



I spent 2 years training for a Half Ironman. Here's what happened

10 lessons on pursuing lofty goals

By Nick Palmer

If this title sounds familiar, that's because you probably read [my blog post from last year](#). To refresh your memory, in 2019 I started training for an Ironman triathlon from scratch. Over the course of the year, I fell in love with the sport of triathlon, made great progress, had a few setbacks, and learned a ton along the way. All that while *not* completing a race because it was canceled due to COVID. My reflections on that first year of training became the original blog post that you may have read last October.

I continued to train over the year since then, but back in May, I was hit by a car while on a training ride, leaving me with a broken wrist, deep wounds, and shattered dreams. During my recovery, I shifted focus to a *half* Ironman, a triathlon of a 1.2 mile swim, 56 mile bike, and 13.1 mile run. I'm happy to report that three weeks ago, I crossed the finish line at Ironman 70.3 Oceanside.

It's only fitting that I revisit my lessons from that first year of training with my new perspective of another year's experiences. If you read the original post, there will be lots of familiar content here, but there are enough new ideas to make this worth reading. Consider it, if you will, a sort of *upward revision*.

If you didn't read the original, don't worry - this version stands alone. For context, though, my intention is to use my stories to share lessons that are applicable for *any* goal that *anyone* pursues.

I hope that as I share these experiences, you will find yourself inspired to chase that crazy goal or to try something brand new with a fresh sense of commitment and intensity.

1. Passions are variable

Passion is supposed to be about something you love, right? The dictionary defines passion as "a strong liking or desire for or devotion to some activity, object, or concept."

I don't like that definition. It implies that passions are fixed - you either *are* passionate about something or you're *not*. In her book, *Grit*, psychologist Angela Duckworth defines passion quite differently:

The word *passion* is often used to describe intense emotions. For a lot of people, passion is synonymous with infatuation or obsession. But in interviews about what it takes to succeed, high achievers often talk about commitment of a different kind. Rather than intensity, what comes up again and again in their remarks is the idea of consistency over time...Is *passion* the right word to describe sustained, enduring devotion? (57-58)

What I mean by passion is not just that you have something that you care about. What I mean is that you care about the *same* ultimate goal in an abiding, loyal, steady way. You are not capricious...You are, in a sense, pointing

in the same direction, ever eager to take even the smallest step forward...You have your priorities in order. (64)

This framework for understanding passion allows for changes and new experiences. It allows for the guy who hated even the *thought* of running to eventually feel like something is wrong if he doesn't run for more than two days in a row. Since passions stem from active decisions to consistently engage in something, we can consciously develop them.

So how do you *make* those consistent decisions and allow yourself to develop a new passion? Create an environment of accountability and to eliminate the chance to change your mind. Signing up for a race as daunting as an Ironman was an effective way to motivate me to train each day. I shared this goal with my coworkers, friends, and family so that they too could hold me accountable. With a specific goal selected and the people around me aware of what it would take for me to achieve it, I created an environment that forced me to be consistent.

Clearly define your goals and tell the people in your circle what you hope to accomplish. At first you may feel like the consistent engagement with your activity is forced, but over time, trust that it will become second nature. At that point, when the goal falls to the back of your mind and you're practicing for the sake of the activity itself, you'll know you've unlocked a new passion.

2. Find a Purpose

In my second year of training, I had long since developed a passion for the three activities. I was enjoying the way I was spending my time, I was seeing the health benefits, and I was excited to keep improving. That said, the daily training had me often making sacrifices, and I worried that I might burn out.

Around that time, I called up the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation to see if I could join their Team Challenge, Race in Orange program. I would continue training for my race on my own but now in support of the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation and to raise awareness for these debilitating illnesses. I've been a Crohn's Disease patient for half my life, and the Foundation has been incredibly important resource to my family and me since I was first diagnosed in 8th grade.

From then on, my training journey had new purpose. I was training and racing not just for myself, but for the millions of patients who suffer more severe cases than I do. That mission kept me focused and motivated during difficult sessions, long weeks, and ultimately during my car accident recovery.

The support I received from family, friends, and colleagues has left me speechless, as together we've raised nearly \$15,000. I've been so grateful for each donation, and trust me when I say I was thinking about my team of supporters throughout my race as it got difficult into the home stretch.

Of course, it may not make sense to align your goals with a charitable cause, but I'm sure you can find some higher purpose. Maybe you can connect your goal to your family or to some long-term vision you've had for yourself. By making it about more than just achievement, you'll find yourself more resilient in the difficult moments and humbler in the celebratory ones.

3. Be a student

To say I had a lot to learn about swimming, biking, and running is an understatement. I began devouring as much content as I could; I scoured videos on swimming technique, read about different types of bikes, and experimented with several ways to warm up for runs. As I progressed, my lessons became more specific and meaningful; I explored different diets, supplements, and workout types. I could share stories about *dozens* of different things I learned, but one lesson that I finally absorbed five

months into my training, once I was experienced enough to understand it, has had the biggest impact on my approach.

