

## Ironman Arizona – November 23, 2008 – Sarah J. Tracy Race Report

Total Distance: 140.6 miles  
Total Time: 15 hours, 51 minutes, 15 seconds

2.4 mile swim (1:20:36 min)  
T1 (00:13:54)  
112 mile bike (7:40:00)  
T2 (00:09:00)  
26.2 mile run (6:27:46)

Two weeks ago today I participated in my first Ironman Triathlon, billed by television commentators as the “toughest single day endurance event in the world.” I signed up for it Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup> of last year, late one night after a couple glasses of wine. After pressing the “confirm” button on the Ironman website, officially charging the \$550 entrance fee on my credit card, I strolled over to my accomplished triathlete love, Brad, and said, “Guess what I just did?” Upon hearing my plans, he said, “Oh, Sarah, what have you done?”

Brad knew the journey in front of me, and was concerned that I was pushing it. In fact, I probably was. I completed my first sprint distance triathlon (750 meter swim, 12 mile bike, 3.1 mile run) just 13 months earlier. But, I figured, because of other travel commitments, there was no way I would be able to train for Ironman in 2009. Plus, I heard myself say out loud to my two friends, Isa and Amy, at our biweekly masterminding meeting, “It would be kind of cool to do the Ironman before my 20<sup>th</sup> year high school reunion.” What the hell? Where did that come from? As a tenured university professor with a vibrant life filled with great friends and family, I think of myself as fairly happy, confident and accomplished. So I was surprised and somewhat embarrassed to hear the high school reunion comment come out of my mouth—perhaps it was just the best justification for doing it now.

Indeed, throughout the last year, when people ask me about the Ironman, I still cannot provide a tidy rationale. A group of colleagues and I were hanging in the break room the other day. Clark said, “So, was it worth it?” I paused for a moment, really unsure what to say. My colleague Dan jumped in and suggested that I should answer that question by doing a dramatic model-esque spin, giving my butt a little wiggle, and saying seductively, “You be the judge!”

All joking aside, am unsure whether I can pinpoint an exact reason why I did the Ironman or really, whether I will ever be able to know for sure whether it was “worth it.” However, I *can* identify some of the lessons I’ll carry with me because of the experience. More so than my race-day strategies, split times or nutrition choices, these lessons are what will stay with me. So, that’s the focus of this race report.

### **Lesson One: The journey is the destination.**

I opened this race report with reference to the commentator’s catchphrase for Ironman as the “toughest single-day endurance event in the world.” I question this blanket description on a number of accounts. One could argue that there are many other tougher things that one could endure during a single day (child birth; climbing Mt. Everest’s peak; the day before knowing you’ll be laid off come to mind). However, what I want to focus on here is that Ironman is *not* about a single day—it’s about the journey of sacrifice, pain, triumph, community, frustration and wonder that is part of training.

My physical training (swimming, cycling, running) spanned the course of 48 weeks and grew from 7 hours to nearly 20 hours a week at the end. I trained in each discipline three times a

week, with long workouts Wednesday and Saturdays, and every Sunday off. Additionally, I spent hours preparing clothes and equipment, stretching, strength-training, driving to the pool or bicycle start locations, as well as frequently visiting my beloved physical therapist Ranata.

I tried to get eight hours of sleep every 24 hours, and that meant a schedule of early nights (~9:30 p.m.), early mornings (between 4:15-5:15 a.m.) and frequent naps. Most evenings were spent preparing my clothes, equipment and nutrition for the next morning along with a meticulous schedule working backwards from the time I needed to start work. Every night I set two alarms (e.g., one for 4:30 and one for 4:35). I got out of bed when the second one rang, headed out the bedroom door, and immediately changed into the workout clothes set out the night before.

I learned how to survive in my job. Emails that in the past I would have spent several paragraphs responding to, now got one-line responses of “That sounds great.” People didn’t seem to mind. My writing pace slowed.

On the one hand, I learned how many corners I could cut and still accomplish the basics in my world. On the other hand, for literally the first time in my life, I felt guilt that I may not be working hard enough at my job. I vividly remember one Thursday when I spent four hours at the gym, missed being involved in a work project, and felt guilty and angry that I was left out. After stewing about the situation for several hours, I decided to suck up the guilt and anger. Every choice has consequences.

