

Ironman 2010

The Journey

Dan Erschen



9 of the 17 Ironman 2010 finishers from Westwood Health and Fitness, Pewaukee, WI
Left to right: Scott Rice, Iron Mike McCluskey, Doug Kiser, Jerry Huhn, Lowell Mutchelknaus, Andy Neary, Jeff Ferris, Dennis Wantland, Dan Erschen

Thank you to all the people who made this journey possible...especially Bonnie, Samantha and Jacob who lived the journey with me. Thanks so much to my family, the people I work with that allow me the time to exercise, all the people I've exercised with over the years and all my friends who have supported and encouraged me every step of the way. I am so fortunate and thankful to have you in my life.

Ironman 2010 Journey with Multiple Sclerosis
Dan Erschen

My Ironman 2010 journey was such an awesome experience...I just have to share it with you.

Sometimes in life we are dealt cards and we don't quite understand why we deserve them. In my case...I've been dealt the card of learning to live with Multiple Sclerosis. MS is a neurological illness; the cause and the cure are still unknown. Every person with MS has different symptoms with varying degrees of severity, so while I cannot speak on behalf of everyone with MS, I will share my story. Perhaps it will give someone a little inspiration and a spark of hope whether you are dealing with MS, some other chronic illness, an injury or you are in good health. Life can improve, relationships can be strengthened; you can help others...even with a chronic illness.

I've had two major MS attacks in my life and still live with many symptoms every single day. My first major attack was April 4, 1990 when I was 29 years old. My hands had fallen asleep and within 3 days I was not able to walk nor did I have enough strength or coordination to lift a fork to my face and feed myself. I'm not even going to mention what it was like to go to the bathroom...let's put it this way, I couldn't do it myself. My entire body had intense pins and needle sensations as though it fell asleep.

At this time, the doctors diagnosed me with Guillian-Barre Syndrome which has many MS-like symptoms but typically comes on much quicker. I was given 6 Plasma Pheresis treatments before I started coming back around. This is where they suck all my blood out, spin it to separate the red cells, white cells and plasma. They give me back my own red and white cells and replace the plasma with a donors plasma. I called it getting 6 oil changes.



After being hospitalized for 3 weeks and spending 3 months in physical and occupational therapy, I was finally able to button my shirt and tie my own shoes again. I still could not run a computer mouse at this point because I did not have enough coordination. The remainder of the first year, I worked hard to regain my strength,

coordination and mobility and eventually was able to walk fairly normal again.

In September of 2000, when I was 39 I had my 2nd major attack. This attack came on while I was at a family wedding. My legs fell asleep (I knew that feeling way too well) so I went home

early and went to bed with high hopes that it would be better in the morning. No such luck! This time I was not in the hospital as long (only 1 week) but I went for about 1-1/2 years with barely being able to walk. I should have been in a wheel chair but I was too stubborn to ride in one. Instead I leaned on my family members, walls, etc. when I went out (which wasn't for very long when I did get out). It was a major accomplishment to make it from the living room to the bedroom. I could only sleep flat on my back like a corpse...it was miserable. This time, I was diagnosed with MS and was told the first attack was most likely my first MS attack.

Today my MS symptoms consist of: Blurry vision, poor memory, depression, tingling and burning sensations throughout my body, shocking / jolting sensations, fatigue, weakness, balance issues, urinary problems, etc. I still have 2-3 nights per week when walking is a real challenge due to weakness and balance issues. I typically get up to urinate 4-8 times per night. I get some relief in the mornings so that's when I exercise and do as much as I can physically. We have this little game we play with each other...I beat it in the morning, but at night, many times it wins and I have to be ok with that. The next day is usually a brand new day and it's my turn to show the MS who's boss. The scary part is living with the thought that another major attack could be any day. That just helps me appreciate every day I have that I can do the things I'm able to...like walking. I do not take any physical activity for granted anymore. Instead, I give thanks for being able to do it.

I am now 49 years old and MS has really changed my life for the better. I've learned that relationships with family and friends are so much more important than any materialistic thing in the world. I've learned how to love and what it means to be loved on a whole new level. I've learned the true power of living simply while having fun. I've learned it is so much more rewarding to help others than to be self centered and caught up in my own self pity. I've learned how important it is to have faith in my life. I've learned that my body will adjust to what I put it through. I've learned how to sort out different types of pain and understand which pain I can push through and which pain not to. I've learned to not be afraid to push my body to the extreme for fear that it will make the MS worse. It's been my experience that extensive exercise makes it better. Through daily exercise, eating healthy, minimizing the stress in my life, getting plenty of rest, staying in cooler temperatures, avoiding large noisy crowds and Copaxone daily injection drug therapy, I have been able to control my MS to a certain degree and I am so thankful.

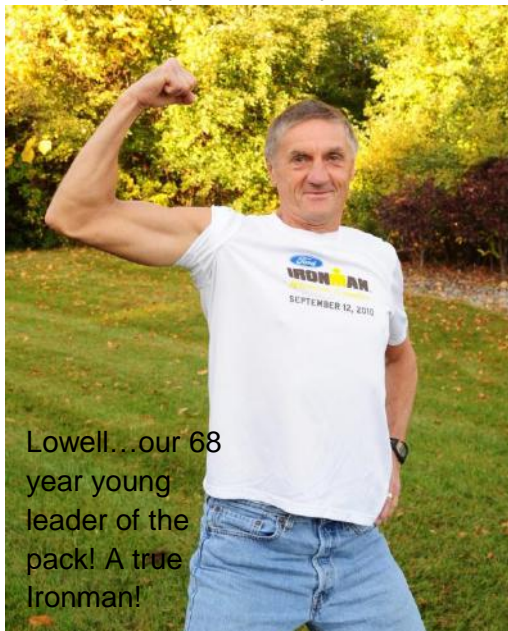
So...how about this Ironman experience? Well first of all, I should probably tell you what an Ironman is. It's not a person. It's a triathlon event where you do a little swimming, biking and running (well maybe a lot). You start out with a 2.4 mile swim that you need to complete in 2 hours and 20 minutes. As soon as you complete that, you jump on your bike and go for a 112 mile bike ride. To put that in perspective, it's like riding from Milwaukee to the Wisconsin Dells. As soon as you finish that, you put your running shoes on and go for a little jog...you run a full 26.2 mile marathon. Yes...this is all in one day; you have 17 hours to complete it. The swim starts at 7:00am and you need to be done by midnight. When you finish it...now you are an Ironman as a person and the crowd lets you know it as you cross the finish line. It's awesome!

