

TRIATHALON TEST HAS LASTING AFFECT

By DON SIKORSKI
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"If you give in to the fear and pain, there are dreams you'll never know". Jeff Blinderman likes to quote inspirational movie lines, and the coach in 'North Dallas Forty' is telling his team this before the big game. He is also telling the 42 year-old Norwich resident to keep pushing forward, no matter how much it hurts.

Blinderman faced this fear and pain while training for Zane's Sprint Triathlon in Madison, CT, comprised of a ½ mile swim, a 13.6 mile bike, and a 3 mile run. What made the event especially challenging for Blinderman is the fact that he possesses no background in any of these events. A baseball/basketball/golf guy since his teen years, Blinderman committed to competing in his first triathlon back in April. Married with two children, a new home, and a demanding job, Blinderman looked back and realized he had fallen into the same trap that many Americans do, putting exercise on the backburner. "I was always so busy that it never dawned on me to be in shape," confessed Blinderman. This time, Blinderman had a motivation. A close friend had found out in March that their 2½ year old daughter had been diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblast Leukemia. Entering treatment at the Yale New Haven Children's Hospital, the overall prognosis was good but the battle would be ongoing. Having spent more than my fair share of hours in Yale's Children's Hospital, I can tell you that it is one of the saddest and most moving places you will ever be in your lifetime. Jeff Blinderman decided to do something for the cause and to prove something to himself, teaming with the Kids Cancer-Vive organization of the Tommy Fund to raise money for a worthwhile cause. "It was something that I always wanted to do, and now I had a reason to do it," said Blinderman of his jump into the triathlon world. "I had some athletic background," he said. But I had never done anything like this before". I agreed to offer coaching assistance and maybe even tag along for a workout or two. Now the work began.

Sunday afternoon in June and it's starting to heat up. "Do you know what we should do," I ask Jeff as we approach home following a brisk 15 mile ride through the hilly streets of Norwich. Too tired to respond, Blinderman hopes the answer entails a nap and maybe some food, but no such luck. "We should get right off the bike and run a few easy miles, just to shake the lactic acid out of the legs". Blinderman glares at me in disbelief, secretly hoping his wife is home and demanding household chores be completed; anything to avoid extending this painful workout. He is about 6 weeks into his training, and had begun to recognize some improvements in his fitness level. But this really hurts. He shuffles along, legs completely shot from the uphill climbs on the bike just moments earlier. Neither of us realize at the time how pivotal that workout would be to Blinderman's progress. A mock triathlon effort a few weeks later, incorporating all three events back-to-back-to-back at about 90% effort, insures Blinderman that he can actually finish this thing. Now he is looking for respectability. He realizes that will be more difficult than it looks.

Saturday, September 8th, 2007, and Jeff Blinderman faces what he considered "his greatest physical challenge in 42 years". Nervously looking out at the choppy ocean waters at the Madison Surf Club and the buoys in the water that almost appear unreachable, Blinderman begins to reflect back on the efforts that got him here. You know you have trained hard, but begin to wonder if you have done enough. Movie inspiration may have to be the difference. As the horn sounds, the "Karate Kid" theme song plays in Blinderman's head. He swallows enough ocean water to fill a small fish tank, yet it's Mr. Miagi telling him (and the Karate Kid) "win, lose, no matter; all that matters is you compete..." Blinderman exits the water in decent shape, racing up the beach to the bike area. I am no expert triathlon coach, but I have advised Jeff on the importance of the races' initial leg. "If there's one event that you need to be sure you can finish," I say, "it's the swim". Blinderman must be glad to have someone with that type of wisdom coaching him. With the ocean waters behind him, the bike cadence begins to feel better and less forced. Approaching the course' major climb a few miles in, Blinderman begins to hallucinate, hearing Al Pacino talking to him and the other Shark football players in the locker room before their playoff game in "Any Given Sunday." He needs to fight and claw for every inch, because life, like football, is a game of inches. Adding up all these inches will make the difference between winning and losing, living and dying....." Blinderman pedals on. The bike to run transition goes much smoother, and Blinderman hits the road with his legs hurting but moving forward. He reflects back on the late night intervals at the NFA track (after the kid's have been put to bed), running laps at 90% effort when most are home watching television or retired to bed for the evening. He also reflects on Rocky Balboa's trainer. Jeff and Rocky and in Russia (Rocky IV) at the cabin at the base of the mountains, cranking out sit-ups while his trainer screams over and over, "No pain, no pain, no pain....." Blinderman tried to convince himself of the same. He crosses the finish line in 1 hour, 31 minutes and 16 seconds, grateful to see family and friends waiting for him at the finish. A review of the results the next day shows Blinderman's 163rd place overall finish easily puts him in the top half of the 362 person field, a solid accomplish for a first-time tri-athlete that once considered walking 18 holes of golf a good workout. Blinderman did not give in to the fear and pain, just like the Coach in North Dallas Forty recommended.

Along the way, I was impressed at Jeff's dedication not only to being able to finish the triathlon, but his willingness to work and getting faster and actually "racing" the event. Too many people slug through a 5½ hour marathon and never run another step, satisfied simply to check it off on their list of life accomplishments. They simply miss the point. Blinderman, in contrast, has learned the values of cardiovascular training. "The benefits are tremendous in terms of how you feel from the workout," says Blinderman. You feel better mentally and physically and you sleep better". Blinderman is also grateful to those who supported his efforts along the way. "This endeavor was nowhere without my team behind the scenes and all of the people who donated time and money," claims Blinderman, "People's generosity makes you realize that the world is still a good place". As for his athletic endurance career, Blinderman is now hooked. "I can't wait to get back at it", he says of his return to training. Al Pacino would certainly be proud.

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