The training journey was filled with joys and sorrows that I could have never anticipated. My body was perpetually sore. However, I also felt more alive and exuberant than ever. When watching the summer Olympics, I sensed an affinity with the athletes. With the gradual increase in training, every Saturday, I finished my longest bike ride ever. I had continual satisfaction of breaking new ground. My body transformed. My veins enlarged; my body slimmed and I felt strong.

Sorrows also sprang up. My body did not always do what I asked it to do. I wiped out twice on my bicycle, and ended up with huge bruises and scrapes. My GI track got out of kilter with the increased calories and physical and mental stress. Over the course of training, I dealt with sub-scapular bursitis, Achilles and posterior tibial tendonitis and plantar fasciitis. I was pushing my body beyond levels it had never known, and perhaps beyond what I “should” have done in a perfect world. I learned new stretches and addressed imbalances in strength and flexibility. To diagnose my shoulder and foot issues, I got two different MRIs, was fitted for custom in-soles and received two cortisone injections. I visited Ranata who treated my body with soft-tissue release, ASTYM, hybrosis, and ultrasound.

Along the way, I met new friends and strengthened existing relationships. These memories make up the journey of triathlon. The journey of training is the substance of Ironman.

**Lesson Two: When it seems that people are blocking you, they are just as likely clearing and easing the way. Struggle against them and over them, and the path will feel obstructed. Flow within and amongst them, and the path will feel friendly and quick.**

The Ironman swim was nothing like I ever experienced. Videos are really the only thing that illustrate the mad scene. Imagine 2,200 wet-suit clad participants packed together waiting for the starting gun to go off. This is the moment we all have been training and waiting for. We are pretty crowded even when treading water vertically in Tempe Town Lake. The gun goes off and we all turned horizontal. Bodies bursting with pent up nervous energy are literally overlapping and on top of each other and trying to move forward.

In past triathlons (which stagger the start times to avoid so much crowding), these early moments of the swim have been panicky for me. I hate running into someone else, feeling others hands and arms pushing me down, and knowing that I could get kicked in the face at any moment. In past races, I have begun to hyperventilate about 200 yards in, and had to stop or do sidestroke to calm myself.

Objectively, Ironman was no different in terms of the crowding—or if anything, was worse. However, somewhere along my training and racing, I transformed my viewpoint of all those arms and feet and bodies around me. I told myself that they were all my friends. Their arms were pats on the back, and their splashing feet in front of me were making way to draft. I relaxed into the rhythm and made mental friends with the pack of competitors around me. I had one of the calmest, most enjoyable and fastest swims of my life.

**Lesson Three:           When the path gets hard, stopping is not the solution. You perhaps change position, slow down, try a different fuel, or slightly modify course. However, you keep going. It gets easier further down the course, and continuing to put one foot in front of the other provides the opportunity to know that.**

I hit my lowest point of the race during the second of my bike loops. It felt as though daggers were digging into my neck and upper spine, my arms and wrists were sore, my hands were going numb and I felt sick to my stomach. At this point, I was still facing another 3 hours or so in the saddle and realized that the day was not even halfway completed.

I was struggling to keep up my goal speed (a measly 15.5 mph) and watched bodies that appeared “less fit” than me whiz by. I didn’t know whether I would be able to keep going. I felt very alone out there among the cacti on Bee-line highway. Spectators were few and far between, and because of triathlon drafting rules, I could not turn to fellow riders for camaraderie or conversation.

About that time, we came to our “special needs” bags. I stopped and switched out my bottle of warm and soured nutrition for fresh powdered recoverite that I mixed with an ice-cold bottle of water. I stretched out my neck, shook out my hands, and got back on the bike. Twenty-five miles later, I looped back into Tempe and saw my mom and step-father cheering me on with beaming smiles.

I yelled out, “One more loop, and I feel o.k.!”

And, I did.

Feeling o.k. was just a little further down the path than feeling bad.

**Lesson Four:           Anything worth doing well is worth doing badly in the beginning.**

Cycling is the most difficult part of triathlon for me. I am just not very experienced or fast. I also feel uncertain of the machine. My bike handling skills and experience are on par with an 18 year old’s driving skills. In other words, they’re not great.

