

# Dealing With The Disappointment Of Success

An attempt to articulate the feelings of failure.

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13<sup>th</sup> October, 2018.

Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. The morning of the Ironman World Championship dawned and personally, I'd never been more ready. This was the pinnacle of an 18 month

campaign that yielded an Age Group win, a 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and a 5<sup>th</sup> along with 3 PR's. I'd developed noticeably as an athlete, both physically and mentally and my lead-in had been highly focussed and flawless. A long, injury free and highly consistent build towards the race resulted in me treading water on the start line in Kailua Bay in what was unquestionably the best physical shape I'd ever been in – and ever likely to be.

*“a bizarre sense of acceptance”*

As the sun rose and the crowds built along the breakwater wall around Dig Me Beach, I felt strangely calm but tingling with nerves at the same time – a bizarre sense of acceptance of the situation.

I positioned myself well in the water and was satisfied with the execution of my swim and management of the mental energy that is so easily wasted in the anxiety-generating open water swim.

Like most, I wondered when the infamous trade-winds would awake to destroy the



morale of those on the Queen K. But, they never came – an incredibly rare

phenomenon that tempted many into pushing hard on the bike while the conditions permitted. By four hours into the bike I was

optimistic about putting together ‘the perfect

*“I only had to jog-in a 3:30 marathon”*

Kona day’, after all, I only had to ‘jog-in’ a 3:30 marathon to achieve what I’d had my heart and mind fixated on for years - sub 9:30 at Kona - easy right?

It was about then, with just less than an hour to ride, that I made *a series of errors* – errors that would later bring 18 months of training and dreams undone. I’d hyper-hydrated. I filled my stomach to its absolute limit with fluids in a pre-planned attempt to counter the impending dehydration that would come throughout the run. Resisting the urge to empty my stomach all over the volcanic landscape of the Big Island, I put a blanket-

*“I forgot that I still needed fuel”*

ban on consuming any fluids until I found myself back in a position of comfort again – and here led to error number two..... My race fuel is in liquid form but physically and mentally I had ‘locked the doors’ to any form of fluid. With the consumption of fluids now out of my mind, I simply forgot that I still needed fuel. The last hour of my bike leg was executed without calories – not the best way to start a marathon in Kona.

Starting the run with a known caloric deficit and still feeling the physical effects of hyper-hydration, I was dizzy, confused, nauseous and disorientated from the first step.

With the caloric fuel tank running on empty and a thrashed stomach that wouldn’t tolerate a game of ‘catch-up’, it wasn’t long before my fuelling error became a problem. I zig-zagged my way down most of Alii’ Drive staring at my watch without any comprehension of what it was telling me in return. I’d already lost the ability to interpret the data, problem solve or think rationally. I was struggling to recall my race plan and I was

very quickly losing my mental focus. But most telling of all was that slipping from my grasp was the motivation to keep striving towards everything I'd worked so hard for, for so long. I seemed to be at ease to simply 'let it go'. Seemingly in slow motion but very much in real-time, like a train wreck, in front of my own eyes I watched my "near certain sub 9:30" erode and crumble. It is difficult to

*"Like a train wreck, in front of my own eyes"*

describe in words the genuine heart break that follows. Out there, in the heat haze of the Queen K approaching the Natural Energy Lab, I was witnessing my own body go into



shut down mode, utterly powerless to arrest its slide into yet another embarrassing walk. I simply could not consciously override my body's urge to stop and walk. I tried every mental strategy that I thought I'd

perfected over 20 years of racing. But this was darker than I'd ever experienced before. My fuelling deficit was too great and I was defeated, mentally as much as physically. My reactive grief couldn't even wait for the recovery area and as I ran, jogged and walked without any conscious control, my disappointment turned to anger, then disgust at what I'd allowed in error to occur.

9hrs and 48minutes after the canon fired, I finished. Yes, that is a respectable time and far from a disaster. In many people's eyes that

is a hugely successful day and naturally, I was elated to finish as my body was flooded with

*"I can't help but think they are fraudulent"*

positive hormones for the first time in many hours. Honestly, I look at my finishing chute



photos and can't help but think they are fraudulent. The smiles, the fist pumps, the joy – all a short term, endorphin-induced flash of elation that temporarily masked the underlying sense of despair and heartache.

To move forward I need to learn to be proud of what I achieved. I did the best with what I had on the day but I expected more from myself as a highly trained athlete. I devoted myself to that one race and invested massively in the emotional, financial and social cost that preparing for that race demanded.

It stings and it hurts when the reward doesn't match the effort. Now, many weeks after the event I remain hurt and stung – feelings I suggest I'll carry for life.

*"Unfulfilled and disappointed in my success"*

I'm constantly being told by the well-intended that I should be happy to have finished such an amazing event. But I'm sorry - that simply doesn't tick my box. Why? Because Kona 2018 wasn't about simply finishing. Kona 2018 was about producing a result that matched my training and athletic potential - and I wasn't able to produce that, so I remain unfulfilled and disappointed in my success.