When did this journey begin? Even though I didn't know what an Ironman was when I joined Westwood Health Club and started exercising consistently January 1, 2002...I would say that's when this journey began. My first day of exercising consisted of some stretching and 5 minutes on an elliptical trainer. I had to get on something I could hang onto because I could hardly walk

so walking for exercise was not an option...yet. After that first 5 minutes on the elliptical, the tingling sensations and weakness from the MS symptoms were so bad that I was wiped out for the rest of the day. I remember thinking to myself: "Well, I guess this isn't going to work for me," along with many other negative thoughts. The next day I went back, did the same thing and made it 7 or 8 minutes on the elliptical without feeling quite so badly. I kept this up daily and within 4 months, I worked my way up to 30 minutes. My energy level improved immensely. I was still challenged to walk, but my walking was improving. Now I was becoming excited! I can still vividly remember the first day I walked down our driveway to get the mail in by myself...that was a big day and a huge accomplishment! Eventually I graduated from the elliptical trainer to being to walking on a treadmill and eventually jogging a bit on a treadmill. I have to tell you, when I first started attempting to jog on the treadmill, many people around me didn't think I was safe. It wasn't pretty!

As I went to Westwood everyday (consistency and patience were key), I met some very inspiring people. One person I met was David James who did this thing called an Ironman. As he was telling me about his experience and what he all did...I was amazed. I remember thinking to myself...how would you ever train for that? How much would you have to eat? Why would anyone want to do that? How miserable would you feel afterwards? It never even entered my mind that I would ever consider doing one but his stories sure fascinated me. I loved to ask questions about it and he loved to share his experiences with me.

What finally made me want to do an Ironman? As I continued to exercise daily for a year or so, I worked up to the point that I could actually jog a little. I learned of this Thursday morning running group that Westwood has, so I thought I would show up and give it a try. This is where I met and became very good friends with some of the most active and inspirational people I've ever met. These people are here to run together but they are also here to love, encourage and support each other. Lowell Mutchelknaus is the leader of the group and he is a person who accepts everyone as they are and wants them to run with the group, regardless of skill level. He



Lowell...our 68 year young leader of the pack! A true Ironman!

will help anyone he comes across as much as he can. He's a true leader, leading by example and a very down to earth, easy to talk to inspirational person. If you don't get enough time with him on the run, just join him afterwards for coffee at Panera's and...bring money.

Then there is Jerry Huhn and Iron Mike McClusky in this group as well. Jerry helps all of us with swimming and biking on a daily basis. Iron Mike does every event he hears about, regardless of where it's at. Lowell, Jerry and Iron Mike all do Ironman triathlons on a consistent basis and they are all in their mid to upper 60's. I joined this group every Thursday that I possibly could. They inspire our entire running group and suckered me (and many others) into trying an Ironman. They believed in me and kept telling me that I could do

it. They would say: "You're not getting any younger, you might as well try it while you still can, how do you know if you don't try? What's holding you back? What's the worst that can happen? What else would you be doing that day?" So basically, I gave into inspirational, healthy, positive

peer pressure and signed up in 2007 for the Ironman in 2008. They also inspired many of the others in the group as well so we had a really great group of people to train with. Once I signed up, the encouragement and support from the entire running group and people at Westwood who witnessed my challenges with MS just intensified. The entire group really wanted to help me make it.

Bonnie, my wife was not really on board at first as she was the one feeding me when I couldn't feed myself, helping me walk when I couldn't walk, loving me and encouraging me when I was down, etc. She really didn't know what this would do to me neurologically and what would happen with the MS. I didn't know either, so I really couldn't comfort her on that. When everyday is different, how can anyone know? I did not have my doctors blessing either so that didn't help matters. I looked at how much exercise has helped me with MS so far, so I was willing to take the leap and attempt it. I was not scared of the MS because I had learned how to listen to my body quite well and know when I've had enough and when I could handle more. My first doctor told me that there wasn't anything I could do to provoke another MS attack and there wasn't anything I could do to prevent another MS attack so listen to your body and just do what you can. To me, his comment removed a lot of fear. Once the decision was made, Bonnie accepted it and supported me every step of the way. She's awesome!

Did I have any challenges to overcome? Through the years, I've had many challenges to overcome. First of all, I have the daily MS issues including depression. It's really hard to keep my chin up all the time when the MS keeps trying to take over. I feel like I'm working so hard to beat it yet it still wipes me out and I have to start all over; many times daily. I've been on medication for depression and didn't like that so I figured I needed to find a way to beat depression on my own. Exercise helps a ton so I keep that up. I found that the best way for me to beat depression is to get off my self-pity pot and do something for someone else. Many times it's as simple as listening to someone and talking with them. I try to find someone that I know will appreciate me and then I do something for them.

There is something about that sense of appreciation and gratitude that lifts me up and makes me feel better. When I'm doing something for someone else, it saves me from my self-pit by making me feel good about myself. I'm a firm believer that we help ourselves by helping others. There are a lot of other positive things I do to beat depression as well, and for the most part, I'm happy to say I'm doing pretty well with depression now.

I've had issues with falling while running. Sometimes I can't feel my feet after running for a while and it's challenging to stay up. I've had a couple of falls when I tripped over my dog or rolled my ankle and had to go get stitches afterwards and new glasses because they broke when they cut into my face.





Mike Kurth was with me on one of these runs when I fell and he had to call Bonnie. She came to pick me up...again. Mike and Bonnie already had me in the back seat of the car while I was still asking Mike...who's going to call Bonnie? I had a mild concussion this time. Then, of course I didn't want to go the hospital, only urgent care; it's cheaper. She took me to urgent care and they sent me straight to the hospital...who would have thought? Why does she always have to be right? Those get to be expensive runs by the time you pay for the emergency room, medication, replacing the broken glasses, etc.

I've had knee surgery on both knees. 5 or 6 years ago my doctor told me I should quit running because my right knee is bone on bone. He said I'm too active and would not be happy with a knee replacement at this point. I explained to him the benefits I receive from running with my MS issues, and then he suggested

mixing it up with other exercises like biking and swimming to protect the knees. That made a whole lot more sense than to quit running.

