

Those who grasp for goals never fail

By Bill Shaw

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“... of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these, it might have been” (105-06).—
John Greenleaf Whittier

“Maud Muller” (1854)

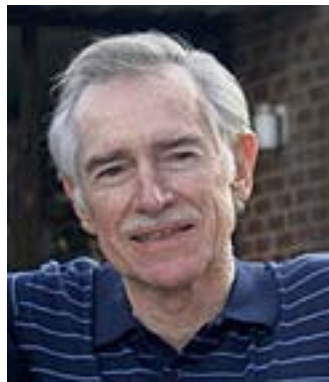
As we triathletes moved through the lines to have our bikes and helmets checked and our bodies marked between 5:30 and 6 a.m. Saturday, March 8, the temperature hovered between 20 and 30 degrees in Athens, Texas. I dreaded stripping down to my swimming togs. Fortunately, however, the 300-meter swim began the triathlon inside.

I waited more than an hour to enter the pool. I was swimmer 445. Swimmers enter the pool based on their estimated swim time. We entered the pool at 10-second intervals and swam three of the five lanes both ways, which made for some collisions and congestion.

Thanks to my swimming teacher, Madeleine Felsted, I had a swim time 30 seconds better than last year. I could have pulled the time down a minute if the pool had been less crowded.

From the pool door, I ran about 50 yards into the cold, barefooted on a rough, pebbly parking lot to my bike. The USA Triathlon referee told those who were about to head out for the 13.3-mile bike ride to dress warm because some triathletes had suffered from the cold. I pulled on a full sweat suit, so my transition was slower than usual.

The road was rough, the hills were long and hard, the wind froze my face. I made good time despite the conditions. Shortly after the turnaround at halfway, I hit a rock and my back tire went flat.



I thought I could make the rest of the ride with the flat until I hit a steep hill and some rough road at about 10 miles. I stopped. A volunteer loaded up my bike and took me to the transition area, where I surrendered my timing chip.

I recorded an official “DNF” (Did Not Finish), but I slogged out of the transition area and ran the 5K with the official finishers.

My 26th triathlon and my 277th race was not to be. I experienced only my second DNF in 278 races. The only other was when I took a few strides at the start of the 1993 Firecracker 4 and stopped dead in my tracks because of the paralyzing pain of plantar fasciitis. Putting my Athens DNF in perspective, I

have logged only a .7 percent failure rate in 25 years of adult racing. In addition, my body did not fail or betray me; my bike did.

As runners and triathletes, we must learn to accept failure due to our training or lack of it or, in the case of a triathlon, a mechanical failure.

My failure last Saturday in the ultimate scheme of things is insignificant.

Sports and athletic contests are metaphors of life. Overachievers and mediocre athletes like me are never in the spotlight or at the front of the pack. We accept our limitations, and sometimes we must lower our expectations, particularly as we age. The act of faith in registering for a race and starting it are heroic. The overachiever and mediocre athletes who bring up the rear or fail to finish because their bodies betray them, or the machines they depend on break, are as heroic as those who cross the finish line first.

If you fail, keep the faith. The “saddest words of tongue or pen” are not “it might have been” but it was never attempted. As Browning wrote in Andrea del Sarto, “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what’s a heaven for” (97-98).

You might not “reach” the goal you set, but in “grasping for it,” though you fall short, you achieve heroic stature.

Bill Shaw’s running column appears in *The Facts* every other Monday.