



SON OF INFERNO PENTHALON
North Conway, NH

By Scott Cole
April, 2003

As David Brancaccio likes to say, let's do the numbers ...

RUN: 7 mile hilly road run

PADDLE: 6 mile kayak down the Saco River (Class II rapids)

BIKE: 18 mile road bike to the top of Pinkham Notch (1500 vertical feet)

HIKE: 2.5 mile hike up snow-packed Tuckerman Ravine Trail (2,000 vertical feet)

SKI: 600 foot vertical hike and subsequent downhill ski

TOTAL VERTICAL CLIMBING : 5400 feet (running, biking, hiking, skiing)

AVERAGE HEART RATE: 177 beats per minute

TOTAL RACING TIME: 3 hours and 39 minutes 40 seconds

TIME BEHIND FIRST PLACE FINISHER: 36 seconds

This is one of most favorite multisport races because it combines endurance with speed and blends a sweet set of sporting events. It's one of those races that drives you to get up early in January to ride your indoor bike trainer and motivates you to hike the snow covered trails in February when you'd rather be skiing. I had come close last year, but remained a solid 10 minutes off the leading pace of Dave Lamb. Dave was returning again this year and so were two triathlete friends of mine that I invited: Scott Weiler and Erik Grim—the latter being known for setting course records in events like this. I knew I had my work cut out for me.

The race started at 7 am Saturday morning. While I was busy racing down in the valley, running, paddling, and biking, Scott Berk hauled my ski gear up to the base of Hillman's Highway, the ravine where we would be skiing in the 5th and final leg. Although I was competing in the solo category, I was relying on Scott to scamper up the 2.5 mile Tuckerman's Ravine Trail with my not-so-compact downhill skis and boots. Of course, being the opportunistic outdoorsmen that he is, "Sherpa Berk" also carried his own skis and boots, not willing to miss out on a good chance for some backcountry skiing.

The race starts with a steep 500-foot climb up a narrow, paved road. I knew I wasn't going to win or lose this race in the first 45 minutes, but since running isn't my strong event, I was concerned I may needlessly push to keep up with others. Sure enough, Dave Lamb and Erik Grimm took off like rockets, out of view on the first climb. I settled into a slightly uncomfortable and barely sustainable pace. When training, I tend to run comfortably with a heart rate of around 165 beats per minute, sometimes jumping to 175 when climbing a steep hill. On this run my rate never dropped below 180.

As I neared the transition to the paddle, I was in 4th place, behind Dave Lamb and Scott Weiler. I made a quick transition to the boat, slipping into 3rd. This year I remembered to fasten my neoprene skirt around the kayak-- failing to do so last year caused me to tip the boat in a rapid, lose my paddle, and nearly give up on the race. Even so, my



aces are never complete without some paddling mishap—this time I forgot to unleash the hook on my rudder before pushing off, thereby making it impossible to release the rudder into the water. It remained locked throughout the paddle, meaning I would have to anticipate my turns and pick my lines cleanly.

I felt strong throughout the paddling maneuvering the boat with the current and maintaining a speed at least as fast as the water was flowing. I kept a high cadence on my paddle stroke, skimming off the top of the water and reaching for the next stroke as fast as I could. I slowly but surely gained on Dave Lamb, who was in 2nd place. At first I only saw him around the wide bends in the river, but toward the end, I was right on his tail. This was an encouraging sign because last year I lost sight of him during the run and never saw him again. When I approached the kayak to bike transition, I realized I had forgotten to place a dry pair of socks by my bike. I only had the ones I was wearing and they were about to get soaked when I stepped out of the boat. As I glided into shore, I reached down and took both socks off and stuffed them in my mouth. I splashed through the water and ran up the shore to my bike, where I slipped my sanding feet into dry socks. It was 8:30 in the morning and the temps were in the 40s.