Somehow I ended up with a hernia and needed to get that fixed. That surgery wasn't too bad. The worst surgery I had was the 2nd surgery from a torn rotator cuff (the same one twice). With MS, it doesn't take long lose my physical strength without exercising so I didn't allow it to heal long enough the first time and had to have it fixed again. The second time around, it was torn in two spots and the doctor was only able to fix one so I live with the other tear today. This time the doctor made it extremely clear to me that this is not about will power. It's about biologically giving my body time to heal. I listened to him and behaved a little better the second time.

Learning how to swim has also been a major challenge for me...hahaha, it still is. I'm not very coordinated so swimming doesn't come easy to me. I knew how to doggie paddle but that's about it. It took me months of choking, gagging and swallowing water just to learn how to breath in the water. Learning to swim has been a real challenge but Jerry Huhn has pretty much taken me under his wing as a pet project. Thanks Jerry!

I've rolled my ankle so many times that it still hasn't healed. I've been running with a limp for years now and every time I roll it again, it hurts even longer. I really have to be careful on corners. So yes, there have been a few challenges along the way. If I was looking for excuses not to exercise, I wouldn't have to look too far.



I have to tell you a little about my 2008 Ironman experience because it certainly ended up being a big part of my 2010 experience.

2008 Ironman Experience

- I invited as many people as I knew to come support me and be inspired by the event
- My sister Lisa and her husband Bradley designed a t-shirt for me. I had 150 bright yellow T-shirts printed so people could find each other in the crowd. I gave out 125 or so to friends and family that were coming to the event



- Went out to eat the night before with friends and enjoyed fun conversations and Ironman stories
- Got up early and fueled up for the big day
- Walked to the lake...got body painting done. By the way, walking through a crowd at an Ironman event with Lowell was like walking with a rock star at a concert. He had friends everywhere!
- Enjoyed the spirit of the entire event...it was awesome!
- The crowd by the water was huge...athletes everywhere. It was really exciting to know how far I've come and now I'm attempting a full Ironman Triathlon

- I entered the water about 10 minutes before the canon went off because I wanted to get a spot to start toward the inside so I didn't have to swim any farther than I needed to
- The canon went off right on time at 7:00am and the water erupted with 1,800 swimmers all taking off at the same time...that was so cool!



- I swam my first length, went off course a couple of times but did pretty well. I made my first corner around the buoy and the sun was in my eyes so bad I couldn't see very well. I saw a boat that I thought was just outside the next corner buoy so I swam toward it. When I got closer to it, I realized that it was not by the buoy; it was more in the center but out a ways from the end. It probably took me 5 minutes to get back on course.
- I made my 2nd corner and did pretty well until I got close to the 3rd corner. By that time some of the Pros were passing me on their 2nd loop to finish. When one of them would even touch my foot, my leg would cramp up badly. When I was cramped up, other swimmers (strong ones) came up behind me and just beat on me as if I was in their way (which I was). This happened all the while I was making my 3rd corner. That'll teach me for being in their way. There's nothing better than a good old fashioned beating while you're all cramped up in water.
- I finally made my 3rd corner and moved way to the inside to get out of their way. I was eventually able to shake off my cramps and start swimming again.
- I made my 4th corner and knew I was approximately half done so I looked at my watch. I was at 1 hour exactly...I was ecstatic! I knew that with the beating I took and all the trouble I had my first lap; I had an hour and 20 minutes to make my 2nd lap. I felt confident I could swim faster without so many people in the water as long as I didn't cramp up.
- I swam the first length of the 2nd lap pretty well (I thought). I was swimming next to a woman that was swimming at about the same speed as me for a while. Eventually she pulled quite a ways ahead of me.
- I made the first corner and then a kayak came up next to me. I wasn't sure why so I kept swimming and made the 2nd corner.
- After the 2nd corner another kayak came up to me on the other side and the guy in the kayak said to just follow the kayak so I don't have to stop and sight and that they were going to guide me in. I thought that's cool so I just kept swimming. I was apparently slowing down quite a bit on that 3rd leg because they kept telling me how much time I had left and encouraging me to swim faster.
- I finally made the last corner and there were boats everywhere. I see could see the people in the boats standing up and yelling at me to keep going that I'm going to make it. I was swimming as fast as I could possibly swim...I went to an all out sprint for me. It didn't take too long of doing that and I was all cramped up again. I tried to just ignore

the cramps and get to the shore because I knew it was going to be close. The people in all the boats were cheering me on as loud as they could...it was really exciting and cool to see so many people cheering for me. At this time I thought I was going to make it. Then...all of a sudden it got quiet. It was only a few seconds after it got quiet that I was touching the bottom with my hands and I knew I had made it. I couldn't stand because of both my legs were so cramped up so two people helped me stand. I looked at the clock and saw it was 1 hour and 21 minutes. Then I heard the announcer say that this guy worked really hard to make it and he's going to be really disappointed to hear that we cannot let him go on to the bike because he missed the cut off time. As soon as I could stand, I started up the bank as fast as I could; hoping they would make an exception and let me go on. The official grabbed me by the arm and told me that I can't go because I missed the cut off time. I told him that I had to go on because I worked so hard to get this far and I did swim the full distance. I promised him that I would make up way more than one minute on the bike and run. He said I'm sure you would but he can't do it...the cut off time is the cut off time and he can't make any exceptions. I told him that I have MS and six years ago I could hardly walk. He said sorry...better luck next time. By that time they had my chip off my leg and I knew I was done for the day.

