

American Zofingen – The Novel

Sunday, May 19

- 5 mile run (53:34 - 10:42 pace)
- 29 mile bike (2:02:33)
- 5 mile run (50:35 – 10:07 pace)
- 29 mile bike (2:10:00)
- 5 mile run (49:56 – 9:59 pace)
- 23 overall of 55 (25% DNF rate)
- #3 age group, won a beer mug



Saturday May 18:

My girls are shrieking and hollering in the pool at the Hudson Valley Resort and Spa, a potentially generous name for the place we're staying at ahead of tomorrow's race (it could use a coat of paint).

Val is floating in the water and recovering from the Brooklyn Half, which she ran that morning, and I am simply laid out poolside in a lounge chair, drinking a carton of coco water to make sure I am fully hydrated, and trying to relax.

The Zoff is a beast, the scene of the crime for me, where I somehow combined both my single worst and single best performance in the same endurance race. I nearly died, I nearly quit, and then I didn't do either.

This year, I am undeniably older and certainly feeling wiser, and despite having only just completed a course of antibiotics earlier in the week (couple infections, fever, no big deal, right?) I feel quite strong – likely due to the fact that I haven't done much of anything for the past ten days.

With the forecast calling for overcast skies at 65 degrees for most of the morning, I allow myself to be fleetingly optimistic that the conditions will allow me to dramatically outperform my prior year's numbers. There is a 10% chance of rain later in the afternoon, but frankly getting rained on late in the last bike loop or even during the run is fine with me. Heat is my enemy.

I am planning to meet the Withrows, Eric and Evan in the parking lot the next morning, but as of this very moment, I simply sit still, digesting the enormous dinner I have eaten, and look forward to the single can of lager waiting for me back in the hotel room.

Amzof... I shall have finally my revenge on you, I whisper to myself.

Oh yes... Oh yes I shall.

Sunday, May 20:

I push CandyCane Snowflake into the parking lot at about 5:45 am, keeping an eye open for signs of blue eyes and/or blond hair indicating the presence of the Withrii. Eric is up and moving also.

It is colder than I had been expecting, the clouds are very low and very grey, and the ground is wet from rain overnight. I begin to wonder about this "10% chance of rain" forecast.

John and I enjoy a moment of liberally and vigorously applying some chamois cream when we spot Evan and wave him over. He rightly declines to shake our hands, and joins all of us in looking apprehensively at the sky.

John plays Tetris with the bikes and gets them all stowed. We jump into the vehicles, and I recline into the very comfortable seat in the front of Eric's jeep as we work our way to the start. A light mist forces Eric to reach to turn on his wipers, and presently an increase in the rainfall has him reaching to up the wiper blade tempo to match.

The 10% possibility of rain has now migrated to a 100% probability, and my elaborate and satisfying revenge fantasy of the night before is going right out the window.

Revenge is a complicated business.

We park, and I am hiding from the mounting precipitation in the shotgun seat of Eric's jeep while JW pulls the bikes off the back of his truck and I dig through my bag, realizing that to stay warm I will have to wear every item of clothing I have. I pull on arm warmers and wrestle compression sleeves over my calves. On go a pair of gloves, on goes a disappointingly perforated extra cycling jersey. I throw on a wool beanie I always have with me.

A gust of wind chills me and the wet keeps me chilled as I duck into the rain to retrieve CandyCane Snowflake.



I look around and everyone – EN Mike, Jess, JW, Eric, even my own reflection in the car window – everyone is plainly miserable and brimming with regret.

Damn you, Withrow.

Long course racers flit about, preparing themselves, trying to massage warmth into their legs, glancing occasionally at the sky as though glaring angrily at the clouds will have them reconsider raining all over us for the next eight hours.

Spoiler: it won't.

“OK,” announces the race director, “long course people, I guess the race is going to start in a minute. This rain totally sucks so I’m not going to bother playing the national anthem on my bagpipes... get yourselves to the start line.”