Triathlon rules dictate that the athlete must not receive any external support, and if they do, they may be disqualified from the race. Therefore, a key part of triathlon is being able to service your own bicycle if something goes wrong—such as if the chain falls off, the brake starts to rub or if the tire flats. I have never been a person who was motivated to learn any of these things for myself. In fact, the idea of having to do these things on my own was so terrifying that I never cycled outside by myself until about six months ago. Finally, before my first half-Ironman last April in Galveston, I had to face my fears and learn how to change a flat tire

For some reason that I still do not fully understand, I decided that I should face the learning process all by myself. I put a date in my calendar and blocked out 3-4 p.m. one Thursday afternoon. I set myself up in the living room, determined to change the tire at least once. The process marks one of my ugliest points of training.

I had no clue how to get the chain and back tire disconnected from the derailleur. And, once I got them off, I could not for the life of me figure out how to get them back on. I struggled with the chain, and tried to jam it in. I took it off again. Grease got on my face. Grease got on the carpet. Grease got all over my clothes.

During the process, I said awful and mean things to myself—things I would never say to my worst enemy. Things like, “Sarah, are you so stupid that you can’t figure this out?” “Who the hell do you think you are?” “You are so, so dumb.” “You’ll never be able to do triathlon.” I screamed so hard in frustration that my two cats cautiously approached and tried to comfort me with sweet meows. The sun went down, I turned on the lights, and intermittently cried, tried more, cried some more and hung my head in my hands.

I was an ugly mess. I felt deflated, useless, anxious, incompetent and scared.

Three hours into the disaster, Brad got home from work. Paralyzed in his tracks, he stared at me with this crazy facial expression of confusion, horror and sympathy. I must have been quite a sight. My hands were covered in bicycle grease and my flushed face was smudged with tears, mascara and grease. I was sweaty and disgusting. And, I still hadn’t succeeded.

Brad cautiously asked if he could help. Somehow, I had the wits about me to say something like, “If you are o.k. with just sitting there, providing intermittent tips and me not being very nice to you or anything right now, that would be great.” He did, and I got the tire changed within the next half hour.

The next week, I shared this story with Isa and Amy at our biweekly mastermind meeting. I was glad that I had finally changed the tire, but the whole experience was entwined with negative energy. I still had a ton of anxiety that I would become upset and frozen if I flatted during a race. They listened patiently and helped me to see the humor. They recommended that I first make sure that I knew the basic skills of the process and if not, to enlist help. Then they suggested I try it again on my own, and this time, to give myself only positive messages and encouragement.

So, I went over the process again with Brad to make sure I actually understood the technical details. Then, on my own, I set another tire changing date with myself. This time, I forced myself to say only kind things to myself. I changed both the front and back tires several times, and finished within the hour.

The following weekend, for the first time ever, I went out for a wonderful training ride by myself. I was confident that if necessary, I could change my own tire. I may not be fast, but I could do it.

Anything worth doing well, is worth doing badly in the beginning.

**Lesson Five:                   Obstacles are a natural part of journey and should be celebrated. They serve as intermittent nuggets of evidence that the goal is stretching you to new places.**

About a half hour into my 7 hour 40-minute Ironman bike split, my back tire blew off the rim. I felt my blood pressure raise slightly, but I slowed down and headed to the right side of the road. Immediately, I began saying to myself out loud, “I am very good at changing a tire.” “I can do this.” “This is just one more part of the race.” I ignored the many racers flying by me, and talked myself through it. Fifteen minutes later, I was back on my bike and on my way.

Facing and fixing that flat tire is one of my most awesome Ironman memories.

**Lesson Six:           A view from the back of the pack is a stunning view that is qualitatively different than a view from the sidelines.**

The morning before the race, Brad handed me a letter. Among some other very sage wisdom about what I was about to encounter, he said,

There is a tremendous challenge that lies before you. No, this is not hunger, or disease, war, or death of a loved one. However, today's struggle is significant because of you CHOSEN it. Today, you've chosen to seek out adversity, hunt it down, confront it, and become its master.

Before the Ironman, I did my best to predict my race split times so that friends and family could try to plan their day. Amazingly, I was almost dead-on for my swim (about an hour and twenty minutes) and bike (a bit more than seven and a half hours). Before the race, I had never run more than 13 miles straight, so my time to complete a marathon distance was a huge mystery. It took me six and a half hours—about an hour longer than I would have hoped—but at mile 22 my left foot demanded no more pounding. I walked most of the final four miles.

Several days after the race, I received an email from an acquaintance reading, "I looked up the results and it looks like you had a pretty good swim." By good, she meant slightly better than the median. My bike and run times were less than average. WAY, less than average.

