

## The Road to Athens

After the Lavaman triathlon in Kona, I headed to Japan for the Ishigaki World Cup, the first of the season. I had an evening lay-over in Osaka and I decided to stay at the airport hotel. Even though it was a little more expensive to stay at the airport, it was simpler to catch my connecting flight and gave me chance to check out the airport which is an engineering feat. Aaron, my husband, was most excited about me flying into this airport. This airport is built on a man-made island! You may have seen the documentary on the construction of this amazing airport on The Discovery Channel or TLC. It was really interesting to see it up close, but one night there was enough. [LINK](#)

The next morning I flew over two hours from Osaka to Ishigaki, a small tropical island south of the main islands of Japan. When I was booking this trip it seemed like it took longer than usual. I now understand why it was long journey as this is definitely a remote location to get to. It was worth it since it is also very beautiful and unique.

All the World Cup races from now until early next year count toward making the 2004 Canadian Olympic Triathlon team. The Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) is still finalizing the Olympic Qualifying criteria but it is rumored to be similar to the criteria set in 2000. We will likely be expected to have 3 top ten finishes at World Cup races in the next year to qualify. That being said my main goal at this race is to finish in the top ten. I felt that I was not in top race form yet but was strong enough to get into the top ten.

I stayed with Victor Plata from the USA, in a great hotel. It was really reasonably priced, brand new and right in front of the race start; not to mention beside the European bakery. I really enjoyed wandering around Ishigaki city for the first few days. Eating at restaurants was always an adventure because you never had any idea what you were ordering. In other places in Japan they have pictures of the different meals that are available to order. You can just point at which one you would like and smile. In Ishigaki the menu pictures were limited so the meal was always a surprise until they brought it out. After a few times not getting exactly what I wanted, Victor and I resorted to cycling to the grocery store and buying meals from the deli. I ate quite a few rice balls and curried chicken dishes.

Race morning we woke up to the sound of beating drums and loud singing. The age-group race was taking place and the fans were out in full force. There was a group of ladies dancing a traditional dance to the band on the side of the course. These ladies are for the most part older (over 50) and they were out there all day from 8 am until the men's race was over at 5 pm. Talk about endurance!

On race morning I felt pretty good even though the day before I had a bit of stomach upset all morning. Luckily I recovered by Sunday morning, or so I thought. After seeing many elated age-groupers finish their race, it was time to get out there and warm up. Warming up was easy, as it was the hottest day of the year so far, about 28C and 80 %humidity. We were in for a hot one. This was a non-wetsuit swim and the water was really pleasant. It was the same colour as the water in Hawaii so I tried not to get

distracted by the creatures swimming underneath us. Actually after I saw signs hanging around the town warning about poisonous water snakes I decided I was better off not to look at the bottom because I would definitely panic if I saw one.

From the pontoon race start to the first buoy was fast and furious; everyone was jockeying for a good position before the first turn. In most races your position in the swim is determined by the first turn as it is hard to get around people. It is a full out sprint to the first turn – not a good way to warm-up! It seemed like the pack didn't split up at all and about 20 girls were trying to turn left all at the same time. The rest of the swim was pack management. You try relaxing and focusing with a person on each side of you in front of you and behind you while you endure bumps and tangles. It always gets really aggressive towards the end of the swim because everyone wants to be first to run in the transition area and get on their bike quickly, and that is exactly what happened in this race. I ran quickly through transition with a large group of girls we all jumped on our bikes and headed up and over the bridge that we would end up crossing 12 times during bike course and 6 times during the run portion. This bridge wasn't a huge hill but it was enough to make you tired by the end. So up and over the bridge we went, there was about 13 girls in the pack and moving along nicely. After the bridge we were on a flat straight away for about 1 km and had a 180 degree turn to return over the bridge and around the rest of the course. This is where the unthinkable happened! I am embarrassed to even admit it, but around the 180 I didn't realize I was the very last person of the pack of 13 to make the turn. If you know anything about cycling, you would know this isn't a good place to be because you get the yo-yo effect. The yo-yo effect is when you have to slow down and wait for everyone else to turn and then when it is your turn everyone is already sprinting away and you have to work that much harder to catch back up. Well that is exactly what happened to me only I could not catch the pack. I was dropped – a terrible and frightening experience. I stayed within reach on the flat but as we approached the bridge and as the front of the pack was starting up the bridge someone attacked and picked up the pace, the pack responded and that was the end of me. I almost felt like I was having a bad dream. I was in disbelief. So there I was sauntering over the bridge all by my lonesome because there was no one around for a while. Finally 3 girls caught up to me and we started working together for the next couple laps. Eventually on the 3<sup>rd</sup> lap of 6 a larger pack of 6 or 7 girls caught our little pack. This pack was moving along well, with Michelle Dillon leading the group. She was really biking well and encouraging others to do the same. Before I realized it we started to make time up on the lead pack. Michelle was an amazing leader and kept pressing the group to push to catch up. Eventually we could see the pack up ahead and with one lap remaining we closed the gap. I never in my wildest dreams imagined this would happen, anyways, I was back where I began (in the front pack). “Thanks for the help girls”. We were now 22 strong!

We all exited transition 2 together and the run pace picked up really quickly. The heat definitely became a factor and I only felt like my normal self running for about the first 2 km. Then dehydration struck. I was in survival mode and just mentally telling myself to keep moving and I could make it through. Everyone was feeling the heat because as bad as I was feeling the front runners weren't that far ahead. I jockeyed back and forth a couple times for position but then just concentrated on getting over the finish line. When

I finally did get to the finish line in seventh place I was so hot and dehydrated that I collapsed (this isn't like me). I have finished 5 Ironman and never needed an IV but this time I sure needed it. Three other women also had IV after the race so that says something about the conditions. I figured out afterwards I must have been dehydrated starting the race because of the little stomach bug I had the day before. Overall I was pleased with the result as I did manage to finish in the top ten and mentally I kept it together when it seemed like everything was falling apart.

The party afterwards was a lot of fun; they had a live bandstand with popular Japanese singers and lots of good food. Of course we ended the evening off by heading out for some Karaoke singing. I am really glad I had a chance to visit this part of Japan. It is a very interesting and friendly place to visit not to mention very beautiful. What a fun trip!