The “start line” is, of course, a large-ish rock to the right side of the trail. We line up to watch them go, especially Colin, who inexplicably looks delighted. He’s the golden retriever of human beings: big, overwhelmingly friendly, blond, and the moment you wave a tennis ball in front of him and throw it as far away from yourself as you can, he runs after it at full tilt for the sheer joy of it.

“Ready, long course athletes” calls out the race director, “because your race starts in five... four... three... two... one” and with that (and nothing else), they are off.

I howl for Colin at the top of my lungs. He churns away up the hill, and maddeningly, I will see him again not that long after I finish my own race, which happens to be 35 miles shorter than his.

In a panic, a long course participant runs up to the race director in the pavilion. He’s missed the start by a full five minutes, and wants to know if he can have permission to still run the race.

There is a nearly comic pause.

“Look - I don’t know that 5 minutes is going to make a big difference. It’s going to take you ten hours to do this thing. You can start whenever you want, you don’t need my permission.”

“Middle distance athletes, prepare to start... One important announcement, the rain has basically washed away all the markings on the road for the bike course so it is very likely you will get lost... and if you do get lost, remember, it’s your fault. We’ll have a moment of silence for Chris Gleason and then get going. You can thank him for the weather.”

I am at the back, where I belong. I have my arms wrapped around my chest to keep warm. I came into this race looking forward to avenging the prior year’s performance, one in which I plumbed the absolute depths of exhaustion and had to be dragged across the finish line by my two girls (where I promptly collapsed after finishing dead last in my age group) .

Of course, the Zoff throws her own curve ball right back at me, complicating my plans with all of the unpredictability of this formidable weather.

I quietly abandon my hope for a PR and simply decide it will be a victory for me if I avoid falling, breaking my ankles in the woods, or requiring the help of a five year old girl to cross the finish line.

Shivering in the mist and gloom I realize that even with these dramatically altered goals, my odds aren’t good.

Run One:

We start, and my plan is to be last, which I am for the better part of the first mile.

The rain is constant in its presence, but varies in its intensity, and its syncopated patter and tapping on the canopy of leaves along the trail is the only noise that competes with the sound of my breathing and the hiss and suck of my shoes in the mud.

“Good news guys” I announce to the knot of runners I am moving with up the first of many, many inclines in the trail “I checked the weather forecast and there’s only a 10% chance of rain.”

I am picking my way carefully along the trail, have stopped at the aid station twice for water and sports drink, and I am working my way up from dead last to almost dead last. But I am relaxed, and calm, and warming, and every now and then I spot Eric’s white jersey in front of me on the trail. Like me, and out of deference to his legs which are recuperating from a recent outing at a 50 mile trail run, Eric is treating the first lap as a sighting lap.

Running toward transition, I spend the last few hundred yards chatting with two women as we mutually debate the wisdom of one of them having a second child. Noting that it took both of my daughters to drag me across the finish line of this race last year, I encourage her to get going on number two despite the reservations of her husband.

If he’s reading this, I apologize.

Bike One:

In reality, the Zoff does not start with the run loop.

The first run loop is a wink, a kiss, a tease, a hand that reaches out and brushes your cheek and tells you how strong you are and seduces you into making the mistake of following her down a longer, shadowy path against all good judgment, toward an uncertain end.

I transition calmly and deliberately as the rain taps its gentle fingers with a slight impatience against my back. I did not have the foresight to turn my bike shoes over or hide them under my pack, and over the course of the run they have filled with small pools of water. The temperature is a perfect storm for my glasses, causing them to fog impenetrably the moment I put them on and having me throw them into my pack in disgust.

I look over at Eric, who is looking down at his knees with concern, but all I can think about is how jealous I am that he had the foresight to bring not one, but two garbage bags and consequently has dry shoes to begin the bike leg with. No matter that they will be soaked through in the first few minutes of his ride, I envy him this small comfort.

Of course, Eric was probably envious of the fact that I had two operative knees.

As I work toward the bike exit, a course volunteer helpfully points at the least flooded part of the gelatinous, muddy pit that is the trail out and suggests that I “get up a bit of steam” so I don’t get stuck.