Out of 2190 racers and 2075 finishers, I came in 1964<sup>th</sup>. Out of 105 women in my 35-39 age group, I was 94<sup>th</sup>. In other words, I was among the slowest 10 percent of Ironman Arizona 2008 racers.

The bottom 10 percent. Ouch.

In some ways, this "bottom 10 percentile" is somewhat depressing to see in print. In fact, I have avoided writing down my scores until now, because the way I frame my Ironman story is not about the time. When I articulated my percentile to Brad and several triathlon friends, they were quick to say, "Yeah, but..." and provide very good rationales about why my slow time did not matter.

However, these are the same people who are rightly very concerned with and proud of their own ranking at the *top* of the group. Indeed, I would argue that in any competition—whether that be sports, school or business—*some* of the story is about one's ranking compared to other people. So, what is that story for me?

In racing Ironman, I chose to place myself in a context where I did one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life, and still, I ended up nowhere near the elite. Through this experience, I know at a visceral level that success need not be a comparative game. From the back of the pack, I learned humility and gratitude in ways that I never could at the front. I learned that I can face fear and feel triumphant even when all external signs point otherwise. I also better understand how being in the bottom does not equate with lack of effort or lack of feelings of accomplishment.

Someone once said that the best teachers consistently put themselves in contexts in which they are not expert. In doing so, they are reminded of what it feels like to not be the smartest and the best, and this experience makes them better teachers.

In my view from the back of the pack, I learned that good comes even when (and perhaps only *through* the process of) not excelling compared to others.

**Lesson Seven:           A plan, even if it must be changed, is better than no plan at all.**

One of my favorite stories is told by organizational scholar Karl Weick in his book, *Sensemaking in Organizations*:

[A] young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps sent a reconnaissance unit into the icy wilderness. It began to snow immediately, snowed for 2 days, and the unit did not return. The lieutenant suffered, fearing that he had dispatched his own people to death. But on the third day the unit came back. Where had they been? How had they made their way? Yes, they said, we considered ourselves lost and waited for the end. And then one of us found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down. We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm, and then with the map we discovered our bearings. And here we are. The lieutenant borrowed this remarkable map and had a good look at it. He discovered to his astonishment that it was not a map of the Alps, but a map of the Pyrenees. This incident raises the intriguing possibility that when you are lost, any old map will do (p. 55).

Likewise, the Ironman provides clear evidence of the importance of a map and a plan.

Before the race, I created a nutrition plan that detailed exactly what and when I would eat and drink. Brad has struggled with nutrition and hyponatremia (water intoxication) in the past and I was determined to take in enough calories and salt so that my system would stay balanced. I also knew from training that to actually get in enough calories, I would have to eat and drink even when I didn't feel hungry or thirsty. I pledged to stick to the plan, and if started feeling sick to my stomach, the answer was *not* to stop eating, but to slow down so that my system had a better chance of absorbing the nutrition.

My plan included an array of Cliff brand products including black cherry Cliff Shot Blocks (little gummie cubes), Cliff Electrolyte Drink in crisp apple, Cliff Recoverite Drink in vanilla (and lactose pills to help with the whey protein digestion) as well as caffeinated Zimm electrolyte drink, water, Electrolyte Pills (filled with sodium, potassium, etc.), cut-up peanut butter green-tea infused Cliff bars, and peanut butter pretzels from Fresh-n-Easy. On the run, I planned to continue with the Cliff products as well as pick up water plus the following in turn at each aid station: banana piece, chicken broth, pretzels, repeat; then at mile 22, but not before, I would start with the defizzed cola.

On the bike, I grappled with nausea. However, I trusted in the plan. And, that trust is what helped me get through the lowest times. On the run, I could not stomach any more of the Cliff products, but continued with the Aid Station plan. I also improvised, making up with the lost Cliff calories by picking up food that were calorically similar, like cookies and grapes.

I learned that plans, even if changed, map out the way, provide reassurance, and encourage smart improvisation. Especially in times of bewilderment and pain, trust in a plan can help keep you moving forward.

**Lesson Eight:           Gross" is completely relative. And so is tedium and pain.**

Around mile 80 of the bike, I took a big gulp of my electrolyte drink. Then, without warning, it ejected back out of my stomach and sprayed down my jersey and front tube of my bike. I was already covered in a layer of sweat, sunscreen and Tempe Town Lake gook. This just added one more layer.

