

Finding my Ironman

By Matthew A. Passen

As young lawyers, we are typically the low man on the totem pole at our firms and on our cases. We are handed work by partners and senior associates, and are expected to turn in a flawless work product. We are constantly making first impressions with our colleagues, clients and judges. This typically translates into one common theme: We are consumed by work.

In 2008, I was no exception to this pattern as an associate in the litigation department of a large law firm in Chicago. I had been there a couple of years — keeping my head down, doing my best, billing my hours — when it struck me. I needed some rejuvenation; an outlet from the daily stresses of work.

Enter the Ironman: 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike and 26.2-mile run.

The thought of attempting an Ironman triathlon first came to me at a wedding over Thanksgiving weekend. At the reception, I was talking with a friend with whom I grew up playing hockey. This friend was also a litigation associate at a large firm in Chicago. It turns out he had recently completed an Ironman triathlon.

This is a guy who I knew was a star associate at his firm — well on his way to making partner. He was also recently engaged. How in the world did he find time to train for, let alone complete, the Ironman? And then he said something to me I will always remember: “Ironman is a mental test. The race itself is 99 percent mental and 1 percent physical.”

I remember thinking to myself: 140.6 miles in one day a *mental* test. Sure, buddy.

Nevertheless, that conversation planted a seed in my brain that would not go away. If he can do it, why can't I? I always wanted to run a marathon — why not do it for the first time as part of an Ironman? A week later, I signed up for the Ironman, scheduled to take place that September in Madison, Wis. I had 11 months to train.

Mind you, I was no endurance athlete. I grew up playing competitive ice hockey and then, after graduating college, I entered a few Olympic-distance triathlons to stay in shape. But I had never swum longer than one mile; I had never biked more than 25 miles; and I had never run longer than seven miles.

How was I going to find enough time to train without getting fired or getting divorced? Question two got even more complicated when I found out that my wife was pregnant, and her due date was only two weeks after the Ironman race day.

But once I chose a plan, it turned out that the training was surprisingly manageable. I trained six days a week. On weekdays, I trained in the morning before work — never

longer than an hour and a half. Saturday I did my “long” bike and Sunday I did my “long” run.

The training barely impacted my work week — I had no problem putting in full days at the office. In fact, I was surprised at how *good* I felt after swimming laps or completing a short bike ride in the morning.

As my workout sessions improved throughout the months of training, my confidence improved and I brought that confidence with me to the office each day. Moreover, the training sessions became my release from the everyday stresses that consume a young associate in a law firm.

Sure, there were times where I had to modify my training schedule because of work — coming into the office on the weekend, traveling out of state for a deposition, editing a brief or finishing up some research in the morning. If I had to miss a day of training because of work or for some other reason, I didn't let it stress me out. Most of the time, however, I was able to find an hour somewhere in the day to get in a training session.

Fortunately, I also had a wife who was completely supportive. Not only was she pregnant, but she was also an associate at a large law firm, so she had her own demanding schedule to worry about. It helped that she was

so exhausted from the pregnancy, and I was so exhausted from the training, that neither of us minded taking it easy on the weekends.

Still, there were many stretches of adversity along the way: times when it was cold and dark outside, when the last thing in the world I wanted to do was jump into a cold pool and swim laps. Times when I met with an orthopedic surgeon, chiropractor and a physical therapist because my knees or back hurt when I ran. Times when I was so tired after riding my bike for three hours, and knew that I still had three more hours to go. And many, many times when I thought I didn't have what it takes to complete an Ironman.

However, I made it to the starting line on race day. And when that gun went off, I knew there wasn't anything that would keep me from the finish line. The race was technically the most physically challenging day of my life, and there were certainly plenty of times throughout the day where I felt the physical toll. But my friend was right — the training had prepared me mentally to know that I had what it takes.

I finished the Ironman in 13.5 hours. And you couldn't wipe the smile off my face for months.

That was two years ago, and I'm still trying to find my new Ironman. Actually, I'd like to sign up for another Ironman race, but I think my wife would kill me, especially now that we have a 2-year-old daughter running around at home.

There are times when work becomes my Ironman. As lawyers, there are simply times when we must become all-consumed with work. I am now a trial lawyer at a plaintiff's personal injury law firm. For me, preparing for trial is the same as preparing for an Ironman: You must have a well-thought-out plan; each day is a strenuous mental challenge; you must prepare for occasional setbacks; there is no

Passen — page 22

As my workout sessions improved throughout the months of training, my confidence improved and I brought that confidence with me to the office each day.

Matthew A. Passen is a personal-injury lawyer with Passen Law Group. He represents individuals and the families of those who have been seriously injured or killed as a result of the negligence of others. He is an officer with the Chicago Bar Association Young Lawyers Section, and is currently serving a two-year term as co-editor in chief of the YLS Journal. He can be reached at mpassen@passenlaw.com.

Passen

Continued from page 5

substitute for preparation; and the result is the product of your hard work.

I never thought it would take a 140-

mile race to give me such perspective on my chosen profession. But that is exactly what the Ironman did for me.