Magically, it is the perfect temperature to be constantly uncomfortable for the entire bike ride. At maybe 60 degrees, laboring up that first awful climb in the small ring I overheat nicely, oblivious to the rain and the occasional gust of wind.

Of course, after two horrible skyward miles, I am heading downhill, and the wind and rain conspire to chill me to the bone, and in any ordinary circumstance I would be borderline hypothermic.

However, I am not hypothermic because I am speeding downhill at twenty, thirty, and then forty miles per hour on wet roads, through syrupy, lazy bands of fog, on a thin, shoulderless open road with multiple sharp corners and switchbacks.

I am not hypothermic precisely because I am as scared as I have ever been on two wheels.

The rain stings my eyes into slits, I'm clutching the pursuit bars so tightly my hands are numb, and I am lightly dragging both brakes in a completely hopeless effort to keep the rims and pads just a little dry in the event I have to really stop, which I know is a pipe dream anyway.

I am truly in fate's hands, and when the hill finally plays out into a right hand turn I almost coast to a complete stop before I am calm enough to resume actually pedaling forward because, after all, this is a race.

If it is possible for the conditions to be so bad that I actually look forward to the uphill, if only because there is less likelihood of immediate death, then they are.

I calm down. I am eating and drinking. I fondly remember parts of the course from last year: "hey, that's the spot where I thought of throwing my bike over a cliff" and "yup, would have strangled myself with my own bike chain here if I had the strength".

Presently, I see an insane person standing on their pedals working up the front side of a brutal two mile climb on a canary yellow bike, and I decide to catch up. It is Colin's little sister, Kaitlin, gamely grinding her way uphill. We had done a long trail run together a few months ago in Harriman state park, and relieved to see someone familiar I pull alongside and say hello.

We briefly exchange pleasantries and catch up, and at one point she stares at me and announces "I swear I thought I was good on a bike... this is killing me".

After a shared 300 yards of grim, quiet work, she waves me on.

There is one thing that is actually working properly in this race for me, and that is my nutritional strategy. This irritates the hell out of me, because my nutritional strategy is Withrow's nutritional strategy, which he essentially forced on me as his rebuke of my failure to execute better at the NYC IronMan.

Withrow delivered a five pound bag of Infinit powder to me a few weeks before the race, and I have prepared two "two hour" bottles of the formula (one for each bike loop). I find I am enjoying the taste (it is much less cloying and "manufactured" tasting than other sports drinks) and manage to fairly steadily deliver the entire bottle to myself over the course of the ride.

I never peak, I never bonk, I never have that empty "I would eat an entire rack of lamb and a box of donuts right this second" feeling.

I supplement only with the water that I get at a couple of the aid stations and, at one point, two chocolate chip cookies.

The cookies are at a station after a 180 degree turn at the bottom of a hill shrouded in fog.

Just the sight of them is a miracle. I skid clumsily to a halt and find my hands don't actually work at this point in the race – they're just too cold, my fingers won't bend, my thumb is useless and I can't feed myself.

"This may be a little awkward for both of us" I tell the young lady working the aid station while roguishly arching an eyebrow at her, "but I want you to feed me a couple of those cookies... and do it slowly".

She does, and we both feel a little licentious.

I am in heaven.

I am on the back half of the course, in the rolling whoop-de-dos on a road barely wide enough for two vehicles, and well shaded by huge old willows and oaks. As I crest a rise, I realize I'll need to get off the bike to relieve myself at some point soon.

However the thought of stopping, the idea of being stationary in the cold and the wet while my legs cramp as I bat uselessly at my race shorts with my wooden hands, is totally unappealing.

So I try "It" again. "It" is the one thing I have been completely unable to do for my endurance racing career to date: pee on the bike. As though any confirmation was needed regarding the exceptional circumstances of this race, for whatever reason, whatever combination of conditions and fatigue and misery, my body is suddenly comfortable with the idea of me simply peeing on myself.

