

Escape From Alcatraz
by
Martin P. Desmery

Escape From Alcatraz embodies everything we love about the sport of triathlon. The race is unique, challenging, and extreme. Strength and technique are essential, but physical skills are not enough. You need to be "mental" about this event, both in training and on race day. If you know what to expect, and if you're prepared for the unexpected, you will have one of the most amazing experiences of your triathlon career.

You can't just sign up for Escape From Alcatraz. This popular race is reserved for about 1,800 fast or lucky triathletes from around the world. There are half a dozen qualifying races in the Escape "To" Alcatraz series. These events are held in different geographical regions of the United States, as well as the U.K. and Europe. The top age group finishers in the qualifying races, plus the division champions from the previous year's race, receive automatic invitations. The rest of the field is comprised mainly of lottery winners, relay teams and athletes who participate in certain training camps.

I placed my name in the lottery for the June 2005 race before the deadline in mid-November of 2004. At that time I had been into triathlon for less than two years. A training buddy named Bob ("Shack") Fitzpatrick convinced me to fill out the online registration form. I must confess that I wasn't keen on the idea because I disliked swimming in cold water. Back then, if I stuck my toe in a chilly pool it would take me three minutes to gather the nerve to jump in. I just couldn't picture myself crawling through the frigid waters of San Francisco Bay. Still, I knew I had only a remote chance of winning a lottery slot, so against my better judgment I entered my name.

When the lottery results were announced in December, Bob had been picked but I had not. Perfect! "Congratulations, man! Gee, what a shame I can't do that swim with you." Instead, I entered the race as part of two-man relay team, with another good friend named Jerry ("K'Boom") Porter, who agreed to be the swimmer. (By the way, you don't need to qualify or enter the lottery to race this way. Relay teams are accepted through online registration on a first-come, first-served basis.) The three of us made plans to travel from Boston to San Francisco the following June. Just the guys. No wives, no kids, and no chilly swim for me. I was happy.

In February, the race organizers announced the second wave of lottery picks. "Second wave? What second wave?" I'll never forget the feeling in my stomach when I checked the website and saw my name listed as one of the "lucky" winners. I was trapped. I couldn't back out. I already had my plane ticket. To make matters worse, Jerry contacted the race organizers, explained how he had suddenly become a one-person relay team, and somehow managed to convince them to give him an individual race entry. I had no choice. The time had come for me to suck it up and conquer my fear of cold water swimming.

I have several recommendations for anyone racing Escape From Alcatraz for the first time, especially if you're nervous about the swim. Obviously, you need a well-fitting, quality wetsuit. You also need a "squid lid," which is a neoprene hood that fits over your swim cap and protects your head from the cold. Silicone ear plugs are helpful too, as they help prevent the heat from seeping out of your skull. And, most importantly, you need to practice swimming under race conditions. The temperature of San Francisco Bay in June can range from 52 to 56 degrees Fahrenheit. The only way to acclimate your body and mind to the numbing cold is to practice, practice, and practice. Start by swimming in the coldest water you can find for five minutes, then 10, then 15, 20, and so on. In a few weeks, you'll realize that you've stopped thinking about the temperature and moved on to related challenges, like how to take off your wetsuit when you can barely feel your fingers. Anyway, the body is a highly-adaptive machine. With the right gear and enough practice, swimming in cold water is not a problem.

I also recommend buying two items from the race organizer's website (www.tricalifornia.com). The first is a short book entitled, "Alcatraz Swimmers Manual," compiled by a Bay area resident who has crawled to and from Alcatraz Island dozens of times – all without a wetsuit. The book has many open water training tips. It also sets the record straight on certain facts about the swim, such as the number of people who have been attacked by sharks in the past 130 years (zero) and how good a swimmer you really need to be (average). My second suggestion is that you purchase a copy of the DVD of the race from the prior year. Escape From Alcatraz is a nationally-televised event. Every year, the producers put out a slick DVD that describes the logistics of the race and the layout of the course. It's an invaluable tool for a first-time racer, especially if you're not from northern California.