Emotions tied to it

- How did I feel?
 - Temporarily, I felt disappointed, a little angry...I really wanted to finish the full Ironman. I worked so hard to get this far.
 - I got a little emotional and had tears in my eyes. Here, the person that opened his big mouth and had lots of people come to support me and be inspired by the event had not made it through the swim on time and the day was done for me and for them. I felt so badly for the people who traveled so far only to have it end after the swim.
 - I knew I did the best I possibly could have done on that day...I quickly gained the strength to be ok with it and to be thankful for the journey of getting here. I had my mind made up ahead of time that I was going to do the best I could and be ok with whatever the results are. I have strong enough faith that I believe everything happens for a reason and God has a plan...apparently this was the experience I was supposed to have.
 - How would I have felt if I had not done the best I could do?
 - I would have felt like a failure and I would have to live with that the rest of my life
 - I would have felt like a slacker just trying to get through it
 - I would have felt even worse for letting down all the people that came to support me
- Then...the most inspirational moment of the entire event happened
 - I looked around at all the spectators still at the swim and the crowd could feel the pain I was feeling...all that training, excitement and effort leading up to this event cut short by the swim taking 1 minute too long in a potential 17 hour event.
 - It wasn't long and these bright yellow shirts that I handed out to my friends and family were coming from every direction. My wife was one of the first people to come up to me and give me a big hug...she knew what this meant to me.



I had so many people coming up to me crying, hugging me and giving me words of encouragement that it was hard to take it all in...especially without crying. People were on cell phones with words of encouragement as well. It was a true blessing to hear all the kind words and see everyone come together. It was truly emotional and inspiring to have so much love and support in the crowd. I've never experienced anything like this in my life. It was truly amazing! I even had one person who I didn't even know ask me to autograph his Ironman program. Wow!...we gave a him a shirt. He was so inspired by the event, my emotions and the fact that we gave him a shirt...he sent me \$17.00 about 6 months later in a re-used envelope with a return address of a homeless shelter in Madison. He said he just got some money in and wanted to pay me for the shirt. I have no idea how he even found my address. I hope I see him again, return his money and let him know there should be more people in the world like him.

The 2008 Ironman experience was so powerful even though I didn't finish it...I just had to sign up again. I was so close...1 minute; I just couldn't leave a goal like this incomplete. So I volunteered in 2009 and signed up for the 2010 Ironman.

Many people ask me what the training is like. The training is the part of this entire journey that I enjoyed the most. With MS, it's hard to stick to a planned training program. I could only train when I felt strong enough to train. Fortunately, I usually feel pretty well in the mornings but I had to alter my plan often. I like to keep the training fun and include as many people as I can. This is where the relationships with your family and friends are built and strengthened. I was fortunate enough to be able to train with each member of my family as my wife began running this past year and we ran together quite frequently.

When my daughter Samantha comes home, we enjoy going for a run together plus we enjoy doing some ½ marathons and marathons together. I was able to run her first marathon with her until I had MS issues at mile 13. She stuck with me until mile 18 but finally I had to send her ahead of me...we both finished, just not together.

My son Jacob, some of his friends and my friends enjoyed several summers of exercising together from 6:00am – 9:00am in the morning. You talk about spending quality time with your teenage son...it was so fun! Gary Oberfoell joined me as many mornings as he possibly could...he was by far my most consistent friend to train with; we've built a very strong friendship through the years of training together. We had a pretty consistent group of other friends training for the Ironman and other triathlons that would



join us and exercise together. I also tied in training rides with our MS Bike team which was a ton of fun. I would like to mention everyone I have trained with but there are literally hundreds of people who have joined me with training. We all enjoy our time together.



I also tied the training in with some fun stuff like riding the MS Best Dam Bike Tour with 60-80



friends on our team, riding bikes from Pewaukee to the Dells area with a group of friends, riding the Ragbrai bike tour across Iowa with 20,000 other people, running marathons with my daughter Sam and friends, doing some road races, smaller triathlons, etc. When training for an endurance event like this, I'm not too concerned about speed, just staying active and doing something with people. It was fun to do some things with one group of people early in the morning and then do something else with others in the afternoon when I was trying to get a little longer workouts in. I've been so fortunate with the training that I rarely trained by myself...even then, I had my dog. I have a great family and great friends...I love them all! I'm extremely

thankful for them. Here's a picture of our Thursday morning running group the Thursday before the Ironman. Unfortunately, some of our regulars were missing this day.

One week before the Ironman, I was running with my dog. It was fairly windy and we ran passed a plastic bag along the road. The wind blew the



bag which spooked the dog. She tripped me and I fell pretty hard on my right hip. I was not happy and it did not take long for it to turn all purple from being bruised. I showed it to Gary and he gave me a look that could just kill. Gary's not much of a dog lover (so he acts like that anyway). Luckily enough, it didn't hurt too badly so it didn't slow me down but it was still all black and blue during the Ironman.

The Saturday before the Ironman was an awesome day. Jim Hutton, a good friend of mine who stood up in our wedding 26 years ago and has been suffering from a huge blood clot in his leg for the past year and half, met me in Madison. He's living in Rochester, MN now. Jim has been off work due to the pain and lack of energy from the blood clot for the past 1-1/2 years.



I was concerned about him but he wanted to come, cheer me on, be a part of the event and take some pictures for me. His niece, Jess joined us as we walked around the expo and talked with friends. We met up with my son Jacob and some of his friends, had dinner together and talked with some fun people enjoying the Ironman venue. I don't know how Jim did it, but he made it through the entire event Saturday and Sunday. He took some awesome pictures! I was so happy he could experience the Ironman. It was an extremely inspirational event for him to be part of.

The morning of the Ironman was interesting. Fortunately, I had a good plan of the bags I still needed to drop off, the food I was going to eat, where I needed to be, etc. Jim and I got up and made all the checkpoints. It was so cool to see so many excited and nervous athletes getting prepared for the day.

So as I was down by the swim entry point before the start, nature was calling and I needed to use the porta potty...I think you know what I mean. While I was in there, I thought I would use my time wisely and have a little chat with God. This was one of the most moving moments of

the day for me as the tears just poured out. It was so powerful I just feel I should share it with you...I usually don't do this but I laid awake two nights after the event giving thanks for so many prayers that have been answered. The words that came to me in the porta potty may not be these exact words but they were very close.

"Dear God,

I don't fully understand why I've been inspired by such great friends and inspiring people to do this event. I also don't fully understand why I have been blessed with having MS but the answers keep becoming clearer and clearer as I continue to live with it. I do believe that this is all part of Your plan for me. Please know that I am here to carry this plan out for You. Today...it is by attempting this Ironman and whether I finish or not; I believe that You are working through me to inspire someone in some way and give them a spark of hope that helps them get through the life challenges they are living with. I don't know who You want me to inspire or why You want me to inspire them but I do know that this is the main reason I am doing this Ironman. I will do the best I can and I will be happy with the results regardless of what happens.