Early on, the intensity of my workouts had me wiped. Even with two rest days a week, I wasn't recovering enough, and I was constantly exhausted. With my body begging for more rest, I began to understand everything I had been seeing and reading about Zone 2 heart rate training.

At a given moment, a person's heart rate falls into one of 5 zones between your resting and maximum heart rate. During low intensity activities, when an athlete remains in Zones 1 or 2 (less than ~80% max heart rate), the body burns primarily fat as energy, it improves its aerobic capacity and overall cardiovascular strength, and it recovers very quickly. As exercise increases in intensity and the heart rate approaches its maximum, the body burns carbs as energy and produces lactic acid as a byproduct while developing top-end speed and strength.

Training at high intensities is necessary to develop cycling power or running speed, but too high a *percentage* of this training prohibits the body from fully recovering between sessions, doing more harm than good. Compounding the problem, without a full recovery and a strong base of endurance fitness, you can't execute your hard sessions *hard enough* to maximize their speed and power benefit. Therefore, if you train too hard too often, you won't be efficiently improving your aerobic base, and since you're not fully recovered, you can't go hard enough to improve your strength. You're in a sort of "Zone 3 abyss."

When I first started running, I didn't know any of this - I was obsessed with getting faster and pushed my heart rate into zones 4 and 5 (unknowingly) with every run. My body could only take this for so long before an inevitable knee injury left me sidelined for 6 weeks. By *now* emphasizing low intensity training and striving to spend 80% of my training time in zone 2 or lower, I've been able to train more frequently, reduce injury risk, and approach my (limited) high intensity training sessions with sufficient energy to maximize the strength benefit.

This important understanding came from thorough and repeated research. Treat your goal area as something to master. Be a student, and seek out as much information, science, and instruction as possible. Lessons and ideas that may not make sense at first will become more relevant as you gain proficiency, so don't let increased success diminish your appetite to learn more. Look for ways to improve every aspect of what you're doing so that when you get to a lesson as meaningful as this one was for me, you will have already built a habit of incorporating new techniques or knowledge into your routines.

4. Make the right investments

As I did my research, it became clear that I would need to make some investments to get started. It was a difficult position to be in because I knew I needed new things, but I didn't know enough to always make smart decisions. At times my choices were fortunate, like when I bought quality running shoes and goggles right away, but in most other cases, my priorities were misaligned. Although I bought a top-of-the-line wetsuit in November that I wouldn't wear until May, I didn't start using a proper training watch until January, I delayed getting a bike until February, and I didn't take a swim lesson until March. It wasn't until my *second year* that I began following a real training plan. That's a lot of time and money wasted.

Had I paid closer attention to all the YouTube videos I was watching in the early months, I would have noticed that every cyclist and triathlete trains on Zwift, that having a device to accurately measure heart rate is paramount, and that swim technique is arguably more important than swim fitness. I was doing all the research, but I wasn't perceptive enough to recognize what was truly necessary.

To the extent possible, I would discourage you from trying and pursue something brand new on no budget. That said, I'm also not suggesting that you go out and buy

lots of fancy equipment. Find the experts in that space and see through the advertisements to discover what they really need to perform well. For your goal, you may not even need physical items; the smart investments may be lessons, coaching, or educational materials. Making the right investments early on will make your transition into the endeavor smoother and your mastery quicker.

5. Don't overlook the little things

Earlier I mentioned how my early running left me sidelined with injuries for six weeks. The fact that I ran too hard was a problem in and of itself, but the run's intensity also exposed other weaknesses in my training. I had spent zero time strengthening my hamstrings or glutes, my running cadence was low (mid-160s) with poor technique, and my stretching routine was unproductive. Looking back on it today, my knee injury was inevitable.

There's nothing exciting about doing running drills or bodyweight strength exercises. This is the unglamorous training that no one sees, the hard work that doesn't even *directly* contribute to better performance. But these little things like technique, strength, and recovery can make or break endurance training. I still go through times when I pay less attention to these ancillary activities, but I no longer pretend like they don't exist.

It's little things that are easy to overlook but can be crucial ingredients for progress. You may need to spend extra time on technique, preparation, maintenance of equipment, or indirect areas like nutrition. It might be about creating the environment in which you're best-equipped or most comfortable to pursue your goal. The point is, don't think that if you're not actively engaged in your activity, you're not making progress. There will be an entire network of little, perhaps tedious, choices and efforts that contribute to your success – embrace them.