My buddies and I flew to San Francisco on the Thursday before the race, which gave us two full days to see the sights and prepare for the drama on Sunday. We stayed at an inexpensive motel near Fisherman's Wharf. This is a popular tourist area with many restaurants and hotels; and it's just a short bike ride to the expo/transition area. Over the next 48 hours, we embarked on a full recon patrol. We took the ferry to Alcatraz Island (intimidating); we swam in the Bay (cold); we biked most of the course (hilly); we walked all over San Francisco (dumb); and we took early morning runs up and down the streets of the city (dumber). I'm sure our pre-race activities were not ideal for three slightly nervous, middle-aged, jet-lagged triathletes, but we were having too much fun to simply kick back and relax.

We hit the race expo on Saturday. The booths were plentiful and well-stocked with the usual assortment of tri-products and race merchandise. The official tee shirt was absolutely the best ever. (Even today, I imagine other bikers and runners whispering in awe as I fly by in my dark blue shirt with the bright red "Escape" logo emblazoned on the back.) We enjoyed the race briefings presented by Julie Moss and other legends of the sport. Over and over, we were told to be mindful of the currents in San Francisco Bay. In order to hit the swim exit 1.5 miles southwest of the start of Alcatraz Island, we were instructed to aim due south towards the city and allow the current to pull us west. Any

athlete who failed to heed this warning would overshoot the swim exit and, in theory at least, be swept under the Golden Gate Bridge and out into the Pacific Ocean. Of course, numerous boats and kayaks are on hand to keep athletes from becoming castaways, but we understood that misjudging the current meant the end of our race.

In addition to the usual T1 & T2, Escape From Alcatraz has a third transition called “T1/2.” The swim exit is about one mile from the bike racks. Many of the pros run barefoot to T1 with their wetsuit pulled down to their waist. Most athletes, however, put a second pair of sneakers in a bag supplied by the race organizers. The bags are transported to the swim exit on race morning and arranged by bib number. As you exit the water, you find your bag, throw your wetsuit inside, put on your sneakers, and run to your bike. This has the advantage of literally warming you up after the frigid swim, so that by the time you hit T1 you’re ready to jump on the bike and fly.

On race day, we woke up before dawn and biked over to the transition area, which was spread out over a large grassy field near the waterfront. After racking our bikes and setting up our gear, we boarded one of the many buses to the ferry terminal. One large boat transports all of the athletes to the start of the race off Alcatraz Island. The boat is very comfortable, with numerous bathrooms and just enough floor space for each athlete to stretch out and contemplate the day ahead. Consider the pre-swim anxiety of your typical wave start, with 100 or so athletes standing for a few minutes on the beach or in the water before the race begins. Then imagine the nervous energy generated by almost 2,000 people, who are forced to wait in close quarters for an hour as they chug out towards the middle of San Francisco Bay. I was very grateful to be with my good friends, Bob & Jerry. Instead of our usual pre-race trash-talking, we traded silent nods and wide-eyed grins. “Oh man! Can you believe we’re really doing this?”

It turned out to be a gorgeous day, without a cloud in the sky and temperatures in the mid- to upper-60’s. As the boat approached Alcatraz Island, we lined up by age group and quickly snaked our way through the ship until we reached the timing mats on the outside deck. I felt like a paratrooper, or maybe a lemming, as I jumped off the edge and hit the water five or six feet below. Suddenly, it seemed like I was all alone. With the moving boat and the rolling waves, the parachute analogy holds true because the athletes enter the Bay over a wide area and spread out. I put on my goggles and did my best to get into the rhythm of swimming without any warmup.

After a few minutes I rolled over and caught the silhouette of the prison against the clear blue sky. “That’s pretty cool,” I thought. About five minutes later I looked again and saw the exact same thing. “That is definitely not cool.” I had been swimming for almost 10 minutes and my position relative to Alcatraz had not changed. I fought back a brief surge of panic, picked out a tall building for my sight line, put my head down in the water and focused on executing long, smooth strokes. I kept telling myself, “Mind the current and head south.” I swam strong through long rollers, washing machine waves and endless swells. I wondered if anybody else had noticed that even the waters off San Francisco seemed hilly.

