

One Mile at a Time

How racing an Ironman Triathlon develops leadership skills

by 2ndLt Danielle Audino

Exhausted. Triumphant. Proud. Seeing my name flash across the jumbo screen at the finish line of my first Ironman Triathlon, I was overwhelmed by what I had accomplished. I felt a pang of guilt as I thought about the support, encouragement, and mentorship from everyone in my community; their names should flash across the screen too. A year ago, it took courage within me to start on this journey, but it took an entire team to cross the finish line.

That process of setting a big goal and taking small steps each day to inch closer toward it was one of the most fulfilling experiences I had in my life. It was empowering to work through obstacles, gratifying to see how daily actions add up, and it gave me confidence that only comes from tackling hard challenges.

Leaders facilitate the same type of experiences within those whom they lead. They empower their team to strive for audacious goals and take on new challenges to feel that same sense of confidence, contentment, and fulfillment as crossing the finish lines.

As a newly commissioned officer, I lack relevant military experience in leading teams. However, utilizing tools I developed from persevering through challenges, like Ironman Triathlons, that experience gap can drastically shrink.

Rely On Your Team

Triathlons may first appear like a solitary sport but reaching success on race day takes a community. I found my community in a triathlon team based out of Portland, OR. The team was full of passionate individuals with unique skills, and I relied heavily on their knowledge as I ventured into this unknown sport. I remember one ride where I struggled to keep pace with

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the group. Like a rubber band being stretched to its breaking point, I slipped further and further from my team, on the verge of losing contact altogether. Noticing my absence, the group slowed. My coach, a prior member of the U.S. Olympic Rowing Team, embodied her coxswain and offered words of encouragement for motivation. The team captain, a physical therapist specializing in cycling performance, demonstrated proper pedaling technique to squeeze out more power in my stroke. My teammate, a renowned registered dietician in the community, handed me her favorite jellybeans for a boost of energy. With their support, I gathered strength and resolve to finish the ride alongside them. As a member of that team, I learned and developed far more quickly than I ever could have alone. We were connected by our shared sense of purpose and our shared goals, yet we relied on our different backgrounds to help each other improve. We knew that every member was vital to the success of the team, like each drop of water contributing to the greatness of the ocean.

Just as I depended on my team to make me better, I encouraged my platoon at The Basic School to learn from each other to help us succeed. My platoon was full of Marines with differences in thought, experience, and skills. Yet as we pressed forward, we learned to utilize each other's strengths to facilitate the success of the group. Serving

as one of the platoon's patrol leaders during a field exercise, I looked to my squad for help in executing an effective reconnaissance patrol. I sought advice from the prior recon Marine for minimizing our signature in the fall foliage. I brainstormed patrol formations for maximizing control with the future infantry officer. I analyzed possible enemy locations with the prior intelligence Marine. Drawing on the unique strengths of the individuals in my squad, we developed a plan far better than anything I could have created by myself. Having experienced the benefit of a diverse triathlon team, I knew that learning from my squad would only make me better. Really, it was not despite but because of our differences that we were successful.

See the Forest and the Trees

When undertaking a big challenge, like racing an Ironman Triathlon, I was advised to always focus on the end goal. I needed to keep my head at a 30,000 feet perspective so that despite the frustrations I felt in the details, I always had the bigger picture in mind. For me, this almost spelled disaster. A few months into training, I felt my cycling was not developing as quickly as I had hoped. I figured adding an additional ride or two each week would help. One week, on this extra ride, I descended a long winding mountain pass. Fatigued both mentally and physically from the previous day's training, I let my mind wan-

der for a split second. I snapped back to attention as my front wheel hit the curb and I sprawled across the pavement. Dragging my bruised body to the side of the road, I took inventory of the situation. Luckily, aside from needing a few stitches, I was okay. Consumed with the idea of crossing that finish line, I almost prevented myself from making the start line. I should have listened to my body screaming at me to rest, instead of blindingly pushing forwards. Like staring at the North Star oblivious to the trail laid out before me, I relied too heavily on my end goal to show me the way. Really, it should have acted as a guiding light, offering the occasional course correction while I remained focused on the compounding effects of daily action to get me there.