I am elated, and so it is with AmZoff: a mistress so treacherous, so manipulative, that she will make a 43 year old man feel like a complete champion because he wet his pants.

Run Two:

I dismount CandyCane Snowflake and stare at my forlorn, muddy trail shoes in transition, peeking at me from the grass like a pair of battered crocuses that have pushed their way from the earth to greet spring, only to be immediately disappointed with the decision.

However, if anything, I am warming to the absurdity of my situation. I have not died on the bike, which I view as a positive. Further, I peed on myself and ate two whole, dry, cookies. Last, there is a creeping familiarity with the course taking hold that is beginning to pay dividends.

I gulp down some carrot juice, eat a mouth full of chocolate covered espresso beans, throw on the shoes and head out. I am completely alone, and after my "gentleman's pace" on the first lap, decide to pick things up.

I'm moving well up the hills (in a fast walk, the wet trail is treacherous enough that running up seems like a mistake waiting to happen) and I am really moving fast down the carriage roads. My stride lengthens, and to try to spare my legs from the pounding assault of the descents, I actually quicken my cadence and try to push off as lightly and quickly as possible. To keep my balance I throw my arms out to the sides, at times windmilling them, looking for all the world like a drunk out for a run.

Of course, little do I realize that hours later, on my third lap, the case could be made that I was running like a drunk *because I was actually drunk*, but really, who can see the future?

Bike Two:

The second bike is a gut check.

I had a good first ride, I just ran a strong lap and my legs actually felt good coming off the effort, I was properly fed and hydrated, and I had fully re-familiarized myself with the course.

But the rain was still coming down and I knew I was looking at another two hours of clinging to a Machiavellian pendulum that swung wildly between heat stroke and hypothermia, between grinding calm and sheer, immediate, plunging terror.

So I ate another handful of espresso beans, refilled my Infinite bottle, ratcheted myself into my shoes, and pushed myself out one more time before I could think things through to their logical conclusion of “stop this right now, you idiot”.

Damn you, Withdraw.

One thing I had failed to factor into my strategy of riding the brakes down the panic-infested descents was that it would wear my pads down. A lot. So, midway through the second lap I realize, thanks to the awful noise and uneven lever modulation, that I basically have no rear brakes.

Perfect.

The mist, rain and fog combine with the geography of the course to completely isolate me. I could be upon another rider and not see them until I am ten yards away. It feels as though I am participating in a mirage, that everything is unreal except the things I can actually touch. Thus, when the aid station with the chocolate chip cookies comes into view again, I doubt my own eyes.

“Cookies?” I yell into the fog.

“Yes – we have cookies!”

It is the same team of girls, gamely manning the aid station.

Once again, I weave to a stop and catch my breath.

“Please... feed them to me.”

“I remember you... two of them?”

Oh, you angel.

“Yes.”

More miles, more rain. The cold continues to creep into my bones on the downhill sections, but doesn’t leave me on the ascents, a worrisome sign. After one particularly vicious little hill I pull alongside another rider and we are chatting while I am trying to regain my strength, and I see a bike parked at the entrance to a driveway, leaned against a post. Its rider is bent completely double, apparently looking for something on the ground.

As I get closer I realize the guy is a mess – he’s bent double because he’s in a full-body cramp, his hands are shivering, and as I close on him I can see his lips and fingertips are blue.

“Hey – are you OK?” I yell at him and quickly follow up that obviously stupid question with “Go knock on that door and get inside that house!”

The other rider beside me and I look at each other and I point at my stomach.

“Good news - there is something to be said for higher percentage body fat after all.”

I'm going uphill, again. At the top I can see a rider has pulled to the side of the road, and is fumbling with his cold hands to open a gel. I recognize the colors first – he's wearing ReserveAid kit – and realize I am looking at Evan. I shout out to him at the top of my lungs, slowing as I come alongside him while he clips back in.

"How are you doing?" I ask, a risky question at best at this point in the race. Evan is a reflection of myself a year ago at this time – he's been mauled, badly, by the course and the weather and like the rest of us he's wearing completely inadequate clothing.