Please give me the strength mentally, physically and spiritually; the knowledge and support to get through this safely and to have fun doing it and please dear God...show me how to help someone else along the way whether they are in the race with me or somewhere else following my progress. Please help my family and friends who are here to support me enjoy the day and to be touched by You through me in some way. I believe You are here today with all of us as You are everyday of our lives and it's up to us to open our minds and hearts and allow You to work with us. My mind and heart are wide open and I know You will be with me all day. Thank You for being my friend.

Thank You for allowing me to accept the fact that I have been blessed and not cursed with having MS. Thank You for helping me find the strength mentally, physically and spiritually through all the issues and challenges of MS to get me here today. Thank You for showing me first hand that exercise, healthy food, rest and reflection time with You helps our quality of life regardless of the issues we are dealing with. Thank You for all the love and support from family and friends through all these years leading up to this point. Thank You for all the people You brought into my life to help me train for this event as there is no way I could have made it this far without them...they truly are amazing! And Dear God, Thank You so much for Bonnie, Samantha and Jacob as they give me so much love and support on a daily basis every day of my life. I know this journey has not always been easy on them.

I don't even know how many people are praying for me today but I know there are a lot. Thank You for being with all of us! Let the day begin". And it did...

When I got out of the porta potty, I saw Dennis Wantland right away and wished him well as he was preparing for his day. I was hoping that he couldn't tell that I was crying a moment ago. Then I ran into Mike Kurth and Gary Oberfoell shortly after that. They said I looked calm and relaxed, which I was at that point. I was excited to get my wetsuit on and get into the water but I also knew that it wasn't going to start until 7:00am so I wasn't in any hurry. As we stood there and chatted, we saw quite a few more of our friends that were doing it come by. I was happy standing there wishing everyone good luck. I was looking around for Bonnie and my family but I didn't see them before the swim.

It was finally time to enter the water. I got in and swam out to the same spot I was in 2008. It was to the inside and toward the back of the pack. I didn't want to get pounded on if I didn't need to. The National Anthem from out in the water was absolutely outstanding. I don't know who sang it, but it was amazing. Once again, I couldn't hold back the tears but it didn't really matter because I was all wet already anyway. The canon went off and the water erupted...YES! We're off!



Two years ago, everyone just swam away from me and I had plenty of room to swim until I got lapped. This year was different. I was actually coming up on people from behind. There were people on both sides of me; we were banging into each other the entire swim. I kept thinking to myself hmmm, I wonder what part of the body that was...it could have been anything. It was really kind of cool and it was also kind of weird. Every once in a while, there would be someone swimming broadside in front of me. Then I had to try to figure out if it was me swimming the wrong way or someone else. Honesty, I think it was a little of both. On the 2nd lap, it felt like the water just got colder on my head. I stopped for a second and realized my swim cap fell off. I had my goggle strap under my swim cap in case I got kicked in the face and knocked my goggles off so water must have gotten inside my cap and it fell off. I really wanted that swim cap as a souvenir but it was gone...oh well.



I got to the finish of the swim and the very first thing I was looking for was the clock. I had my experience from 2008 in my head and I was wondering how much time I had left. I knocked off 29 minutes...I was ecstatic! My first thoughts were "yes!,...I got through the swim, now it's time to just enjoy the rest of the day!" I saw my Mom and Dad as soon as I got out of the water so I just had to go over and give them a hug, high fives, and say hi to them. They were so happy for me!

As soon as I was done saying Hi to Mom and Dad, I went a little further up the chute of people and saw Bonnie and many more of our family and friends. I stopped and gave hugs and high fives to many of my friends and family who were there two years ago experiencing a whole different set of emotions. The joy, love and true happiness shared by all in the crowd were extremely powerful and moving.



I was so happy to make it through the swim on time and others were just as happy for me.

I went into transition, grabbed my helmet and biking shoes and headed right back out. On my way to my bike is the suntan lotion application area where a bunch of my exercising friends from Westwood were volunteering. I had to use the porta potty first because my back teeth were floating but then I stopped and talked with them for a while as well.



They have all given me so much support...it was so nice to see them there and so happy that I made it through the swim in time. I gave a few more hugs and high fives and I finally made it to my bike. Susan, another one of our Westwood runner friends was volunteering with the bikes

and she had my bike off the rack and handed it to me. When she did, there was a note on it from Jerry Huhn that said "Dan, It's your day. Ride with the wind!" I would have liked to thank Jerry right then but he was also doing the Ironman as well and was WAY ahead of me by this point.



Needless to say...I was not in any hurry to get through the transition. 17 minutes later, I was finally ready to go for a 112 mile bike ride. I kind of chuckled to myself and asked a couple of the volunteers "where did everyone go?" By

the time I finally got through the celebration in the transition, there were hardly any bikes left in the coral. Ha Ha...I was ok with that, I knew I would have plenty of people to catch.

I was just getting on the bike and ready to take off and I saw Scott Mueller who trained with me the past few years. Dave Mueller, Scott's Dad was also doing the Ironman but he was way ahead of me as well. Our entire group of 17 people were way ahead of me at this time. I didn't even make it one mile and Tim Mikulance who coached me with strength training for the event was jumping up and down alongside the road cheering for me. I tell ya, everyone sure was happy I made it through that swim...including me.

It didn't take me too long to start passing people. Everyone I passed was so happy to be there, the spirit was amazing (of course it was early in the day yet). I was watching my computer on my bike and is soon as I was at the 12 mile mark, I said to someone "only 126.2 to go...so far so good!" Several people heard me, smiled and added their comments.

When I first entered into Verona before the first loop, there was really loud music going on in a yard, people were dancing, yelling, cheering and drinking. It looked like the special was Bloody Mary's. They were definitely pretty well lit up already. They were having fun and making it fun for us. The music was awesome; I'm not sure what all of their neighbors thought...they were loud!

I got about 30 miles into the ride and I finally caught up with Dennis Wantland. You talk about a guy flying high and happy to be here, Dennis was flying high! He's 63 and just learned how to swim this past year training for the Ironman. He worked really hard on swimming the entire year and finished it in an hour and thirty something which was better than he expected. It was good to see him so happy. He's another one of the inspirational people I've had the privilege to train with and become good friends with.

