

2011 Ironman Texas Race Report
~Christina Cruz~

After months of literal blood, sweat, and tears, the big day was finally upon me. I arrived in the Woodlands with Tina, my dear friend and training partner, the Wednesday before the race. We breezed through packet pick-up and once I got that participants' bracelet on my wrist, it felt real. We spent most of Thursday relaxing and got up on Friday to pack our drop bags. Having never done an Ironman before, packing all of my gear into different bags was a little nerve wracking. Now I'm nervous. We meet our coach Beth Lamie, her husband Mike, and another athlete, Robert Botard for our carbo-load breakfast. Beth runs through our race strategy, answers our questions, and comforts me because I apparently look as nervous as I feel. Then she says the thing that I took with me for the race, "Just enjoy the day and take it all in". I decided that no matter the suffering I went through during the race that I was going to enjoy the experience and be grateful that I am capable of making one of my dreams come true. After breakfast we took our bikes and our drop bags to the race site and then spent the day lying around watching mindless TV and eating. Of course nerves were on high alert at bed time so Tina and I both had a hard time falling and staying asleep.

The alarms went off at 4 am; we jump out of bed and start our pre-race routine. I ate my bagel with jelly, prepped my bike bottles, and got dressed. We were out the door by 4:45 am and had already scouted a primo parking spot only one block from the transition area. Once in transition I put my bottles on my bike and checked my tires. Then we headed to the swim start which was about 0.8 miles from transition. The walk was good for getting things moving and I got in line for the port-a-potties immediately. Thank goodness because those lines got really long as the sun came up. The hour long wait for the start went by quickly and soon I was donning my wetsuit. I went through much mental debate regarding whether or not to wear that wetsuit. I felt like I was "cheating" by wearing one, even though they were allowed, and I was concerned about over heating since the water was 79° that day. In the end I decided to follow my coach's advice. I knew that there was absolutely no shot for me to qualify for Kona or make it on the podium and those were the only things that wearing a wetsuit were going to prevent me from doing, so why was I going to waste energy and time in the swim when I needed that energy later in the day?

I lined up in the wetsuit line and tried to hang at the back so that I could hopefully avoid some body contact once in the water, but my plan didn't work out. I barely made it down the boat ramp and in the water before the gun went off and there were still plenty of athletes behind me trying to get in the water. I had no choice but to start swimming. I've seen Ironman triathlons on TV and online before, so I thought I had some idea of what to expect in the water but I was so wrong. There is nothing like being in that throng of thrashing bodies with nowhere to go. It's all at once terrifying and exciting. There were very few times during the swim where I had clean water, most of the time I was dodging bodies or taking body shots. I got hit in the head, kicked in the gut, kicked in the boob, and someone's heel grazed the tip of my nose. I see now how people get swum over during races, though thankfully it never happened to me. After about 200 yards I was able to get my heart rate to calm down and I kind of settled into a rhythm as best I could. We swam out 1400 meters to the turn buoys and then headed back in before turning down the canal. Everyone got bottle-necked at the turn buoys and at the canal, and a lot of body contact ensued there. The entire time I kept reminding myself to enjoy it and take it all in, and I'm glad I did because I can recall with clarity the feel of the water, the sounds of the spectators in the canal, the sight of all of all of those bodies together, fighting for space. I remember approaching the swim exit and hearing the announcer calling out names and listening for mine as I crossed the timing mat...I think he missed me. Out of the water in 1:24:33, right where I hoped to be.

I had no trouble finding my bike gear bag and ran into the changing tent. It looks like total chaos in those changing tents, but its organized chaos and those volunteers were wonderful. I sat on the edge of my chair to

empty out my bag and found myself peeing. Apparently I had to go really bad and couldn't wait any longer. Thank goodness we were all wet and the floor was just grass. I took my time getting everything just how I wanted it since I knew I had a long haul ahead of me and headed out the tent to get a liberal amount of sunscreen. T1 took 9:16; I think I took a little too much time!

I had been to the Woodlands back in March to preview the bike course and really enjoyed it so I was looking forward to this bike ride, even though I knew it was going to be a long one. We were very lucky to have overcast skies for a good portion of the day and I found that I wasn't sweating nearly as much as I had been in my race simulation workouts. The first hour I was caught up in everything going on around me and did not do a good job staying on top of my nutrition. Heading out of town there were so many spectators cheering us all on, I was all smiles. Here is where my favorite sign of the day came, "Worst Parade Ever!" Hilarious! Right away my bike computer isn't registering speed which I decided was a good thing. Now I couldn't worry about how fast or slow I was going. Beth had said that if it didn't feel easy then I was probably going too hard. I was forced to rely on my cadence and my perceived exertion and I think it worked out. As we neared the halfway point, I began to get a little uncomfortable in the saddle. I decided I would stop at special needs to re-lube myself and stretch for a second. I felt much better after doing that and was excited for the second half of the course. My longest ride was only 85 miles, so I knew I was going to be in for some pain. Somewhere around the 70 mile mark, we rode through an area swarming with bugs that went on for miles. One flew in my ear, three flew into my cleavage, and probably 50 got stuck and drowned in the excess sunscreen on my arms. At one point I looked over and saw a couple that were still alive trying to free themselves from my SPF death trap. I made a deal with myself. I would stop at the aid station after mile 80 really quickly to stretch and wipe the bugs off myself, and then I would not pause over the last 30 miles back to transition. Once again, as soon as I got off my bike I peed all over myself. At this point I realize that endurance events force you to lose any sense of shame you might have. At my last stop I shoved my hand down my shorts to reapply chamois cream while a volunteer talked to me, and now I'm peeing all over myself in front of anyone who glances my way for the second time today! I hop back on my bike feeling less gross and a little refreshed and focus on taking it home. The wind was nowhere near as bad as the wind I had been training in so it actually didn't bother me too much. Around mile 90 my toes were killing me so I took my feet out of my shoes and pedaled on top of them for a minute which relieved some of the pressure. Once we got back in town, I was excited again and anxious to start the run but it seemed like those last 12 miles went on forever! I finally approached the dismount line and got off my bike, 7:09:35 after I started.