He considers my question for a while, and responds with "is it possible to be below empty?" This is not a rhetorical question on his part.

We keep spinning, and the gel begins to deliver calories to Evan's beleaguered body. A cyclist labors past us, and I call out "Good job... I'd say you look great, but I'd be lying" and the color begins to return to Evan's face.

I point out that as far as I can tell, we're actually pretty close to the two mile climb back into the transition area. I further share with him my secret – that I can now actually pee on the bike, and that I have been peeing all over this course for hours, a small victory but meaningful nonetheless.

He nods and smiles in approval.

After another hundred yard or so, I have my wind back and Evan spurs me on.

"You go ahead and do what you have to do. I'm fine."

And I am off.

Run Three:

It just won't stop raining.

The track back into the transition area is now a complete mess, having been churned by hundreds of skinny tires into a masochistic batter.

My feet are freezing, my hands are sodden and clumsy, and I would love to just be dry for a few minutes, or maybe just a few degrees warmer. On go my shoes, and with a chill mounting thanks to my relative inactivity, I realize I simply have to get going and stop feeling so sorry for myself.

I also note, with some concern, that Eric's bike is still in the rack with a full bottle of fluid in it – suggesting he has yet to complete his second run, which makes no sense to me given that I've run with him before and he's like a damn deer in the woods, agile and tireless.

Is it possible he's had a problem and quit? Eric eats marathons for breakfast.

It's sobering, and I trudge toward the timing mat at the run out.

I am stumbling up the steps to pavilion where a crowd has come together to seek refuge from the weather and cheer people on.

Enthusiastic shouts of encouragement greet me under the roof and, briefly sheltered and incrementally warmer, I veer toward the coolers of water, knowing I should force some fluids down but yet completely reluctant to put anything cold into my body.

At once, a substantial bottle of Jameson's whiskey, snuggled against a cooler, catches my eye.

My mind races.

The decision to sign up for this race in the first place constitutes a bad idea, the decision to do the damn thing in the rain and fog and cold is a bad idea, frankly my entire day is a collage of bad ideas, a mosaic of stupid, a picture comprised of a thousand tiny colorful pieces of asinine arranged in such a way that a larger picture of preposterousness reveals itself.

And here, in front of me, is a bottle with sixty warm ounces of stupid inside it.

I come to a halt.

"I'll have a shot of that" I announce to the woman manning the aid station, pointing directly at the bottle of whiskey.

The crowd roars its approval at this terrible idea, and the woman, without batting an eye, grabs the bottle, twists the cap off, and demands to know how much.



Over the buzz of the crowd, as though to help explain this act of ridiculousness on my part, Jess shouts "He's Canadian!"

We agree on a healthy pour of the brown madness.

While the shot is poured, I offer the crowd a few Schwarzenegger style poses, my biceps comically lost beneath the long sleeved jersey and arm warmers. I down the shot, the crowd is screaming, and with that I turn and head out into the rain and mud and solitude of my final lap, a reassuring warmth radiating from the depth of my belly.

Bless you, Irish friends.

At some point roughly two miles into my last lap, I find myself incrementally gaining on a couple of long course runners and commit to passing them. I find it impossible to feel sorry for myself or even permit myself to feel tired when running behind people who have knocked out 90 straight miles on the bike.

In fact, I shame myself into really pushing it – this is the last lap, I am feeling strong, powerful even, the whiskey has settled down quite nicely and, most importantly, the sooner I get to the finish line the sooner I will be, for the first time since I rolled out of bed at 5:15 in the morning, warm and dry.

I close in on a long course runner who is really looking strong. As I fall in behind him I call out an introduction, and he reciprocates (Gary from outside Boston) and then pulls away. I run like a lunatic down the hills and pass him. He gets me back in the more technical single track. I clip him again on the carriage track.

We are beside each other when I see Colin at the aid station, looking extremely strong, and I yell some utterly unprintable encouragement at him.