It was amazing to see all the support from the people living along the route. Many of them had music playing for us, cow bells, dogs, kids, farmers, they were all out there cheering us on. When I came upon one of the first penalty tents, I saw someone with our Lake Country Multi Sports uniform. I saw that it looked like Lowell Mutchelknaus so I yelled out "Lowell...is that you?". I looked back and saw that he was just getting back on his bike so I decided to slow up a bit and let him catch up. He caught up and we talked for a little bit...it sounded like he was doing well other than the penalty for drafting. We had to keep our distance so he didn't get another penalty. In an Ironman, if you ride too close to someone or don't pass in a short time frame, you get a penalty for drafting and then you have to sit in a penalty tent for 4 minutes and watch everyone go by. Lowell served his time and was ready to ride again.

It wasn't too long after that and we came upon some of the famous hills on the Wisconsin Ironman course. There were people everywhere...where did they all come from? They were beating on drums, cow bells, holding signs, screaming "keep going", "#@\$%*#@&**", you name it. It was awesome! Many had costumes on and many hardly had anything on. I came along this one group and remember saying..."Man, you're not quite right". His comment back was you better get going or I'm coming after you! It was really funny!



Everyone was there from the Indians in full feathers to Elvis to people wearing swimming suits, etc. As you can see by this picture...some of them were not quite right. I didn't even notice how steep the hills were the first loop. The crowd really helped everyone up them. Three quarters of the way up the 2nd hill was my good friend Jim Hutton and his niece Jess taking pictures and cheering us on. The hill was steep enough and the athletes were going slow enough that many people ran alongside of them, encouraging them up the hill. I still can't

believe everything I saw on those hills...it was crazy fun! It really looked like a fun and spirited spot to be a spectator as well.

After the craziness of getting up all the hills and heading into Verona at the end of the first loop, I started getting some major burning sensations in my feet from MS. It wasn't long at all and the burning sensations turned into pure pain. I know these feeling way too well. This wasn't good; I was only 55 miles into the bike ride and I'm having MS issues already. Two weeks earlier, Doug Kiser and I was riding the course on a training ride and the same thing happened. We were planning on riding the full 112 miles but only ended up doing 85 miles because I didn't know what to expect when the pain started. We ran 5 miles afterwards and I got some relief on the run...I was sure hoping that would happen after 112 miles today.

I got into Verona and saw a bunch of my family members and friends. I stopped to say hi and thank them all for being out here cheering me on. It was really cool seeing the eyes of the kids that were there. They were in awe and so proud and happy to see me. It was so good to see all of my family and friends along the course.



I didn't want to lead on that I was having MS issues but when Bonnie asked how I was doing, I had to let her know that I have issues. As I was stopped there talking to my family, I saw Lowell go past me. I was hoping I would be able to catch up to him again. I ate a gel, shared some hugs and kisses and was off to do the 2nd loop of the course.

It didn't take very long at all and my MS pain was back. Every time I hit a bump, the shock from hitting the bump was like shooting pain into the pain from the MS. I found myself getting some

relief from the pain by pulling up on my pedals instead of pushing down. Whenever I had a downhill, I coasted and pulled my feet up. I had been practicing pulling up on my pedals all summer so I looked at this as good training. I was ok with it because I was still passing people...that kept me going. I like passing people. I finally caught back up with Lowell and found that he was doing fine. I whined to him a little about the MS and he just said, "well then why are you riding so hard?". I was riding hard to catch back up with him. When I got to the rest areas, I physically stopped for a banana, water, a little rest and thanked the volunteers for being out here. Lowell just grabbed a bottle of water on the move and kept going so we kept passing each other the entire 2nd loop. It was nice knowing he was close.



The big hills the 2nd time around were much harder than the first. My legs were tired, I had some cramping that was on the verge of trying to take over and the MS pain was still painful. I

made it up the first set of hills and there was Jim and Jess...still there waiting to cheer me on and take pictures. They could tell I was struggling but still having fun. Jess ran along side of me for a while. That helped with that particular hill but there were still plenty more to come. I struggled through them while on the verge of my legs cramping and dealing with the MS pain.

When I got back into Verona on the 2nd loop, I stopped and visited with Bonnie and my family again. By this time, I knew I was going to get through the bike ride despite the pain. I knew I only had one large hill left to power up and only about 16 miles to go. I gave them more hugs and kisses, thanked them for being here and cheering me on and I was off to finish the bike ride. I was just hoping the pain would go away for the run. Lowell was ahead of me again at this point so I had to hurry up and try to catch him. I caught up to him and told him to find me in transition because I wanted to at least start the run with him. We did that, we met back up in transition, the timing couldn't have been better.

As I got off my bike for the transition...there were tons of friends yelling and cheering for me. I had all this MS pain still going on but it didn't even matter feeling all the love, support and happiness in the crowd. I hobbled in to the transition area, took my bike shoes off and went ahhh. They could finally breathe and be allowed to cool off for a bit. All I did for transition was

change shoes and grab a powerbar to eat. By the time I was ready, Lowell was ready. Ok...all we have left is a 26.2 mile marathon. I don't know if you know what your legs feel like after you just rode 112 miles on a bike, but they surely didn't feel like running. This should be interesting.

Just as Lowell and I came out of the transition building, we saw Jacob and some friends. I really



wanted a picture with Lowell because at this point, I had no clue how long I would be able to run with him or even if I would be able to run with him at all. Jacob snapped a picture of us and we were off...sort of.

We started running and made it a few blocks and then we saw Jim Hutton and Jess again. Jim snapped this nice picture of Lowell and me...thanks Jim!



I was happy to see that they made it back from the hills and that Jim was still able to stand. Let's see, a few blocks into the marathon...time for our first break? Sounds good, we stopped and talked with Jim and Jess for a bit. We ran from there, up past the capitol and saw a bunch of our Westwood exercise friends. I remember them asking me how it was going and all I could answer at this point is "I have issues". I still didn't know if the MS was going allow me to do this.