About ten minutes later, it was time for me to chew down another Cliff Shot Block. I reached down into my Bento box, a little container covered in mesh and attached to my bike's

top tube. I found my remaining hunks of nutrition swimming in some sort of liquid. It took a second for it all to click.

Oh no.

I considered my options. I had already passed special needs, and I really needed the calories in the remaining shot blocks and hunks of Cliff bar. Without dwelling on the situation, I reached back down into the bento box, grabbed a chunk of something, and popped it in my mouth. It was a little slimier than before, but at this point, it didn't really matter.

It stayed down.

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By the time I was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> lap of the run, it was about 9 p.m., and the port-o-potties had been well-used by about 1900 athletes in front of me. I had downed perhaps one too many cups of chicken broth, and my body was demanding that I go NOW. I came upon a row of potties, and only one was open. I opened it up, and found the seat splattered with someone else's poop. I couldn't wait, so I entered and locked the door behind me.

Now, usually, I am pretty accomplished at hovering above the seat—a skill that requires a practiced combination of clenching some muscles while relaxing others. However, after 13 hours of constant exercise, my hamstrings, glutes and quads were screaming. My muscles were in no mood to hover. But, I didn't have another good choice. In that dark, stank port-o-potty, I hovered, peed, and prayed, “please don't let me fall into the crap. Please don't let me fall into the crap. Please don't let me fall into the crap.”

I made it.

About 45 minutes later, I saw Brad at the Phoenix Tri Club Aid station. When he asked what I needed, I said, “All I ask for is a port-of-potty without poop on the seat.”

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The week after Ironman, I found myself about 10 hours into a session of correcting and providing feedback on my doctoral students' semester paper rough drafts. I felt like quitting and doing something else. But, I kept going. Their papers were interesting. They were not causing my physical pain. I was not alone with only my own thoughts for hours on end. I was not eating my own barf. I was not hovering precariously over a stranger's excrement.

Gross is relative, and so is pain and tedium.

## **Lesson Nine: Energy expended boomerangs back.**

Photos of me on the course—especially near the end—reflect a facial expression that is a bizarre combination of hooded eyes, drawn face, caked on sweat and sunscreen, and a huge almost maniacal smile. Let's just put it this way: It's a good thing I never plan on running for political office, because these photos would be the death of me. I look certifiably insane, because the smile does not match the clear exhaustion evident on the rest of my face.

Throughout the race, volunteers and spectators kept yelling out, “Look at you! You still have a smile on your face! Good job! Keep it up!” My feeling was that, of course I would still have a smile on my face. Here were thousands of volunteers and people out there in order to cheer me on. Spectators had designed sign after sign that said things like, “Ironmen, you are our heroes.” My mom made a bright pink sign that said, “Sarah is our IronWinner,” and my friends wore specially designed tee-shirts that said “Go Sarah!”

During my transition from bike to run, three volunteers helped me change my clothes. One massaged my neck while another helped me with my foot braces and another laid out my clothes. I felt like a professional athlete!

As I came through the Phoenix Tri Club aid station, the flocks of people at the beginning would yell, “Sarah is coming, Sarah is coming” and I got tons of high fives and whoops down the entire line. I heard my name over their loudspeaker and I saw a video camera capturing the moment. I felt like celebrity.

The finishing shoot was even better. Even at 10:51 p.m., the bleachers were filled with spectators, all of them screaming and yelling with noisemakers and flashing cameras. I stopped and hugged my friends and family in the stands, and fighting the tears, tore through the finish line with the hugest smile ever on my face.

When else would an everyday professor get this type of treatment?

The thing is that the smile and energy expended not only reflected the absolute joy and pleasure of being in such an amazing place. It also boomeranged right back at me. The more I smiled and whooped it up, the more those around me cheered me on and shot positive energy my way. It’s a pretty cool cycle.

**Lesson Ten:           The fruits of accomplishment, drive and discipline last long after the pain has faded.**

After Brad’s first Ironman, his dad Barry said to him, “If you can do this, you can handle anything that life throws you.”

There’s a confidence that comes with Ironman, and a knowledge that I can persevere even when I feel incompetent, hurt, bored, less than average or grossed out.

Bring it on!