6. You don't have to feel 100% to make progress

I can't tell you how many times I wanted to take extra days off. Some days I hadn't slept enough and woke up feeling exhausted. Other days I felt like I might not have enough time to properly warm up if I was going to make it to work on time. Some mornings I felt minor injuries or had eaten poorly the day before. The list goes on and on. It was easy to let myself think that training on days when I didn't feel 100% would be wasteful.

As reluctant as I've been to push through those moments of doubt, I've learned that the stars don't have to align each day to make progress towards my goal. It's possible to have a great workout on 5 hours of sleep or with a slight hangover or with minor knee/shin/foot/etc pain. Some of my best runs have been on mornings when I had to drag myself out of bed, and some of my best swims have been on days when I've dreaded going to the pool. I don't know if there's anything scientific to this lesson – it might just be a lesson in mental resilience. Don't let your mind impose limitations.

Why does this point matter for anyone with a non-athletic goal? It's subtle, but perhaps one of the most important on the list: If we can make progress even when the conditions aren't ideal, then we don't need to do everything in our power to *create* those ideal conditions. In this way, you don't need to make crazy sacrifices to keep yourself on track. Relax. Don't stress yourself out or put too much pressure on each day. Your journey doesn't need to get *totally* in the way of regular life. Strike a healthy balance between your goal and everything else important to you. You can still make progress towards an ambitious goal while maintaining your family, social, and professional life.

7. Every day won't be perfect

There have also been several days when despite how a workout started, it would fail. Since so much of my training evolved into low intensity heart rate targeting, I became

very aware of what my heart rate “should” be for a given running pace or bike power. Some days it was way off with no clear explanation.

I remember one Saturday morning in May 2020 I planned to do a 15-mile run, but by the middle of the second mile my heart rate was 175bpm when it should have been 155bpm. Knowing that if I kept going for 15 miles like that, I would need multiple days to recover, I made the extremely humbling decision to stop after 3 miles and try again the next day.

These types of failures didn’t happen often, but there were at least a dozen runs and bike rides that I gave up on over the past two years. The lesson I learned in those moments is to salvage those days in some *other* way to make progress. If a bike workout failed, I would spend that extra time doing mobility exercises to strengthen my legs. If I was feeling an injury during a run, as I ran home to end the session, I’d be hyper-focused on my running form to build better habits. I found *some* way to improve even if my body was preventing me from completing the planned training.

I’ve also come to find a middle ground between a *failed* workout and a *great* workout. Just because I didn’t set new personal bests doesn’t mean that a session failed. Those magical, perfect sessions are few and far between and expecting to have them too frequently is unrealistic.

Lionel Sanders, one of the best long-distance triathletes in the world, says, “One *great* workout will not win a race. Thirty to forty *good* workouts strung together in close proximity is what wins races.” I found this to be especially true and helped me learn to deemphasize my day-to-day results, accept the failures as they come, and look at my progress as a *trend* as opposed to an individual datapoint.

For your goal, the equivalent of a failed workout might be an unexplainable lack of concentration, a mistake, tech issues, bad weather, distractions, or any other factor that you can’t control and that prevents perfection. In those moments, be humble enough to accept the circumstances and shift your focus. Find some related, helpful activity that you *can* control, and look ahead to tomorrow as a new day to try again. And during the *good* sessions, which will probably make up 85-95% of your days, trust the process and don’t let yourself fixate on the measurable results.

8. Don’t be afraid to pivot

As I assessed my damaged bike and wounded limbs while waiting for the ambulance in May, I had an immediate sense that this car accident was going to cancel my Ironman plans. But for weeks, I clung onto hope. I limped around my apartment trying to estimate when I would be able to run again, and I tended to my wounds thinking I could probably swim in a few weeks. But then we confirmed that my wrist was broken, and I was put in a cast for a month.

Getting the cast felt like the final blow, erasing any hopes I had of easing back into training sooner rather than later. I was stressed, depressed, and unmotivated. I felt like a zombie: wake up, work, go back to bed. Nearly two years’ worth of training ruined by a decision to ride outside on a particular Wednesday afternoon. If I couldn’t complete an Ironman, what was the point of all that time? Was I willing to spend *another* year training?

I wanted to race this year, and it was obvious that when I got my cast off, I wouldn’t have enough time to train for my Ironman. Looking through the race calendar, I noticed that there was a half Ironman (also known as an Ironman 70.3) being held in southern California on October 30. The location and timing ideal, but the distance was an issue for my ego.

I spent two days wrestling with whether I had the humility to train for a race of only *half* the distance I had been training for all this time. Would it be enough? Would I be happy with the result? Would it be worth the effort?

Ultimately, I overcame the hesitancy by reframing my goals given the changed circumstances. I started to focus on *fun*. With a shorter distance race, my training would be more manageable, and that the race itself would be more of a *race* and less of a survival test. I determined that completing a 70.3 in under 6 hours only 8 weeks after recovering from a car accident would be a goal worthy of continued focus.