Then we started down State Street. It was solid with people from the curb to the buildings as far as we could see. I said to Lowell...."wow! Look at all these people!". He said, "that's right, this is your first time doing this isn't it?" We didn't make it three blocks and there were people coming out of the crowd and on to the street yelling to Lowell and cheering him on. Running with Lowell was truly like running with a rock star. It seemed like everyone knew him and loved him. What was really amazing was, I would keep asking him..."who was that"? And he knew every one of them that he got a good look at. The crowd was awesome! Before we even realized that we got started, we were at the first mile mark...only 25.2 more to go, so far so good! I was looking for some of that warm Coca Cola that people who have done this before have had good results with. They were all out...just my luck. Oh well, maybe next rest station, it's only another mile.



By mile three or four, I had some Coca Cola in me, my legs were transitioning to running and I was feeling really good. I was amazed! Sometime in the beginning, Lowell was cramping a bit and he lost his electrolyte capsules. I had plenty so I was able to help him by sharing. By this time, I felt confident that I would be able to continue running with Lowell...I was so thankful! It didn't take long and we started to see some of our training friends as we crossed paths, we would yell to them to see how they were doing. Some were happy to be there and some were struggling but it was so good to see everyone still in the race. When we got to Camp Randall Stadium and ran around the field...it was like running on carpet. This was the first time I was ever inside of Camp Randall so it was really cool...especially running with Lowell. We were enjoying every step at this point!

As we continued on, we came across my daughter Sam and some of her friends and Jacob and some of his friends. We stopped to find out how they were doing, gave them some hugs, high fives and thanked them for being out here.



By this time, the adrenaline and endorphins were flying so high...I was just happy to be here! I was sooo happy that the MS pain resided and I was able to run and enjoy it.

As we were coming up to the capitol, we saw a lot of our Westwood exercising friends. We stopped to see how they were doing and let them know all is going well for us. They didn't think it was quite right that we stopped to talk a bit. I sure appreciated them being out here and cheering us on, the least we could do is stop and let them know how we are doing.

When we got to the 13.1 mile mark, I saw Bonnie and a bunch more of my family and friends including my Mom and Dad. Well actually, I don't know how I could have missed them as they were yelling, screaming and so happy for me. Many of my nieces and nephews and friends of theirs were also there. It was so nice to see those little kids here experiencing the spirit of an Ironman.

My Mom and Dad told me that they were going to go home...they just can't take it anymore. My Mom and Dad are the real Ironman Troopers who came the night before, slept in the van (well attempted to) and then stayed out on the course all day. Mom was still recovering from both knee replacements and Dad can hardly walk because his ankles have been fused and hurt so badly he has a hard time walking. They were both walking all over Madison and Verona all day until I was half way through the marathon and they just couldn't take it any longer. They finally

had to leave but still drove 1-1/2 hours home. Hmm...I wonder where I get it from. Mom and Dad have always led by example to keep our chins up and keep going no matter what challenges we face in life. They are living the true Ironman journey...I thank Mom and Dad for showing me how it is done. I wouldn't be as strong as I am without this example of strength, faith and willpower shown to me my entire life by them.

On the block by the capitol, we saw Lowell's family and grandchildren. They all had T-shirts on with Lowell's picture saying something like "Grandpa's doing another Ironman?". One of his little grandsons ran with us for a while. You could just see the pride in the little guys and Lowell's eyes. It was really cool!

Before we entered back on State St., some friends came out of the crowd and told us that Dave Mueller was just ahead of us and he needs our help. First I asked if they were kidding and they said no. And then I felt really bad for Dave and wanted to catch up to him and see if we could help him. We finally caught up with him just before the stadium and ran / walked with him through the stadium and a couple of miles after that. He said he was just drained and was having a hard time getting going again. I think he ran out of fuel somewhere along the way. Finally, he told us that he'll be alright and we should go on. I felt really bad about leaving him but I knew how tough he was and that he would do whatever he needed to do to finish...and he did!

It wasn't long after that and Jacob found us on his bike. We were running on the sidewalk and he rode a ways away from us but sort of by us on the road. He said that I still look fresh and look like I normally do when I run. I know I don't look good when I normally run but I took that as a compliment because I did feel good. The 2nd half of the marathon was actually very easy for me. Lowell got a hot spot on his foot from his sock rubbing into his foot. We stopped so he could adjust that because of the pain. Once he got that adjusted, we both ran well.

We had about 4 miles to go and we saw Dennis Wantland so we stopped and talked to him. By this point, I knew we were getting close to finishing but I really did not want it to end. Dennis still had about 9 miles left so I said to Lowell. "Let's run with Dennis and help him get through it". Dennis was flying high and welcomed the company. Lowell was so funny, he looked at Dennis and said "Dennis, you're a great friend and I love you dearly but you're on your own man. I'm this close, I'm going to finish this thing out and we'll see you at the finish line". I think Lowell was afraid that if he even let on a little bit to run with Dennis, I would take him up on it and we have 9 miles left instead of four. I really didn't want it to end, so I was ok going either way.

Lowell and I continued on to finish it. We got up by the capitol again and there were all our Westwood friends plus...all the people who already finished, waiting for us. They all ran with us on the sidewalk all the way to the finish line. That was so cool!



Lowell and I were both feeling awesome as we finished strong side by side across the finish line. The first thing I said after completing the 140.6 mile Ironman was "Thank you God!" as I knew He was with me every step of the way. I couldn't wait to

congratulate Lowell and thank him for helping me through this entire journey for the past 8 years. I know I would not have done this if it wasn't for his inspiration ever since I started joining him with his Thursday morning running group. And then, to be able to run side by side with him for the entire marathon...what a gift! Thank you so much Lowell!

It wasn't long and they gave us our medal, hat and finisher T-shirt. Lowell had some chick grab him and walk him over to get his picture taken. I just kind of followed along. We got our picture taken and then got to meet up with our friends and family. Oh man, everyone was so happy...including me! The tears of joy and love really started flowing! It was truly an emotional moment. Everyone I saw was so happy and crying...I just let it all go and joined right in. There was no way I could even attempt to hold it back. These were all true tears of love and joy. They were everywhere!









After we were done celebrating by the finish line, I got back on my bike and rode back up by the Capitol where some of my Westwood friends were still hanging out and waiting for Dennis Wantland to come in. What a bunch of troopers!



We all had some fun there sharing stories about the day. It wasn't too long and Dennis came in. It was so exciting to see how happy he was as he entered his last block before the finish line. Oh Man...what a day for him too. 63 years young, he just learned how to swim and...finished his first Ironman! Amazing! I was so happy for him! The inspirational spirit in the crowd at the finish of Ironman is absolutely amazing! If you have not experienced it...put it on your bucket list. You will be inspired!

