

Race Report, Galveston 70.3, April 8, 2018:

“Cocksuckers, Crotch Sores, and Challenging Myself Beyond What I Ever Thought Possible”

7-8 months pre-race:

I'm about 1.5 months away from a 10 mile swim in the Tennessee River Gorge in Chattanooga for the annual Swim the Suck. This race is SUPER hard to get into – only 100 slots and registration closes within 20 minutes of opening. I had missed it in previous years and was so excited to have made it in. For some reason, despite knowing what a badass I already was, having swum around Key West (12.5 miles) in 2015 and then a 6.5 mile swim in Tampa in November of 2016, just 5 months after my son was born, I just didn't think I was challenging myself enough. Swimming was always so easy for me. Sure, long distances take their toll and I cannot swim at 1:30/100m pace for 10 miles (nor 6, nor 3...), but really, I could swim all day and still do a decent clip. It's my dream to swim the English Channel one day, along with the other 'big three' (Catalina Channel and Manhattan), and the Straits of Gibraltar, etc. I've never really doubted my ability to do any of those races. But the idea of swimming open water, THEN cycling, THEN running – that scared the shit out of me. Partly because I had tried once, in 2008. I signed up for a sprint in central Florida while I was in grad school down there. I jumped in the water, which was nearly frozen (yes, it actually got that cold in Florida that year) WITHOUT a wetsuit, went into shock, and had to crawl back out, defeated. My pride in being 'that crazy woman' who will swim in anything was totally crushed. (Lesson learned: you should just wear a wetsuit if the water is below 60 degrees. I know, I know, others will don the wetsuit if it dips even a tad below 75, but look: if you want to swim the English Channel, suck it up, because your swim will not be official if you swim in a wetsuit, and trust me: it is waaaaayyy colder than what most triathlons think is the proper cutoff for wetsuit legal races, but I digress). That race has been my only DNF since.

So, before my swim, I decided I needed to also sign up for a half ironman. Why the fuck would I choose this distance, you ask, as my first comeback attempt at triathlon, while I was still very much in pelvic floor rehab from my son's birth, and still waiting to see if I could successfully complete a 10mile swim in a month or so? I guess because I like to have a reason to fight. I'm a professional philosopher – a female academic in a completely male-dominated field, full of adversarial assholes. So, triathlon seems...perfect for me? Thus, I clicked 'pay now' and registered for the Galveston Half Ironman. (Note: I did spend much time with my partner, Paul, trying to convince him to convince me to change my mind, that this would definitely take a lot of time and mental space, probably mess up our relationship, etc. He was blissfully confident we would be 'fine.' Fast-forward to today. We are 'ok' so long as I don't sign up for another one of these anytime soon.)

About two weeks or so after I paid my money and committed to this nonsense, I began to consider hiring a coach. Realizing how much was at stake, I didn't want to screw this up like I did in 2008, and thought it would be money well spent. Jonesboro, Arkansas does not have a wide selection of triathlon coaches (read: none), so I looked at a bunch of different remote ones. They were all men. That's fine, I guess, but I was clear up front that I had a serious diastasis recti (if you don't know what that is, consider yourself lucky – mine was over 4 inches

and to this day, it hovers between 2-3 depending on how much core work I'm doing), and wanted to work on my pelvic floor to minimize pain and instability. Also, it would be nice if, you know, I could go run more than 2 miles without shitting my pants. Isn't childbirth just magical?

So, yeah, none of the dudes really responded to any of that. They were more focused on getting my times where I wanted them to be, which is cool, but not enough. Then I found Bonnie. She and I clicked immediately on the phone and she had even been through similar childbirth issues. I was really happy to find someone who realized that being a woman is 1. Not a disability, but 2. Also not the same thing as being a smaller, weaker version of a man. We are just different, and we train differently. So, I took her on to train me up to finish my first triathlon outside (I had done a couple of those super sprint ones – 300 m swim, 5 mile bike, 2 mile run – all indoors and safely NOT on a bike that wants to kill you. I even did one 7 months prego and kicked so many guys' asses in the swim. That is still one of my proudest moments).

I completed my 10mile swim October 14th, and the next day, got going on my first 70.3 training plan.