As a new leader, I too was instructed that my focus should be *up and out* on the larger goal at hand. Remembering my experience on the bike, I approached this advice with caution. During the last week of my Combat Engineer Officer Course, I was tasked with leading a recon patrol to gather information on a nearby bridge. Having spent the past two days in the sweltering heat with little sleep, we slowly trudged along the route. After just a few minutes, I noticed bodies beginning to sway as my squad strained with the effort. Realizing if we pushed too hard, we might not ever make it to the reconnaissance site, I spent the next three hours constantly navigating between our end goal and our current needs. It was a delicate balance of pushing the patrol forward toward our objective, yet also understanding the current condition of the squad and taking pauses to rest and reassess. Learning from my mistake while training for the Ironman, I did not let the end goal cloud my decision making in doing what was most needed at the moment. My role was not to focus solely on the objective but to deftly transition between the small details and the big picture to ensure success for my team.

Get Comfortable Being Uncomfortable

Focused on my daily training, the weeks and months slowly ticked by. I had somewhat assumed that swimming,

biking, and running would grow to feel easier and easier. I was halfway through a particularly daunting 100-mile ride, exhausted and unable to fathom cycling another mile; I coasted to a stop. My body longed for rest, but my mind was set on completing the day's training. Pushing away the ache, I narrowed my focus to the rise and fall of my breath and began peddling once more. Like a racehorse wearing blinders, I used my sunglasses to block out distractions and clawed through the remaining miles. I realized that rather than the training getting easier, my ability to tolerate discomfort grew instead. With each mile, I grew more capable of focusing on the task at hand despite the tiredness or fatigue within.

Enduring discomfort as a triathlete is no different than enduring discomfort as a leader. I will never forget the notorious twelve-mile hike I conducted as a platoon commander while at The Basic School. With 80 pounds of gear on my body, and the weight of ensuring my platoon completed the movement resting on my shoulders, I stooped under the load. Like fish swimming upriver, I saw members of my platoon slowly drifting towards the rear, falling victim to the steady pace. All I wanted to do was stop and rest. But as their leader, I steadied myself and focused on the task at hand. Drawing on the thousands of hours in which I learned to perform despite physical discomfort, I shifted my focus from my personal suffering to the condition of my platoon. As I coordinated gear hand-off, maintained accountability, and whispered encouragement, the load on my back seemed to lessen, and I stood taller under its weight. I realized I had molded myself into someone who could compartmentalize discomfort to focus on the needs of those around me and the task at hand.

Trust The Process

It was 0600, and race day had finally come. I checked over my gear one last time before migrating to the start line and the location of the first event—the swim. My anxiety heightened seeing the buoys marking out the 2.4-mile distance. Doubt crept in and suddenly it felt impossible. I took a few deep

breaths. Stretching the swim cap over my head, I remembered the thousands of laps I swam with my team. Zipping up my wetsuit, I remembered the hundreds of cold mornings at the pool. Donning my goggles, I remembered my coach who gave me her lucky pair. Looking out again at the 2.4-mile swim ahead of me, I decided to trust my training; I knew I was ready.

Similar to race day, after a year of preparation, it was finally time to check in at my first unit as a Marine officer. Feeling overwhelmed and unsure, my mind flashed back to the starting line of my first Ironman Triathlon, and I remembered I had experienced these same emotions before. I did not think I was ready to race 140.6 miles, but I called upon the support of my team and found confidence in my preparation. Heading to my first unit, I did not think I was ready. But just as I had done before, I took a few deep breaths and remembered my training. I knew to look to those around me for guidance, accept and push through the discomfort I might face, and take it one day at a time.

I realized it was not about having previous experiences that emulated the challenges I would face as a leader; it was about utilizing the challenges I have endured to give me strength to navigate through whatever comes. Because when I am called upon to lead, there is no time to wish for more experience or more knowledge; all I can do is trust myself and have confidence that what I learned will be enough.

