

The Post Crescent

Wisdom is Gained Through Experience to Integrate Non Success as Well as Success

By Gloria West

September 11, 2008

The Fox Valley Ironmen and women had an exceptional day last Sunday at this year's Madison Ironman.

The weather was favorable with only a 1 mile per hour wind factor at the early morning swim start. Overcast skies kept athletes for most of the day rather comfortable. This mid September event over the years has notoriously been brutal with temperatures from extreme heat over 100 to low dips into the 50's raining for 15 hours. As a spectator, it was touching to watch such athleticism of many Tri Foxes, Gear N Up members and other identifiable faces from the Valley. One guy, I was particularly interested in, was Mike Steffek from Appleton. This young buck of 28 years has evolved into a superior triathlete in rather a short time. He, like many, came from 1 of the 3 disciplines of the sport.

Mike's background is unpretentious. He grew up in New London and during his preteen years was intrigued by his mother participating in the local 5k's. So Mike decided to go out for Track and Cross Country at New London High School. He claims he found himself doing "fairly well" in track. Now don't let his modesty fool you. In any given race, blink more than once and you won't see Mike again. He is like a willow in a hurricane and yes; "faster than the speed of light."

Watching this guy so consistently improve his triathlon times sparked my curiosity as to how he turned his track days into stellar Ironman performances in a short time. So hear his confession "After high school I lifted weights and ran. My big inspiration into triathlons was from a guy I met at the gym, Wolfgang Wallenschlager. He felt I had a talent and kept encouraging me to enter a triathlon. My biggest challenge was the swim, which I did not know how to do, so I started taking lessons. I found myself placing in my age group in the smaller triathlons and then gradually still placing in the larger more regional events. I began to really focus on the sport. Four years ago, Mike joined a special group of triathletes from Neenah, the Gear N Up Team. I call them "special" because they are very nurturing. "If I wanted to be good" Mike confided in me, "I knew to join a group of people who had the same focus and goals as mine"

About 4 years ago, Mike was ready for the "big one." In 2005, he signed up for the Madison Ironman. Many of us will never forget that year! It was hotter than ever. Athletes were dropping like flies. Calmly Mike stated "I was just happy to finish with at 11 hours and 44 minutes. Then in 2006, the weather was worse. That year it rained from 7 am until midnight. Conditions were shaky, literally with temperatures in the 50's. Yet Steffek improved his time by almost an hour with an impressive 10:47. That is a huge hunk of change in this sport. Last year another big leap came. Mike reduced his time to 10 hours and 11 minutes. How exactly? He had an easy answer, "I worked on all 3 disciplines equally even though running has been my easiest."

This year his goal was 10 hours. Knowing Mike, I was willing to bet on it. This last year he has been coached by Jim Boldra who is the most experienced triathlon coach in the state of Wisconsin. Boldra has done over 30 Ironmans, is a consistent age group winner and qualified for Hawaii over 7 times.

Mike and Jim have a very admirable relationship. Mike commented "What I like about Jim is he works on my weaknesses. He doesn't let any of his clients go into denial as to what those weaknesses are. Yet he

never lets you get down on yourself no matter what happens. He doesn't put pressure on me and that makes me feel even more that I want to do well for him as well as myself. It is obvious the respect for each other is mutual. Jim couldn't say enough about the sincerity and toughness of his young client, "Mike is the most focused and hard worker I have ever met. He simply is disciplined and listens well."

We all know the nemesis of the sport is in those little things that can go wrong. This last Sunday was a day for Mike's nemesis. His Ironman morning started out well. He had his best Ironman swim split ever by coming out of the water on a 2.4 mile swim at 1 hour 4 minutes. Wow! That is chilling in itself. Mike's time on the bike went well also. But then there was that tiny moment which turned the fate of his race. After 2 loops and banking in 102 miles, he made one of the final turns neck to neck with a competitor and with a slight bump on the road, caboom! He went down. He had only 10 miles left to go. He flipped Mike head over heels. Looking back Mike said with bewilderment, "It all happened so fast and I was dizzy. All I could do was lay down and wait for help." Next was the ambulance and thankfully a short visit to St Mary's Hospital. The medial report was a separation of the shoulder. Mike, released shortly after, came back to see his teammates finish their race on Sunday.

When I asked him what he gained from the experience, he stumbled for a moment and then admitted with a slight laugh, "not to ride to close when turning a corner and surely not to use my front breaks." But I can't help but think Mike has learned even more than that. His reflective attitude throughout the interview was evident. Mike was laidback and it felt like he has already drawn the conclusion to be at peace with his small, but costly mishap. Now that is being wise which doesn't come easy at the tender age of 28. It kind of reminds me of the old adage, "real success is what you do with yourself after you fail." I am sure Mike will be back in the saddle, in no time, and giving it his best once again.