

PERSONAL RECORD

Why giving birth is

NOT LIKE RUNNING A MARATHON

(or finishing a triathlon or an adventure race or whatever endurance event you're into).

BY KARA DOUGLASS THOM

After I finished my second Ironman Triathlon, my body and mind were in top form. In pursuit of that finish, I had run seven marathons and dozens more triathlons and had grown lean, fit, and savvy enough about training to improve my times and master what, to the average person, seemed nearly impossible. But one year after reaching fitness nirvana, I was lugging around 60 extra pounds, barely able to shuffle to the refrigerator for another protein shake. I hardly recognized myself in finishers' photos.

I looked at being pregnant with twins as just another physical challenge. If I could grit my way through more than 140 miles of continuous racing, surely I could sail through what countless women before me had accomplished. To prove my mettle, I set my mind on a natural delivery, despite facing a 50 percent risk of cesarean section.

I told my doctor I was ready to sweat. I was ready to grunt. I was ready to do something hard. After months of near bed rest, I yearned for that transcendental place where my mind detaches from my body after so many hours of movement and wills it to keep going, to push past the pain and the fatigue, to move even faster. I always learned something about myself when I arrived at the point where I felt I couldn't go on—but did. I yearned for that challenge, those feelings.

So two weeks later, when I went to the hospital to be induced, I packed GU Energy Gel, POWERade, and all the mental artillery I had used in races. I thought that delivering my twins would be just another endurance event.

Childbirth is an oft-used analogy to attaining a big goal: the gestation is symbolic of training and preparation, the birth is the event, the baby is the achievement—or the new self one becomes after the experience. Before having kids I had used that analogy myself. So I approached my first birth experience in the same way I did a big race—down to carbo-loading the night before.

When my water broke and the contractions hit, however, I felt blown off course. Some 15 hours later, I was still trying to master my labor. Ultimately, my two baby girls were born. Oh, yes, it was hard. But hard like an Ironman? No way.

The physical exertion I experience during a race is spurred by an external stimulus: the water against my skin during the swim, the headwind I carve into on my bike, the asphalt meeting my feet as I run. All of the factors that make a race challenging—



heat, hills, and heart rate—are regulated by my will. Even what I can't change I can control by slowing down, even stopping. Everything comes from the outside in.

Childbirth comes from the inside out.


I had expected to do something hard, but instead something hard had been done within me. Despite weeks of Bradley birth classes and reading every natural-childbirth book I could find, there was no real training for this. And there certainly was no speeding up, slowing down, or taking a break. Even though I had successfully passed up the temptation of an epidural, I had made the birth more difficult by trying to anticipate and manage my labor as though

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it was something I could control. Natural-childbirth experts encourage moms to surrender to birth. Not train hard. Not master the pain. Not gut it out. Just surrender.

I have always said that an endurance event is 90 percent mental: if you put your mind to it, you can convince your body to finish. In child-birth, however, you must turn off your brain and allow your body to do the physical work it knows how to do without your mind's interfering with the process.

When I became pregnant a second time, I went into labor at home. Contractions came and went as I enjoyed breakfast with a friend, played with my daughters, even indulged in a prenatal massage. Instead of anticipating each seize and trying to control each jolt, I let my body respond spontaneously. In the beginning all I needed was to close my eyes and breathe deeply. As the contractions came closer together, I found comfort on all fours, practically kissing the floor. Finally, moans gave way to guttural calls and screeches of relief as I marveled that a new soul was on its way.

Before my twins were born, I'd spent 30 hours in the hospital. The second time it was just 30 minutes before I held my third daughter in my arms. Both births were equally rewarding, but the competitor in me couldn't help but think that this time I had set a new personal record. 



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