A volunteer took my bike from me and I headed for my run gear bag. I felt like I was walking like John Wayne and it was killing me to walk in those bike shoes so I ripped them off my feet and kind of ran, or maybe pranced, to the tent. Once again, the volunteers were phenomenal. They brought me ice water, a wet wipe, and napkins to put my feet on since the ground was so wet and muddy by this time. I cleaned up a little, got my shoes and Garmin on, and ran out for more sunscreen in 11:24. Next time I'll have to focus on not sitting there so much!

I started my run and my pace was all over the place, anywhere from an 8:30 to a 10:30. I had in my mind that I wanted to run around 10 minute miles, so I tried my best to keep to that and just walk through the aid stations. At mile 3 I was barely able to get my shot blocks down, and an hour later when it was time to take them again, I gagged. Since this had happened to me in training before, I wasn't surprised and I decided to just forget about them and fuel myself solely on liquids and the solid food they had at the aid stations. This worked out okay for me and I made it through my first loop feeling decent. The second loop is where the death march started for a lot of people. I forced myself to keep running and didn't care what pace I had at that point. I finally saw Tina for the first time that day since the swim. She's tells me she was involved in an accident on the bike that cost her a lot of time, but she's okay and looks strong. We exchange encouraging words and I head on. Shortly after I pass a guy who is walking and he and I run together for probably four miles keeping a good pace, talking and forgetting about the pain. He is on his last lap and I am so jealous. We part ways after he needs to stop at an

aid station and I just want to get this lap over with. My stomach is in full revolt at this point and I don't want any food or fluids. I decide to stop at special needs at mile 17 and see if there's anything in my bag that might make me feel better. As I sit down to dig through my bag I start sobbing. I have 9 miles to go and I feel awful. I quickly get those negative thoughts out of my head and grab a couple of chewable pepto bismol tablets and one of those no-water-needed toothbrushes. My mouth feels like it's so coated with crap and I think that maybe if I brush my teeth and my tongue that I might want to eat and drink again. As soon as I scrub my tongue I gag. I head over to the median and keep brushing my tongue until I throw-up...no shame. I felt so much better after that! Just before I'm getting ready to take off Robert, Tina's husband comes up behind me and says hi. He's just witnessed my melt down, but since I lost all of my shame a long time ago I don't care. I'm actually quite excited later when he tells me that he got a picture of me vomiting!

I start running, or my version of running, again until mile 19.5 where my stomach decides it's done. I head over to the grass and hurl. What Robert witnessed was nothing like the projectile fluid that's flying out of my mouth now. I am forced to my hands and knees and I'm pretty sure I looked like a cat coughing up a hair ball. The police officer working that particular area was so nice. He came to check on me and patted my back and gave me his own bottle of water to rinse my mouth out with. In my most dire moment, Tina passes me and asks if I'm okay. I tell her I just needed to get it all out. I walk for a minute and decide I feel much better and start running again. Now I'm just getting all of my calories from liquids and the oranges at the aid stations. Just the thought of anything else makes me queasy. I finally finish loop two and am excited to move onto the third and final loop. The sun is starting to go down which means the temperatures are too. I do the math and realize that I can make my goal of finishing under 14 hours if I keep running. The third loop got kind of lonely for me. I really wanted someone to run with but most people were walking at this point. Towards the beginning of the loop I realize that I've lost my salt tabs, but a guy who has decided to walk the rest of the way gives me a couple since he doesn't think he needs them anymore. I take them both at the next aid station and finally hook up with a guy to run with for the last three miles. As we come around a stretch on the canal where a lot of spectators are, a guy who has been cheering all day recognizes that I'm on my last loop and grabs my hand and says, "The next time we see you, you'll be an Ironman!" I realize he's right. No matter what happens, if I have to walk the rest of the way, I will finish and I will be an Ironman. I started crying I was so happy. As my running partner and I begin to enter the finishers shoot he tells me he's going to let me go have my finish. He's hanging back to find his kids and get a cowboy hat. Now I'm overwhelmed with joy. I tell myself to take in every ounce of this finish. I smile the whole way down the shoot and high five every hand that's reaching out to me. And then I hear it. I hear the words that I've been dreaming about since I signed up for this race nearly a year ago. Mike Reilly, the voice of Ironman says, "Christina Cruz, YOU are an Ironman!" I finished the run in 4:56:17 for a total time of 13:51:05.

Racing Ironman Texas was one of the most beautiful and amazing days of my life. I see now how some people want to sign up right away for another one. You have an idea of how things work now and have ideas on how you could improve next time. I won't be doing another one any time soon, but this certainly won't be my last.