After the event, a miraculous thing happened. Well at least for me it seemed miraculous. First of all, I really didn't have any MS issues the night of the event. Sure, I stiffened up a bit but that was just normal muscle fatigue from what I just put my body through, not MS. I got up the next morning and I felt really good once I got moving from the normal stiffness. Jim and I went to the Ironman expo and I parked about 6 blocks away. I walked a block or so and then I ran the next four blocks to the expo...I could still run! After we walked around the expo a little, Bonnie and I drove Jim all the way back to Rochester, MN and then we drove all the way back to Pewaukee, WI. I didn't have any MS symptoms! Usually, and even today, I have MS issues after 10 minutes of being in a car.

I had four entire days and nights with no MS symptoms. I have NEVER had four days without MS issues since before my last major MS attack in 2000. The only time I came close to it was when I did the 500 mile RAGBRAI ride across Iowa but even then, I had a couple of nights that I had a hard time walking. Two nights before the Ironman...I had a hard time walking (which is fairly normal at night). So now I have all kinds of questions running through my head. Why would I get a four day and four night break from MS after this long day of exercising? Are there healing chemicals being released in my brain? Was it all the love and happiness shared with my family and friends in the air the day of the event? Are prayers being answered? Will the MS symptoms continue to diminish if I keep exercising? I believe they will and I'll tell you why.

The only thing I changed in my life when I finally started to make improvements was I started to exercise. Sure, I cleaned my diet up a bit afterwards, but the exercise was the turning point. Through the years, I have made some progress every single year. Let's face it, when I first started exercising, I could only do 5 minutes on an elliptical machine. 8-1/2 years later, I worked it up to 14 hours and 41 minutes to finish this Ironman and I know I could have gone longer...that's a little improvement! The days that I exercise or just keep moving longer, the MS symptoms are not as bad.

When I first started exercising, I would have MS issues and be wiped out from the exercise and MS combination for the entire rest of the day. Now they will calm down within hours and sometimes minutes when I change my environment a bit. For many years, research has been to learn more about MS and how to treat it. I really hope some Doctor or Researcher who is truly passionate about finding a cure and helping people with MS hears my story and it helps lead them in a direction to find a cure. I've broke through some challenging walls with MS exercise...I hope it helps somehow.

This four day relief experience gives me true hope that a cure is possible and it could happen in a single day as it did the day of the Ironman and the following four days (too bad it didn't last longer). I've always had hope, but this experience goes beyond hope and provides evidence. I truly believe this experience will help others if it gets in the hands of the right researcher or

doctor who are putting their efforts into exercise. I hope, pray and believe that good will come from this experience for others with MS.

It's been 6 months now since the Ironman and I still have not come down from it. I hope I never do. I keep trying to figure out what really happened and how it happened...especially when I can barely walk at night due to MS issues. I know it was a journey but what kind of a journey was it? Was it a journey of fighting a chronic illness? Was it journey perseverance? Was it a journey of mental toughness? Was it a journey of physical endurance? Was it a journey of building friendships and strengthening relationships? Was it a journey of inspiring others? Was it a journey of love? Or was it simply a spiritual journey where God is showing all of us that he has a plan for us (even when we don't understand it) and that this is all part of his plan? All I know is that I didn't do it alone. I know that the Big Guy is with me every day. I've had so much love and support from family and friends (especially those who trained with me) during this entire journey...I would not have been able to do it without them. I give thanks to God for them every day.

People ask me...do you have any regrets? The ONLY regret I have is that I didn't sign up for next year. I went into the event and told myself that I was not going to get caught up in the emotions of all of it all and sign up for next year unless I didn't finish this year. I stuck to that plan and part of me really wishes I would have signed up for next year. It just helps so much with the daily motivation to have something big on the calendar. That is missing right now but I also believe that happened for a reason as well...just not sure what it is yet.

I also get asked...how do you feel you can top this experience? First of all, why do I have to top it? I will cherish the memories of this journey for the rest of my life. One way I feel I could top it would be by helping other people accomplish things they never considered possible. You don't have to do an Ironman to improve your lifestyle but you do need to believe that things you have a passion for are possible. Once you truly believe something is possible, commit to achieving the goal and take whatever actions necessary (even if takes 2 years, 5 years, 10 years or a lifetime) and work toward it everyday...anything is possible.

So what's next? I would REALLY like to help someone else with a physical challenge who never thought it would ever be possible to do an Ironman and share the experience. To me...that would be even more rewarding than doing it myself. I would like to do another one or two and see if the relief from the MS symptoms can be duplicated. Other than that, I don't know...barefoot running? I'm already giving it a try. We'll see how that goes. Regardless of what I do, this Ironman journey will continue into my future.

So many people helped me along this journey...the least I can do for them is to share my experience. Hopefully, by sharing my story, I will have inspired you to take a good look at the challenges you are faced with in your life and give you a little hope and inspiration that you can make your own life better. I was inspired to and chose to do an Ironman. You certainly do not have to do an Ironman to make your life better...pick your own journey. I'm so thankful I was able to do this and I hope you pick a worthwhile journey of your own. Anything is possible!

If I were to give you a few suggestions, my suggestions would be very simple.

- Have faith, know that God loves you, is with you and has a plan for you. Open your mind and heart and allow Him to work with you.
- Pick a part of your life that you would like to improve upon and commit to improving it (I would highly recommend to at least consider exercise...it gave me my life back)
- Ask for help...when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. You don't have to do it alone
- Be consistent. Work on it every single day with actions...not just intentions
- Be patient
- Enjoy the journey...it will be worthwhile
- Love and show appreciation for those who help you along the way
- Love and help as many people as you can along the way

You can and you will improve your life. Thanks for reading this and enjoy your own journey.

God Bless!

Dan Erschen

P.S. I made the comment to Bonnie before the Ironman event that this may be the most physically and mentally challenging thing I have ever done in my life (as an Ironman is for many). She confidently and quickly said, "I highly doubt it". I usually don't do this out loud but I have to admit that once again...she was right. This was not even close to the challenges of dealing with MS on a daily basis. This was much easier than simply walking many nights.

There is always hope...believe it! I am so Thankful!!!