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# Triathlon: Making Small Moments I Will Never Forget

BY LISANNE ROGERS | NOV. 19, 2019, 2:01 P.M. (ET)



Growing up, my mother put an emphasis on appearance. When I headed out the door as a teenager, my mom would call out, “Don’t forget to put your lipstick on!” She was chosen Runner Up Homecoming Queen at Western University in Canada. Paging through the 1965 Mustang Yearbook as a girl, my mom’s brown, wide-spaced eyes underneath a rhinestone crown looked back at me.

Last year my youngest used a Snapchat to distort and balloon Nana’s face, and her eyes widened in dismay. She wouldn’t understand why I treasure my race photos, especially the unflattering ones. They show me in my most painful, challenging moments: my mouth contorted from the herculean effort of moving one foot in front of the other.

My mom took up tennis in her thirties and introduced it to me. I started playing in the under 12 division against girls with big bows in their hair, and tennis skirts emblazoned with alligators. High school and college tennis followed. One day it was no longer fun. I felt bored on during practice, and even during league matches it was like the tennis ball had grown spikes. Tennis was limiting me: the tennis court was shrinking and the walls in my life were closing in. When my doctor in Houston diagnosed me with Achilles tendonitis, I was freed and happily broke up with tennis.

Around the same time, I visited Austin with my youngest daughter. We noticed svelte athletes in our hotel lobby, pushing aerodynamic bikes and carrying Austin Half Ironman mesh bags. *I know I could do that. I wish I had the nerve.* I needed an outlet from my routine of stay at home mom, volunteer work, and the club.

As a stay at home mom, I have cherished my time with our three children, and am so grateful to have witnessed so many firsts: first words, first steps, first competitions, and first dances. I have nursed their skinned knees, fears, and disappointments too. And yet, I sometimes have a nagging feeling of missed opportunity in not participating in the larger game of life. At Jim's work events, I watched his colleagues' eyes glaze over if I told them I was staying home with the kids, but felt fraudulent telling them I was a lawyer.

Seeing those athletes in Austin set something alight inside me. It provided a challenge outside my realm of the home that I knew would satisfy my longing to feel strong and accomplished. I wanted to choose a new path that would make me bigger and braver. Triathlon is a sport that not only requires muscle and endurance, it requires strength of character—I wanted it, so I went for it!

After my first Olympic triathlon, I competed in several other triathlons that qualified me for the terrifying Escape from Alcatraz triathlon. As the name suggests, the race start is from the San Francisco Belle ferry adjacent to Alcatraz Island. When I told some friends I was considering this race, their eyes widened in disbelief. I was frequently asked if I would swim with sharks, and the race website says no large sharks live in the bay, but subsequent google searches revealed a video of a Great White Shark attacking a seal in the bay.

Swimming with sharks or dying in the water doesn't scare me, however. The water is soothing to me. Two photos accompanied me into labor for the first time: one of my husband with crazy morning hair holding our two red toy poodles on his lap, and the other of an almost empty beach in Nantucket, the ocean waves beckoning me to join them.

We had moved to Colorado the previous year. I was glad I would be able to train in the mountains for this race. I started running stairs after a long run or bike ride and did back to back hard workout days with heavy, sore legs. Two weeks before Alcatraz, I started to taper. I did shorter, quicker workouts that felt easy and left me wanting more.

When we arrived in San Francisco, I felt energetic and ready to compete. The sun sparkled off the bay, and my hair blew around from the breezy shore winds as I lined up for race packet pick up. The Golden Gate bridge was in the background, I heard accents from all over the world, and I marveled at the sinewy muscles of men and women of all ages.

On the morning of the race, I arrived at the transition area at 4:30 a.m. Despite the early start, I was awake and energetic thanks to the adrenaline coursing through my body. I set up my transition area and chatted with the Swiss woman beside me - her lean muscled body moved like a ballerina. Her blue eyes stood out from her weathered face, and I felt like each wrinkled line told a story of a running or biking adventure in the Swiss Alps.

On the ferry over, I thought of the prisoners at Alcatraz, and how everyone believed escape by water was impossible. A few days earlier, we had toured Alcatraz and looking down at the dark, fifty-eight-degree water, I tried to ignore that I would soon be swimming that fabled route. I pulled my wetsuit over my shoulders and layered on the neoprene cap, the bright yellow Alcatraz swim cap, and goggles.

As swimmers jumped off the deck in groups, I slowly moved forward. The air was cold on my skin, and I knew the water would be colder, but when my turn came, I didn't hesitate. My body shuddered as the icy water enveloped me, and I gasped for air. The current was strong. We had been told pre-race to swim towards different landmarks in order to not over swim the beach finish. I started to swim toward the two big towers over Aquatic Park, but I still got a little off course. I paused and wondered if I should be afraid, but then saw the Golden Gate Bridge, put my head down, and swam thinking, *I will always remember this.*

As I neared the shore, I realized the current was pulling me to the right. We had been told not to fight the current and that we could get out at the adjacent beach if we overshot the bay. My family often teases me about my terrible sense of direction, and I knew they were carefully watching for me at the swim finish. *If I miss I will never live this down!* I put my head down and pushed against the current. After what seemed like an eternity, I popped out of the

water at the end of the beach. Jim spotted me in his periphery vision and I could hear the relief in his voice as he shouted encouragement. My son, himself a competitive swimmer, whistled and waved and my daughters, blonde ponytails peeking out from baseball caps, yelled jubilantly, "Go Mom! You did it!"

I sat down on the grass of the transition area and tried to pull my wetsuit off. Still chilled, I put on my helmet, sunglasses, socks, and bike shoes, mounted my bike, and headed west toward Crissy Field. We traveled through the Presidio and climbed the hill to the Palace of the Legion of Honor. The route was challenging — I was either going up a steep hill or down one. Several people walked their bikes up the steepest hill. I put my bike in the easiest gear and pushed to the top. Jim and the kids spotted me at the bottom of a downhill and cheered wildly, waving their arms and pumping fists. I felt a surge of emotion and pride as I sped into the transition area for the run.

The run portion of Alcatraz is brutally unique because it incorporates a sand ladder with four hundred steps. The run begins by heading west to the Coast Trail below the Golden Gate Bridge. The trail was narrow above the Coastal Bluffs to Baker Beach, and the run became more difficult in the deep sand leading to the bottom of the sand ladder. My quads were on fire. I used the hand cable to the right of the stairs to help pull me up. Two-thirds of the way up, I high-fived my cheering family and again felt renewed. My body ached, but my brain urged me to reach the finish line.

As I neared the finish, rows of spectators stood along the fence or sat in stadium seats and cheered. I ran by many different flags representing the countries of competitors and toward the massive finish arch. *This is as close to the Olympics as I will get!* I ran across the finish line, my name was announced, and a medal etched with the golden gate bridge was placed around my neck.

Reunited with my family, we posed for pictures, and all my kids agreed, "Mom is a badass!"

*I will never forget this moment.*

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**Paula Copland Sherk**

What a journey—pushing against the current, literally and figuratively!  
Thank you for the inspiration...

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