Training days (October – April)

Much like pregnancy, I think my training could be broken down into trimesters. And like many women's experience with pregnancy, there were major ups and downs. I will preface this comparison by saying, however, that pregnancy did not cause me to develop hemorrhoids, but learning to cycle sure as shit did.

First trimester of training, I call 'trainingsickness': I had to do so much just to re-learn how to run without crapping myself, core work, etc. I hated it. I felt slow and dumb. Even 8 months prego I could run a 9 min mile, but now, I was lucky to do 2 solid miles at 10 min pace. And then there was the issue of the bike...

My bike gets its own little diversion here. I bought it in 2007 when I decided to train for that sprint I never finished. It was used at the time, so it is OLD. It is aluminum. It is also a (gasp) road bike. It is cheap, basic, and not at all fancy. I dusted it off and began to ride it again before I even signed up for the HIM. Just some rides around town, which is, by the way, super hilly. I rode with a friend once who had to keep stopping to wait for me. It was a 16 mile ride. We averaged around 12 mph. I was pretty sure I would be the very last finisher on the bike. I thought about buying a new, fancy, compensating-for-something bike, but then I realized the futility of it, especially if I bonked this race and didn't even finish. Might as well just settle in and make this piece of crap bike work.

Bonnie told me to get a trainer. I did. It SUCKED. I told her I would never, ever, under no circumstances, do a trainer ride longer than 30 minutes. By December, I was doing 2 hour trainer rides and actually liking them better than running.

Second Trimester: I got this shit. Rides are getting better. I'm even braving the ass cold of Arkansas. I have shoe covers, special hats, gloves, etc. January 4th, I ran a half marathon, alone, just out in my town, first time ever with zero walk breaks, at a 9:37 pace. My swim, as usual, is amazing. I am just feeling fanfuckingtastic and ready to take this SHIT ON.

Third Trimester: let the breakdowns commence. By late Feb/mid March, the weird injuries, annoyances, and fatigues of training began to take effect. My IT band, glutes, and whatever the hell else is going on in that area, started pulling my knee all out of whack and one day, when attempting another 13.1, I had to stop at 3 miles because I could barely walk anymore. In my TrainingPeaks diary, I said something to the effect of "Fuck this. I am done. Guess I won't be finishing this race after all." Bonnie ignored that comment entirely. She just kept giving me more shit to do. I had to skip an entire weekend of training, including a 60 mile ride+1.5 hour run because of a nasty sinus infection. I kept missing workouts and it was well into March now. Then, the unthinkable happened. I got a HUGE saddle sore that was so bad I could barely sit down. I called it my big fat pussy pimple because that is essentially what it looked and felt like. Bonnie recommended Clearasil to me. 'For my crotch?!' I asked. I tried it. Seemed to help a little, but that fucker would not go away. (Also, just a note: Clearasil will bleach your underwear. I now have a bunch of panties with white dots on them). With all this going on, I was pretty sure this race was a big fat NO for me.

But, we worked through the issues, did some therapeutic stretching, rolling, pressure point stuff, etc, and I found some relief. Last two weekends before the race, I went out and killed it. Just wanted to keep my bike above 15mph, and I did, for two 60 mile rides in a row, in severe wind. I knew Galveston was windy, and unlike Arkansas, was flat, so I felt confident for the first time in a long time. Went out and ran the day after those bikes and did 11 or so miles each time with ease (ok, a little pain, but nothing that was going to stop me). I made peace with the fact that my dream of conquering my very first outdoor triathlon, a HIM, at sub-6 hour pace, was a very, very, long shot. Decided to just aim for under 7. Bonnie said 'oh hell no. Aim for 6 and be super proud of yourself if you go under 6:30, because that is a super respectable time.' To be honest, I kind of ignored her at that moment. She was talking all sorts of nonsense about doing the bike in 3:15 and how I could totally be closer to 6 than 7 hours, and I was pretty sure with my knee pain I would be lucky to get it done at all, without getting booted off the course at 8:30.

