

Escape from Alcatraz - June 8, 2008

Race Report by John Sellinger and Dan McDonnell

This is a must do race! Incredible venue, well organized, top notch field and the views/scenery were magnificent. It truly lives up to the hype. Although it is a "short course", I believe that much of the race aura is driven by the unknowns leading up to race day and the mental anguish associated. We had absolutely perfect weather at 64, sunny and average winds for that region. But, it is San Francisco, so the temperature, wind, currents and fog can be factors. Our new pro friend James Cotter was there and had another strong finish - 12th place finish and unfortunately that means he again finished just out of the money. I can't even imagine racing for food!



1.5 Mile Swim

They haul all 2000 of us out on a ferry and park it right next to Alcatraz. Although there are designated swim waves, it is a literal free for all off the boat. There is a timing mat on the boat, so once you cross it, the clock starts ticking. You then walk out onto the deck and are pretty much forced to jump in and haul ass. There were T.V. cameras on board, helicopters flying over, kayaks and boats everywhere. No swim buoys to site. The pre-race meeting was critical as they provided sighting tips.



1) The bay fills eight feet and recedes eight feet every six hours. So, they time the race start as the bay recedes into the Pacific. The advantage, you are swimming "with" the current. Granted, the current is draining directly out into the Pacific.

2) There is a radio tower 5 miles up in the hills of San Francisco. You use that as your sight for the swim and always keep it at "1 o'clock". This was the strangest aspect of the swim for me. There were no turns or swim buoys. So, you jumped in and swam toward this tower which was about one mile up shore from the swim exit. But, due to currents, you just kept swimming and swimming toward this tower...and the current just pulled you down the mile to the swim exit. Very bizarre! And so, there were many people who did not attend the race meeting. They jumped off the boat and swam directly for the swim exit. Due to the current, they ended up 100's of yards off course and were either pulled back onto course by the kayaks or had to exit the water anywhere from 100 yards to 100s of yards down the beach from the actual swim exit and then run all the way back to transition.

3) The swim was nuts as we were also told to swim your ass off for the first 10-15 minutes to ensure you did not get pulled down to far with the current. So, the first 250 yards was utter chaos with all the people, the chop and adrenaline. After the first 250 yards, we entered what I would call the "washing machine" where you were just tossed around in all directions by the chop. This went on for 10-15 minutes. Once you got out of the main part of the bay, the water calmed a bit, but then the current picked up and the eddies came into play.



Regardless, you swam like hell to the sand beach finish with the hope of not overshooting the swim exit.

4) We wore wetsuits, hoodies and booties as the water temp was 54 degrees.

5) We did not see any sharks or sea lions in the water, but know they were there...part of the mental challenge!

T1

Usually, transition is nothing to write about, but this one was kind of nuts. At the swim exit, you had a transition bag, as there was a 3/4 mile run from the swim exit to the official transition area. So, most people had shoes in the T1 bag and warm clothes for the run to official transition. Thus, our 7 minute T1 time!

18 Mile Bike

As you can imagine there are no flats in San Francisco. The bike was a blast as there were a couple monster climbs and steep descents with a few technical aspects. The loop took us through Presidio, Baker Beach region and then up and around Golden Gate Park and back. I flatted at mile four, which cost some time (double flat after the first tube change I was out of CO2=trouble). An LA Tri club dude saved me by providing CO2. I lost about 11 minutes after the fiasco. I know I hit 47.5 mph on one descent, so made for a fun ride!



8 Mile Run

The run was absolutely beautiful as we ran along the San Francisco Bay, under the Golden Gate Bridge, along the cliffs above Baker Beach and then down and onto Baker Beach. It was also a really hilly and challenging loop with Xterra elements included. At mile two, we had about a steep, 50 stair climb off the pavement, up and onto a trail. We then ran through this tunnel that was about 10 yards long and started out at about six feet tall and by the exit was at three feet tall. You popped out of the tunnel and then had a tough climb on the trail along the cliffs, ran down a steep staircase, then up onto the pavement again. We then had a monster descent for about 1/2 mile down onto Baker Beach. Then we ran 1/4 mile down the beach, turned around and ran 1/2 mile up the beach. And then the fun part. The 400 stair sand ladder! What a total bitch! After the 400 stair sand ladder, we had another 25 yards to climb on the sand, turned and then had another 1/4 mile climb on the trail to head back along the cliffs overlooking Baker Beach and then down and around to the finish. Was really tough, but I love the Xterra aspects and the hilly parts, which kept me pumped.



We will be going back to do this again!