Although the swim distance is 1.5 miles, you're supposed to be assisted by the current so the swim leg should last a little longer than your one-mile time. I expected to be in the water for no more than 35-40 minutes. After almost half an hour, however, I could see that I wasn't even close to the swim exit. Also, it didn't look like I had moved very far to the west so I assumed that the current must be closer to shore. I had almost reached land, well to the east of the swim exit, when I finally realized that the water seemed to be moving in the wrong direction. I spent almost an hour in the Bay, with the last 10 minutes stumbling over submerged boulders while trudging through thigh-high water at the shoreline as part of a long line of cold and tired athletes. We learned later that over 200 people had to be pulled from the water because the unusual cross-current had dramatically lengthened the swim.

I finally emerged from the swim exit and found my bag at T1/2. Somehow I managed to peel off my wetsuit and put on my sneakers. As I started out on the one-mile run I heard someone call my name. It was another triathlon friend from home who just happened to be in San Francisco on business. Small world. The unexpected support from 3,000 miles away gave me a huge boost. I ran a relatively quick mile to the bike transition, switched shoes and donned my favorite Grateful Dead bike jersey. It took a few minutes to navigate out of T1; and then I headed off on the 18-mile trek up and down the famed streets of San Francisco.

The bike course opens with a one-mile stretch of flat road, followed by a series of climbs. Like a pilot, I scanned my instruments – speed, cadence, heart rate – trying to stay focused on the physics of my ascent. I passed within two feet of a very enthusiastic spectator who looked exactly like Robin Williams. “Whoa! That really was Robin Williams!” My fear of not having a gear low enough to climb the hills gave way to concerns about lacking the technical skills necessary to handle the descents. These are well-traveled city streets with the usual assortment of hazards that you don’t want to encounter at 40 miles per hour. It can be difficult to concentrate, however, when almost every mile presents a stunning view of San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Pacific Ocean, the Presidio, or Golden Gate Park.

For many triathletes, 18 miles is barely a training ride, and I completed the bike leg almost wishing I could do it again. By the time I exited T2 my mind had already blocked out the swim and I found myself thinking, “I absolutely love this race!” Then the fun really started. The 8-mile run begins and ends with two flat miles along a paved footpath. In between, you run on dirt, gravel, asphalt, grass, wood, and rocks, as well as hard- and soft-packed sand. There are long stretches of wooden stairs and steep hills where the course is only wide enough for a single lane in each direction. You definitely want to keep an eye on your heart rate or perceived effort. If you allow yourself to redline too early or often, you’ll fall off a cardio cliff and never climb back up.

After you pass under the Golden Gate Bridge you head down to the turnaround at Baker Beach. The half-mile beach run ends with a 400-foot climb, known as the infamous Sand Ladder. You don’t want to encounter this obstacle for the first time on race day. Watch the DVD. Visit Baker Beach. Talk to people. Read race reports. You should have a

clear plan before the race about how to approach this unusual part of the course. It consists of wooden railroad ties spaced about two or three feet apart up an almost vertical hill of sand, with thick cables on both sides to use as handrails. Whether walking or running, you want to try to land your feet on the railroad ties and not on the sand in between, although this gets harder as the race progresses and hundreds of athletes kick sand in all directions. Put your head down, shorten your stride, and either pump your arms like a maniac or use the handrails to pull yourself up to the top. With the Sand Ladder behind you, it's almost literally all down hill from there. You've got about one more mile of tricky descents, and then you're back on the flats heading for home.

My friends and I ended our day feeling like we had accomplished more than just a mid-pack finish in a famous race. It was an extreme test of endurance, strength, speed, technique, and mental toughness. We passed. We were now ready to move on century rides, marathons, and long course triathlons. In a sport where "Iron" is the definitive word, and "Kona" is the ultimate destination, "Alcatraz" is in a class by itself.

Martin Desmery is the father of three wonderful kids - Emily, Virginia & Alexander. He lives in Duxbury, Massachusetts, and practices law in Boston. His training buddies include K'Boom, Shack, Condor, Goose, Dr. P, Double D and the members of Team Pegasus. He is coached by Beth Kenney of Pegasus Elite Athlete Management. The love and support of his wife, Diane, makes everything possible. Although her patience can wear thin at times, it never seems to run out. Thanks Dee!