Race Week

My family and I drove down to Galveston and got settled into our AirBnB. I took my 22 month old (who is the size of a 4 year old, no joke) out in his stroller for a quick run. This was more of a very slow and painful jog. It was windy, HOT, and you know, pushing fat baby in non-jogging stroller = no thanks. I worried a lot about the heat. I had been training in Arkansas (and even some in Wisconsin) so I was not accustomed to anything above 60 degrees nor any humidity. On one of my bricks a few weeks prior, I suffered what I think was some beginning heat stroke because it had strangely jumped to the 70s one day in Arkansas and I was running after a ride, got dizzy, nauseous, and had depleted all my hydration supply. I had to walk home and felt

awful the whole day. I was supposed to run 6 miles that day and I had barely made 4. The idea of 13.1 in the heat was really not seeming possible for me. But I had learned to use base salts and after much yelling at me (in her nicest possible mom voice), Bonnie had convinced me to hydrate more while on the bike. So, I had to trust that I could handle the heat.

Friday, two days before the race, we went to Ironman Village to get all checked in. I hadn't really gotten excited about this whole race until I walked into this space. I saw the finish line set up and imagined myself running through the chute finally. I finally had a moment of 'YOU ARE GOING TO DO THIS' wash over me, and not that half-hearted bullshit I usually tell myself. Like, I just knew I could do it.

The day before the race, I did a small brick, and by small, I mean, like barely 200 meters of swimming. I went out into the ocean which was choppy. The whole weekend I never saw a single person swimming out in the ocean except one other guy later that day. It's not for everyone. I love it. But all the same, I didn't really feel like getting sucked into a riptide a day before my first HIM, so I cut it short, got on the bike and road down the Seawall (the road we were going to be riding for the race), and then did a quick mile run. The ride was slow, on purpose, because I was saving energy, but I was still bummed to see my average be below 15. That wind. Good grief. 20-25mph winds the whole time I had been there so far. My runs, however, had been much better, some were even sub-9 minute pace the weeks leading up to this, and during these last couple workouts, I kept that momentum going. 'Oh well, I thought. My bike will suck, but my swim is solid and my run will be good.'

We went to check my bike in around 4pm. I felt so much bike shame, seeing all those fancy tri bikes, hanging my little crappy bike next to all these beauties. I chuckled to myself, however, when I was reminded that 'I don't give a shit.' I muttered 'cocksuckers, all of you' under my breath as I left the transition area, and felt much better.

Race morning

Weather has taken a huge turn. It's 49 degrees. I try to ignore that and be thankful that I won't overheat and remind myself that the water will still be like 69 and that is perfect. I'm up at 4, trying not to be super nervous, checking and rechecking that I have everything I need. Paul woke up and we began packing the car up to go. It was 6. I was sure that was way early enough. Transition was open that morning from 5-6:45, and I just wanted to set up my stuff, get out of there, probably have to poop again (despite my best efforts to avoid the port-a-potty, alas, it never works for races), and then force myself to eat. THIS WAS NOT A GOOD PLAN. The lines of cars trying to get near the Village were enough to send me into existential terror. I had even bought Paul a VIP pass for the weekend so he was supposed to get super fancy parking, but the parking attendants didn't know what the hell he was on about when he flashed his VIP pass. 'Fuck,' I said, about a dozen times, until he finally stopped on the side of the road and told me just to get out and walk. I agreed this was the only way to ensure I could actually get into transition in time to set up my stuff. Problem was, I had a huge box of crap, my bike pump, a backpack, etc and was counting on him to help me carry it all. (Note: DO NOT put stuff in a box.

Holding it in lines that last forever will kill your biceps. They were the sorest part of me after the race.)

I finally get to the transition area and...MORE GODDAMN LINES. I asked some people if I could just go into transition and THEN get body marked and the answer was NO. The philosopher in me wanted to argue that this makes no sense, that they should get everyone out of transition first and then deal with body marking. I mean, my heat wasn't until 7:44, so clearly there was time to get marked after I set up. By the time I had thought all those thoughts, I found a woman, standing alone, with a marker, and I ran to her. I threw my stupid box onto the ground and blurted out, exasperatedly, '1791, 38, please!'. Luckily, I'm a really observant person, and this feature of me is heightened when I'm nervous, so I had watched everyone around me rolling up sleeves, presenting their left calf, telling the markers their bib number and then their age as of Dec of this year. I caught this woman off guard. It was like she wasn't ready for me to be so ready. She fumbled around and finally got me all marked and I made a beeline to transition. It was 6:40.