Gary and I are neck in neck when we quite literally nearly run into Kaitlin as she crosses the path ahead of us, and she cheers the two of us on and I realize I am getting very close to the finish, and I am feeling really good.

Gary leads me out of the woods into the slight uphill through the fields and the last few hundred yards from the finish. I decide to pull the pin and really start turning my legs over – they are dangerously tired, but I am dangerously close, and I can hear the crowd in the pavilion just beyond the treeline.

Here I come, John Jameson. Here I come.

Jess notices me first, Withrow calls out my name, and I vault up the steps to finish. I am elated, I feel terrible but I feel great. I gather myself and then wait for Gary to come through the station, he still has a lap ahead of him and as he passes through I thank him for the chase and cheer him on. I don't even bother to check my time.

Then, I smell chili. I see cornbread. I race to my bag to retrieve the only dry items of clothing I own, which are the AmZof race shirt and my fantastically appropriate "Damn You Withrow" training tee. I get into line for food and begin working my way down the buffet, overwhelmingly happy.

At some point, the award ceremony for the short and middle course races begins, and while I am stuffing a brownie into my mouth, I distinctly hear my name being called.



It is being called because I have finished third in my age group, an extraordinary result for me, and one so unexpected that I claim my beer mug trophy still holding the chili and cornbread from the buffet.

I clutch the mug as though it is crafted of gold. I cannot believe it and actually double-check with the guys running the timing booth. There it is in front of me, the incontrovertible data, a 6:56 finish and three successive negative splits in the run.

"We don't normally see that in this race" the guy says to me.

“That’s because not enough people are drinking whiskey” I reply.

Time, I think, to put this beer mug to good use.

Colin finished second in the long course. *Second*. I can’t even begin to understand this, the effort required, and it defies any kind of commentary on my part.

Evan pulled himself together and finished third for his age group, remarkable given the conditions and the fact that this was his first crack at the race.

Withrow finished irritatingly quickly despite spending a cold 15 minutes having to fix a flat, posted some unnerving run times, but he didn’t have the good sense to be either 5 years older or 5 years younger so he could collect a beer mug for himself.

Jess flatted 20 miles into the bike and, freezing, made the executive decision at that point to be warm and dry.

Kaitlin finished third in her age group and collected a mug, and thrilled my girls on the follow when she allowed them to play all afternoon with Alpin, her glorious golden lab.

And Eric?

As John and I were pulling together our gear in the transition area, we noted that Eric’s bike was still out, and we began to fear the worst given how awful the conditions were and Eric’s relative unfamiliarity with the P3. In the middle of banging mud out of my cleats, Eric stumbled into the transition area.

His knees were bloodied and covered in gravel, and he looked shot.

And yet he racked his bike and bent, in visible pain, to change into his trail shoes.

JW and I watched him, and I almost wanted to stop him, but after pausing to tell JW he was sorry for having crashed “a couple times” on the bike, he pushed himself up and out of transition and out onto the course.

Jess, JW and I ran to cheer him on through the pavilion, but as we followed him out and watched Eric work his way up the gravel trail we were stunned into silence. Basically, Eric’s knees weren’t working, so he was running by swinging his arms and jerking his body to almost pull his legs forward from his waist. It looked excruciating.

Jess pulled her hands to her mouth and whispered, “John, I think you should go get him.”

“I’m not getting him. He’s got exactly one thing on his mind right now.”

As John said the words, I was on the cusp of going to get him myself but I was caught and held by the memory I have of not being able to finish IronMan New York. That memory is still so vivid to me, and so distinctly painful, that I could not do anything to stop Eric from taking his halting, agonizing steps forward.

I’ll be the first to carry him out of here, I thought, but he’ll have to fall down first.

He didn’t fall down. He disappeared into the woods.

And, hours later, he finished.

People ask me, us, why we do this.

I don't know if there is a good answer. But part of the answer is probably in all the smiles below:



The rest of the answer, the more complicated part, is scribed in Eric's face as he finishes, almost overwhelmed:



We'll be back next year, AmZof.

And we shall have our revenge.