The flexibility to pivot and change focus saved me mentally this summer. I felt like myself again, and with this specific goal in mind, to which I would hold myself accountable, I felt motivated to keep going.

I don't think my experience is unique. We all need to be able to pivot and pursue modified goals in certain circumstances. It's not easy to change your mind on something, but with specific focus on how your goal will change and on why this shift is important to you, you can stay motivated, make great progress, and even protect your ego. We can't be prepared for everything that life throws our way, but we can be nimble and humble enough to adapt to new environments with intensity and passion.

9. You are not alone

Although most of my training over these two years was solitary, my family and friends have been with me the whole time. There were times when it was obvious, like during our SIMON group runs, but far more often were the times when I felt support from the people around me even though they likely didn't realize they were giving it. I am so grateful to the coworkers, friends, and family members who have on countless occasions checked in to ask how my training is going. Each of those interactions were meaningful to me and they kept me motivated.

I'll also re-emphasize how much it meant to me to have a team of donors supporting me. I started fundraising in earnest after I had committed to pivoting to the 70.3, and sharing that new goal with the friends, family, and colleagues who would go on to make donations to the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation on my behalf was a strong forcing function. There was no turning back at that point. Like I mentioned earlier, thinking about that team of supporters during tough moments in training or in the race itself helped me push through and finish strong each time.

Invite people into your journey, don't try and go it alone. Share your goals with the people close to you because they will hold you accountable and you will feel their support. That's not to mention you'll probably make some sacrifices if you take your goal seriously, and following through on those sacrifices will require the buy-in and support of the people closest to you.

10. The journey is the reward

On October 17, two weeks before my race, I texted my friend, "I am fully prepared to do this race in 6 hours." I told him my path to 6 hours was a 40-42min swim, 3:00 - 3:10 bike, 10-12mins worth of transitions, and a 2:00 run. My plan was to take it as easy as possible on the swim, maintain control and consistency on the bike, and leave it all out there on the run. So how did it go?

My race began as I rushed into the ocean, swimming over and under waves in a crowd of people to get out to calmer seas. After 200 yards, I started to settle in and swim as I intended too. I checked my time and pace a few times during the swim - I was right on track and it felt easy. I kept things under control and stepped out of the water after only 39mins.

The first hour of the bike was easy, I pushed 175 watts and traveled 18.8 miles, exactly as I planned. An average speed of 19mph would be ideal for the day, but 18 was the goal. Then the next two hours were challenging, as the course included a few difficult climbs. Nevertheless, I maintained 175 watts on average, which was enough to hold my average speed just over 18mph. I got off my bike after 3 hours and 6 minutes. Right on target.

After I put my running shoes on, I looked at my watch and saw that I had been racing for 3 hours and 58mins total. If I was going to finish the race in under 6 hours, I would need to run a 2-hour half marathon, which I was confident but starting to feel nervous about in the moment.

I started running and my stomach felt horrible and bloated. The early miles were a challenge, but I kept telling myself that with each additional mile, as long as my *average* pace was below or close to 9:09 per mile, there was still hope. My legs felt fine; there were no physical limits to stop me from running. It was a battle between my head and my stomach. Nevertheless, by mile 8, I was running at a 9:30 pace and my average had slipped to 9:15 – too slow.

And then I felt better. I don't know what happened, but shortly after mile 8 I realized I wasn't in pain anymore. So I picked up the pace. My average pace improved from 9:15 to 9:12 over the next few miles. By the time I got to mile 11 I knew I had to make my push.

I gave it everything I had left in those last two miles – it was a truly out-of-body experience. I blocked out the cheering crowds and beautiful ocean views because in my head, I was in Liberty State Park trying to complete a difficult interval on an otherwise ordinary morning. There was nothing I needed to do in these final two miles my nearly 300 runs and 11 *days'* worth of time spent on the bike didn't prepare me for. There was no struggle that I hadn't already overcome.

The discipline, consistency, and precision of my training prepared me perfectly for this day – I swam, biked, and ran exactly as I had planned. There was nothing *new* that I did on race day – there was no magic speed that I unlocked. In these last two miles, I realized that crossing the finish line was not about completing the race; the race itself was only ever about *executing* in a way that I was certain I could execute. Finishing this race strong in these last two miles was a celebration of the two-year journey that got me to the starting line that morning.

I crossed the finish line having run a 1:59 half marathon for an overall time of 5:57.

In whatever you set out to accomplish, recognize progress as a reward in and of itself. Developing a new passion, learning about different activities, engaging with a new community, experiencing the humility of setbacks, feeling the support of friends and family – these are the rewards of your journey. Let the goal itself steer you in the right direction, but don't let the pressure of completing it distract you from the personal growth you experience each day.

It's not too late to support the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation. If you would like to make a donation, here is my [personal fundraising page](#).