Dave Lamb beat me through the transition to the bike, but I figured I might still catch him. Within a few miles, I was on his wheel and then came up alongside. He told me to “keep up the good work” as I pedaled by. Naively assuming that he was conceding the bike portion of the race, I smiled and pedaled hard, putting my head down and ducking my body out of the wind. I figured I should make up time while I could, since Dave was a strong hiker and skier. After a few miles of pedaling, I glanced back and was surprised to find Dave locked on my rear wheel -- he had been drafting me all along to conserve his energy! While this was certainly legal, it bothered me—I didn’t want him to be taking it easy while I pushed the pace. This would provide him with fresh legs on the hike. I considered asking him to return the favor, taking the lead for a few minutes so I could recover. But when I saw the first hill up ahead, I reconsidered. If I could push hard up this first hill he may decide not to stay with me, thus freeing me to set my own pace and forcing him to earn his miles by himself. Of course the strategy was a bit bold and perhaps arrogant-- a hard hill sprint this early may come back to haunt me on the steep grade to Pinkham Notch. But when I got up out of the saddle and turn the pedals hard, Dave yelled ahead, “Good luck to you, Scott,” and dropped off. It worked, I was off to track down Erik Grimm.

The steep grade up to Pinkham Notch was grueling and my heart rate remained high, hovering in the low 180s. I eventually settled into a rhythm, pulling on the pedals as much as pushing on them, and using my core strength to carry myself up the hill. I kept stealing glimpses ahead to determine whether Erik was in sight. Finally, near one of the last switchbacks toward the top, I made out a biker—that was him! For the first time, I realized I had a chance to compete with this guy. Near the Notch, the road leveled out, allowing me to jump into the “big ring” for the first time. Spinning hard, I hit over 30 mph down the last flat stretch, turning the heads of the thousands of skiers parking along the road side and preparing for their long trek up to Tuckerman's. I took a wide turn into the parking lot to toss on my running shoes and fall in line alongside the hordes of skiers.



During the transition from bike to hike, my friend Brad Schildt, who was racing the “hike” leg of the race for a relay team, told me that I was only five minutes back of Erik. As Brad shouted encouragement, I frantically slipped on my shoes and pressed Brad into service: “Hey, can you reach into my pocket and pull out my Clif Bar? ... can you unwrap it, too and hand it to me?!” The race official, who was watching the whole ordeal, leaned over and said, “Maybe you can half-chew it for him, too!”

I took off running, stuffing my face with the Clif bar and trying to drink enough water to wash it down. The trail started off with rocks and mud, but before long turned into slippery hard-packed snow. I focused every bit of energy to avoid slipping. Breathing hard, I didn't even bother calling out "on your right" to the truckload of skiers/snowboards I passed. Some shouted encouragement, some asked what I was doing, others asked if I was racing. I only answered the yes/no questions.

The trail required a speed hike throughout, with only short sections that allowed for a jog. When I popped out at the Hermit Lake Shelters, just below Tuckerman's Ravine, the place was packed and erupted into a cheer as I ran across the bare rocks and veered left to Hillman's Highway. An adrenaline rush surged through me, but I knew I still had a significant climb before I could click in to my skis and enjoy the final reward.

As I approached the crowded transition area, I yelled Berk's name repeatedly. He yelled back and I met him running. I dropped to the snow and flicked off my shoes and jammed on the ski boots. Scott looked excited, which kept my energy level high, despite my sore thighs. He told me Erik was only 5 minutes ahead and pointed up the mountain to a figure slowly kicking his way up the steep slope. He told me the ski was shorter this year so I had to get going immediately if I was going to catch him. I skipped water and food and started up, skis on my back and poles in my hand.

Throughout the hike Erik appeared tired, which allowed me to gain on him slowly through the 20 minute climb. I kept my head down, glancing up only occasionally to gauge Erik's progress. I concentrated on breathing consistently and applying my core strength to getting me up the hill-- my thighs were of little use at this point. At the top of the ski climb, where race volunteers had flattened out an area for us to transition to our skis, I came up alongside Erik and surprised him. He hadn't been gauging my progress as I had his. But he had the step on me going into the transition and quickly took the "pole position," clicking into his skis and heading off. The best I could do was follow him. Baring a crash, he had first place wrapped up. He didn't crash (but I did!).

I collapsed as I skied to a hockey-stop across the finish line- what a great feeling after pushing so hard for so long!! I improved over last year and, with some good Karma, I may improve to first next year. Of course, maybe I'll be smarter next year and pass up invitations to superstars like Erik Grimm.