Got all my stuff set up first. Kept staring at my pump. I had not yet pumped up my tires and I was running out of time. They had just gotten pumped up yesterday and I only rode about 5 miles, so I knew they were likely ok. Plus, Paul had made me extremely nervous by saying that it was much harder to pump up these new tires I had gotten (armadillos because I really didn't want a flat on the course. I've never had one, never changed a tire, and although I had learned via youtube, I was really praying to all the gods that it didn't happen on this race. And I am a dumbass who relied on her husband to pump up her tires the last couple rides I went on, so I had never actually pumped these new ones up myself.) The announcer came on and said 'It's 6:45 folks. Time to leave transition.' 'Screw it,' I said. Remember: I am going to suck at the bike anyhow.

I was shaking, on the verge of tears. I didn't even know where Paul was. The only person I knew in the entire sea of 2500 people there that morning, and I he was MIA, still aimlessly searching for fake VIP parking probably. But when I left transition, he yelled out to me. I just sort of collapsed into his arms. 'I don't want to do this,' I said, tears filling my eyes. I don't think he knew what had gotten me so upset. I later explained the nightmare of trying to get into transition to him and vowed to get there at 3am if I ever did one of these again. He reminded me to eat. I stuffed some sweet potato and banana pancake into my mouth and it just sort of came back out. I was so nervous I was about to puke. We found the port-a-potties. THE WORST. At least my defiling it was unnoticeable, especially considering the big dudes going in and out in between my measly girly shit.

Finally, I was able to calm down a bit, eat a little, and drink a ton of my infinit. We walked toward the swim area. EVERYONE seemed to be wearing a wetsuit but me. 'No they aren't,' Paul said. 'Look at that douche,' he said, pointing to a guy. (We totally get each other and you can see now why I REALLY needed him by my side that morning). I shook off the doubts at my choice and put on my 'I am a REAL swimmer and don't need a wetsuit unless it's actually cold and besides, who needs the slight speed advantage when you are already fast as hell on your

own' HAT. It worked. Sort of. I was still so unsure of myself. By the time we got pretty close to the dock I would be jumping off, I started seeing a lot of other pale pink caps – my women – ages 35-39, along with the 18-24 year olds, 150 or so of us, all told. Someone told Paul he had to leave the area, as it was for athletes only. I got all panicky again. We kissed goodbye and I tried to put on big girl pants and not cry. About that time, a woman in my group looked at me and said 'how ya doing? Aren't you cold?' I must have rolled my eyes because she said 'guess you are tired of people asking you that, huh?' and I said something like 'no, it's ok. I just know the water is going to feel way better.' She seemed unconvinced. I was jumping up and down to warm up but my feet were like ice. I started doing so ballet stuff to get my feet warm. People looked at me funny. Whatever. Let's see YOU do the splits in your dumb wetsuit.

Then the moment arrived. They called the pink caps onto the dock. Icona Pop was playing and I jumped in time with the music. They started sending us into the water and boy was I glad it was an in-water start. I didn't want the shock of the water to be my first official race moment. Unceremoniously, I just jumped in. The water felt SO GOOD. I peed ALL THE PEE. I treaded water vigorously to warm up a bit more. Another asshole asked if I was cold. I said 'no, and I was glad to have such cool weather actually. Also, I don't have to take my stupid wetsuit off, nah nah nah nah nah nah.' Ok, I didn't say all that. In reality, I said something like 'no, the water is nice!'

Countdown...and we were off! And panic set in. Not because of the slight chop in the bay from the high winds, and not because of anything open water related. This was my home, after all. But dammit, these bitches were super aggressive. Grabbing my legs, basically trying to crawl over me. I think I actually kicked one of them on purpose just to get her off of me. Open water swimmers are NOT this rude. I remember thinking the first few minutes about how much I wished this was a normal open water race that would eventually spread out and I'd be all alone out on a river swimming another 8 miles. Yep, I actually had that thought, at a 70.3, that I wish I could swim another 8 miles right now. Eventually, things did spread out a little, but people continually touched me and it creeped me out every damn time. I got into my rhythm but knew I was going slower than usual. I wanted to conserve some energy and was trying to calm my heart down still from all the panic in the beginning. Plus, some of the super fast guys from the heat behind us started overtaking us and they were NOT very friendly about it. Every time one of them ran me over, I stopped and did breaststroke for a bit and yelled out "cocksuckers." It made me feel better. We turned the final buoy and there was a pink cap next to me. I decided I had to beat her. I did, by like 4 seconds. 38 minute swim. Not bad at all. I knew I could have done it faster, but it still ended up being in the top 25 of my heat. Running through the chute and taking off my cap and goggles, I saw Paul, cheering me on. I felt so good! Except, now came my nemesis...