**Lesson Eleven:       Diamonds bought for oneself are beautiful.**

The day before Ironman, I visited the merchandise tent, curious to envision what I might buy to commemorate the race. Some people get M-dot tattoos. Most finishers get lots of gear. I didn’t want to jinx myself by purchasing a bunch of stuff before I finished, but I wanted to see what was there.

The thing that caught my eye most was a tiny little M-dot necklace charm made from diamonds.

I got it the day after Ironman and haven’t taken it off since.

For me, M-dot represents IronMind.

**Lesson Twelve:      Our bodies and minds are capable of much more than we think.**

Too often, I hear people say about a whole variety of things, “Well, I just can’t do that.”

Several years ago I did not run, I did not swim and I did not bike. Several years ago, more than an hour straight of exercise seemed excruciatingly impossible.

I have a whole new skepticism for messages of, “Well, I just can’t do that.”

Sure, we cannot control all of the external limits and constraints that come our way.

However, Ironman has shown me how much further I can go than I thought possible. Life is full of choices. I choose to do.

**Final and Most Important Lesson: The best gifts are those of loved ones being there.**

My favorite memories of Ironman are the relationships and people who were there in body and spirit to encourage me along the way.

First and foremost, Brad was there every day providing tips, suggestions and encouragement. He made dinner when I was still at the gym, cleaned and tuned up my bike, helped me plan strategy, insisted that I finally see a doctor about my feet, and tip-toed around the house when I needed to catch a nap. He accompanied me on training rides, patiently going at my

slower speed. He put up with my whole “learn to change a flat.” He never pressured me and helped my Ironman be my Ironman, and not a shadow of his.

Various friends, family members, work colleagues—too many to name here—sent me emails, text messages and phone calls full of encouragement before and after. I received a care package from my brother, Van, before the race filled with all kinds of triathlon goodies and a heart-felt message of encouragement that I still have pasted to my bedroom mirror. My Dad and step-mom encouraged me along and promised specially embroidered M-dot towels to commemorate the day. My mom and step-father attended the event. I’ll never forget looking forward to seeing my mom and her bright pink sign (which, in her excitement to cheer me along, more times than not she was shaking at me upside down).

My master-mind sisters Isa and Amy listened to my insecurities and encouraged my goals along the way. We met every two weeks, and they know this journey almost as well as I. They helped me figure out options when I felt devastated by injuries. Amy brought me fake scars to wear, and Isa made “healthy” brownies. They created the best care package ever for my half-iron race in Galveston. The week before the race, they sent me daily text message poems, saying things like, “4, 4, 4 days more, look out Arizona-Sarah’s going to score!”

Perhaps most especially, I will never forget the spin class that Isa led two weeks before the race. She made a special sound-track CD, complete with songs like “The final countdown” and the Rocky theme song. She brought a bag full of goodies including a coffee-cup signed with encouraging messages from members in the class and a box filled with race-day nutrition. She also designed a one-of-a-kind Sarah action figure—made from a tricked out Barbie dressed in Phoenix Tri Club gear, a short bob hair cut, and gray compression socks.

So cool. Who gets their own action figure?

Then, in the last few minutes of class, she turned down the lights. Rather than the class yelling out our regular affirmations (e.g., “I feel strong,” and “Go legs go,”) Isa carefully walked around to various groups and instructed them to do something different. The final song of the class started and, in a round, the class began to shout out, “Sarah is strong,” “Sarah is ready,” “Sarah will endure” and “We believe in Sarah!”

At first, I was mortified, and afraid that everyone in the class would think that this was ridiculous or that I thought I was great. However, I tried to be present. About 15 seconds in, my embarrassment and self-consciousness faded. With the music blaring, my pedals pushing as hard and fast as I could, I began to really listen to the words resounding around me.

Sarah is strong.

Sarah is ready.

Sarah will endure.

We believe in Sarah.

Tears began to well. The exhaustion and stress and sacrifice lifted out of me. I felt strong and alive. I dropped my head down, squeezed my eyes shut and pedaled even harder. I marinated in this once in a lifetime cocoon of encouragement and love.

Sarah is strong. Sarah is ready. Sarah will endure. We believe in Sarah.

There is no greater gift than having other people believe in you, cheer you on, and be by your side during good and bad.

It’s something that I learned through Ironman in a way I had never understood it before. It’s a lesson—a gift—that I hope to pass along as I continue my journey, wherever that take me.

Stay tuned.