

Ironman Arizona 2005 Michael Lovato

Wasn't it supposed to be hot and dry in the desert? That's what I thought, and that's just what told me I was doing the right thing in racing the inaugural Ironman in Tempe, AZ on April 9th. My last race had told me that my body wasn't all that reliable in the cold weather, and my race history had told me that I tended to fare better than some in the hotter, more extreme conditions. I was beginning to see some summer-like temperatures on the Phoenix area weather reports. I liked the sound of upper eighties and sunny. After all, it appeared that there were many Northern-types on the start list; surely they would suffer in the heat, right?

In spite of my expectation for heat, race day arrived with a cold front in tow. Along with temperatures in the mid-seventies, Tempe Town Lake's choppy surface indicated that some high winds were in store as well.

With a fifteen-minute head start on the amateur field, fifty-six pro men and women started the first-time event. Setting an aggressive tone early on, eventual race winner, Faris Al-Sultan blasted the swim in just over forty-nine minutes. Along with three others, he exited the water approximately four minutes ahead of me. Unaware of my exact time deficit, I sped through transition, anxious to start the three-loop bike course.

In stark contrast to my last race outing, I was pleased to find my legs felt fresh and responsive. I successfully pushed through the initial Tempe loop, up and down and around the corners. At that point I seemed to be holding strong to the deficit I faced leaving the water: so far, so good.

The athletes' first taste of what type of winds we were facing came as we left town for the flat out-and-back section of the course. Right about then, an amazingly powerful tailwind sent us flying out to the turnaround on the Bee Line Highway. Zipping along at about thirty miles per hour, I began preparing myself for the return trip to town: it would not be pretty. However, a positive side to the three loops was that we would only face the tremendous winds for short periods at a time. Rounding the set of turnaround cones, and redirecting back toward town, I settled into a rhythm and waited for the end of the blowing and howling. Soon enough it was over, and we were back in Tempe, zipping up and down and around the corners.

About midway through my second pass through downtown, I came to the conclusion that not only did my bike look good, but it was clearly created *exactly* for this bike course! (It really is interesting what crosses the mind in mid-competition...) Considering the numerous short climbs, the frequent stops and starts, and the sheer number of opportunities to corner and accelerate, I was ever impressed with my Arcole's performance. The idea that one must sacrifice road-bike-like handling and good accelerating capabilities, in exchange for aerodynamics is a thing of the past; thank you very much, Javelin!

As the miles ticked by, I continued to receive splits that I was losing a fair bit of time to the leaders. However, I was confident in my race plan, and knew that my best bet was to stay steady on the bike, and to follow that up with a strong run. I had then moved into third place, and noted that the lead duo had split apart.

Nearing the end of the ride, I made my way up and down and around my last set of corners and hills. I admit that I was becoming quite anxious to begin running. The run course in Tempe was a nice one: challenging and pretty. And I looked forward to testing my legs on the year's first marathon.

The run course indulged the athletes with a large dose of diversity for certain. Although we started out on concrete, we moved to asphalt and later to soft-packed dirt. We later returned to the concrete with intervals of soft sand and more asphalt interspersed. In addition to the variety of surfaces, the terrain afforded us a mixture of short ups and downs, long flats, and two gradual climbs and descents. To add to the ever-changing mood of the marathon, that omnipresent WIND added to the mix a cooling effect and a pushing/ pulling effect as well. It truly gave us a bit of everything, and I liked it.

After running a couple miles past the halfway point, I finally managed to pull into second place. While my focus had been on acquiring that spot for quite some time, my motivation quickly shifted gears. In the blink of an eye, I went from hunter to hunted, as I spotted a couple of fleet-footed runners behind me. Normally the confidence I have in my own running abilities allows me to focus only on those of my competitors that are up the road from me. However, on this particular occasion, I was aware that my running *strength* in early April is well ahead of my running *speed*: I had staying power; I just couldn't drop that pace!

With just over five miles to go, an estimate based on an out-and-back visual on the third place runner told me I had no room to falter. My once seven-minute lead was now down to just about two! Providing my jock math didn't fail me, an on-the-fly calculation told me that I could afford to lose no more than 22 seconds per mile until the finish line. I could manage that, but I had to go! And go is exactly what I managed to do. With the help of a down hill and tail wind section, I successfully dropped thirty to thirty-five seconds off my per-mile pace. I was back in control and I was competing: I loved it!

Only when I arrived back on the Town Lake bike path did I accept that I had successfully held off the late day charge from Portugal's Sergio Marques, the eventual third place finisher. I was then able to soak up a bit of the crowd's enthusiasm, as I finished my final jaunt through Tempe's downtown.

As we congratulated Faris on his first IM win, we showered those around us in a spray of champagne. In the end, I was proud of my efforts and was content to grab my Hawaii slot. And having been uncertain of my ability to prepare for and race in an early-season Ironman race, I was quite pleased with my results. I thank those of my sponsors whose support and belief in me enabled me to achieve what I achieved. Thank you, Saucony, Javelin, American Interbank, Rolf Prima, First Endurance, Profile, and QR Wetsuits.