The cold air hit me like a swift kick in the ass. I once again questioned my sanity in wearing a sleeveless tri kit and nothing more. But nope, I was going to be happy with this decision as the day went on. I fumbled in transition for what seemed like an hour, but got all my gear on, and headed out to the bike course. My watch said 5 minutes or so! Holy crap! I was sure I couldn't do it that fast. My transition practices at home (if you could call them that) were basically me

taking my sweet ass time and lamenting the fact that I had to get on the bike for about 15 solid minutes before Paul kicked me back out of the house.

I saw him again as I left on the bike. It made me happy, but also scared. I would not be seeing him again until I was done with this goddamn bike, which would be like, tomorrow. Then came the clipping in. To this day, it still makes me nervous and I am known to just sort of fall over for no reason when coming to a stop because I forget to unclip. I got myself situated and was officially off! As we got onto the main drag, I suddenly started crying. WTF? But I realized I was doing it. I was on my bike, not bitching about it, and I was pedaling steady and keeping my pace above 15. In fact, it was like 18, 19, 20. The wind was on my back, which spelled ominous things for the return route.

When I got to the turnaround spot at 28 miles I couldn't believe my eyes. My watch was reading 1:29:07. At that pace I would have done my bike under 3 hours. I knew the wind was going to kick my ass on the way back, but still: *Could I do this in 3:15?*

As I rode back, the wind was indeed strong, but I had trained in wind like this. I kept picking off people as I rode, people who passed me on the way out. Was it because the wind was getting to them? Some dude kept passing me but then slowing down again and I would overtake him. His jersey said 'POC' on it and I couldn't figure out what it was supposed to mean. I mused, joking with myself, that it might mean "Person of Color", and then laughed because, like, no. Triathlon is WHITE AF. Yes, there are some brown people, but like women, they are underrepresented. That is a WHOLE other topic for discussion one of these days. "Ironman and Intersectionality: On the whiteness of triathlon." Yes! What an awesome paper that would be. Ok, ok, focus! That guy's jersey? It means PIECE OF CRAP-COCKSUCKER! Of course! I passed him again and this time for the last time. Buh bye!

I noticed my protein bars had come out of my container and were long gone. Oh well. I hate eating on the bike anyhow. I was so nervous about reaching down to get my water bottle, but I did it anyways (I usually just drink from my aerobar container and then make a stop to refill it because I feel like I will fall down if I reach between my legs to get my bottle). I didn't want to stop. At this rate, I was all set to make it in 3:15 and that would be AMAZING. So I reached down, grabbed a drink, went to put it back, and...SPLAT. It went down on the road. I had been so worried about getting kicked off the course for littering, so I considered going back to get it, but then I had seen SO much trash along the way, and so many bottles. If this was my one faux pas of Ironman, so be it. I wanted that 3:15.

One other fun thing I learned on the bike: how to pee. I had come close on a few training rides, but never could quite get it to happen. Well, on this race course, it happened. Several times. I was so hydrated and so determined not to stop that I finally just let it go. I was, however, courteous enough to make sure no one was directly behind me when I did. It's kind of gross to feel pee run down your legs and into your shoes, but you know what? It's way better than holding it.

I rounded the corner to finish the last mile or so of the bike and it was going to be so close to 3:15! I had lost some time going against the wind, but I had kept my average around 16 for the most part. This last mile needed to be done in 3 minutes. I did it in 3:15, so I finished the bike in 3:15:15. I was so amazed and proud and on cloud nine that I forgot for a second that I had to run a damn 13.1 now. And I had to pee. Again.

I sat down in transition and got my shoes changed. And there I peed. Just sitting on the concrete, unashamed at the little puddle I was making. It felt glorious. I ate a little, stuck some base salts under my tongue, and got up to go, leaving my pee behind. (True story: I've never been too bad at public peeing. I see no reason why men should have it so easy to just relieve themselves wherever and whenever they please, so I have been known to just duck behind something real quick like and let it go as fast as I can, even if it's broad day light and there's a good chance I will be seen. When you gotta go...)

I don't have a ton to say about the run except, fuck that run. First 6 miles or so were great. In fact, my first 5k was like 9:07 pace, but then I started to slow down a lot. My knee was starting up its usual assholery, and I was getting tired. Plus, this course...it SUCKED. Three 4.4 mile loops around the same winding, stupid loop that had all sorts of switchbacks and even some dumb hills. I made the first loop no problem and said to myself I would walk a bit after that, but I felt like keeping going after I crossed the 'fake finish' line the first time (we literally ran through a chute that looked like a finish line and on the left it had an arrow for 'finish' with a smiley face and on the right, a frowny face with "#2 and #3" on it). I made it nearly 7 miles before I had to take a break. I had been trying to sip off my flipbelt infinit bottles and mix in base salts but I didn't put the cap back on properly on the salts and they spilled all inside my tri kit. I had salt all over my hands, stuck to my face, and even, it seemed, in my shoes. Plus, I was starting to get nauseous, not from dehydration, but just from all the salt I think. I grabbed a coke at one of the aid stations, as my friend Erika who has done two 70.3s told me that this was her favorite part of the run. It helped settle my tummy, but then a worse malady struck me: the dreaded need to poop. I started running again, had to walk again, and then ran again, pretty much like this the whole time. I had still not seen Paul and my baby, Skyler, who were supposed to be there by now to see me finish. Then I spotted them, and I was walking! I had to get going again! I ran and ran and ran, hoping to spot them again when we passed back by, but they must have moved. I got tired and walked some more and of course, there they were again! Baby Skyler yelled out 'momma' and I almost cried, knowing I still had 4 miles or so. Those last couple miles were a blur but I know I ran a lot more of them than the previous 4. I didn't want my family to see me walking every damn time I passed by! I kept seeing port-a-potties and wanting so badly to stop into one, but I was measuring my time: 38 min swim, 5 min transition, 3:15 bike, 6 min transition...if I were having the best running day of my life, keeping it at like 8:45 pace like I had been on some of my 10ks lately, I would be staring down the sub-6 HIM, but that was not happening. You know what was though? Sub 6:30. I really, Really, REALLY needed to run the last two miles and not stop. My average pace on the run was well over 10 min at this point and by my calculations, I needed to finish in 2:20 or so to make it under 6:30. This energized me and I pushed hard the last two miles. I rounded the bend where we had lined up for the swim earlier that day (for the third freaking time), and knew I was super close. Up one more small hill,

around a corner, and there was the spot with the happy and sad faces, the former directing you to the actual finish, the latter telling you 'wuh woh, you have to go around again, you miserable cocksucker.' 'Fuck you, sad face,' I said, as I passed it by. I had to remind myself to smile because when running, I tend to have RBF (running bitch face – seriously, all the pictures I got of me on the run I was either looking supremely pissed or giving someone the stink-side-eye.) This time, however, I was smiling. Actually, I started crying. I couldn't hold back the tears anymore and ran through the chute. Someone put a medal on me and gave me a hat. I just wanted to hug my family so much I passed right by the line to get your picture taken, then saw it at the last minute and decided I really ought to get that photo op. I got back in line and held back tears of joy just so I could look halfway happy for my photo. I had forgotten all about my watch! I looked down and it said 6:27:32. 'I must have done it!' I said out loud, knowing my watch had been running at least a minute or so after I actually passed through the chute. When I finally found my family, they greeted me with a cheer and Paul told me I had done it in 6:26 something. Skyler, his face covered in Dip-n-dots spoodge, happily exclaimed 'momma! A bike! (unlike me, his favorite thing in the world lately is my bike), and he gave me a huge hug. Paul asked me what I wanted. 'Pizza?' he asked. 'No,' I said. 'I just really want to poop.' And so we found a 'real' bathroom, and I did. And it was glorious. Almost as glorious as the bottle of wine I downed later that evening.

And my bike: I still don't love it, but I have a newfound respect for it. Thanks, bike, for being the reason I made it under 6:30, you old asshole. Maybe we can aim for sub-6 next time.