

To Cheat or not to Cheat....that is the question

Drafting in the sport of Ironman triathlon competition is like a cancer. It eats away at the core attraction of the sport, the ability to measure and test one's personal limits in a challenging 3-sport individual competition.

The disease of drafting has been treated before with very good results, most notably in the sport's showcase event in Hawaii--see the History write-up at the end of this article. Unfortunately, a lack of vigilance on the part of complicit race directors has widespread cheating rearing its ugly head and eating away once again at the health of our sport.

My recent participation in Ironman Canada allows me to cite this year's race as a case in point. Based on what I saw throughout the day and what was reported by virtually everyone on the course, I would have to judge IMC 2002 to be one of the worst races I have ever witnessed in regards to general cheating.

It was sad to see IMC, in its 20th anniversary event and for me personally a special race, join a growing list of IM races and qualifiers that have failed miserably in serving the interests of the sport and its primary constituency, the athletes. While athletes themselves have a role to play in fair racing and individuals will deal differently with the "do I cheat or don't I cheat" scenario that was IMC 2002, ultimately it is the race director's responsibility to put on a fair race.

Looking at the finishing results, one can see that Lori Bowden won yet another IMC title with the impressive finishing time of 9hr15min. Long a dominant bike rider, Bowden was outpaced on the bike by riders who are not known to be strong riders and had to rely on her similarly vaunted run to take the lead very late in the race.

Question:

Was Bowden's bike ride 5hr 18min ride on a tough course a sub-par performance, or did certain women discover something in training to catapult them far forward in the competitive bike ranks, or did the near zero-presence of race marshals and huge packs of shameless cheaters warp the race results?

Please don't criticize me for posing a question that begs to be answered in view of the ITU approach to cycling at IMC. Anyone who witnessed IMC 2002 could see that for many, many athletes the bike portion of the race destroyed any measure of integrity in regards to IM being an individual effort.

Answer:

There is no way to know to evaluate relative bike and run performances because IMC was not a fair race.

What happened out on the IMC bike course?

As I rode the course, here is a list of things I saw, and things I didn't see:

Did see:

- HUGE, tightly packed SWARMS of athletes that spilled dangerously over onto my side of the road on a long out and back
- Lead female pros tightly ensconced within those swarms
- An annoying group of 2nd-3rd tier male pro riders pacelining for the first 40 miles, some of whom tried to be legitimate, others less so, and certain individuals who were disgusting in their behavior
- Lori Bowden riding solo

Didn't see:

- A single draft marshal for the first 40 miles
- A single draft marshal for the next 71 miles
- A single draft marshal accompanying lead females and age-groupers on a long out and back section

Athletes I coach who have participated in various WTC events this year describe the same general scenario as the basis for this IM competitive synopsis:

- train hard to be the best you can be

- sacrifice time away from family in your IM training quest
- spend a lot of money to travel to a race
- observe cheating all around you thanks to organizational disregard
- get pissed at what you are seeing
- in mid-race be faced with the dilemma of joining in but feeling bad about it, or being honest and a sucker not to mention far behind the cheaters
- Do it all again?

How were finishing results affected at IMC 2002?

Thankfully, it is clear that despite the rampant cheating, the best man and woman won this year's IMC. Garret Macfadyen had the strength to overcome a huge deficit in the swim and ride solo through the field to the near front of the field. Bowden too had a deficit to overcome after the swim and was widely observed to be riding cleanly.

Yet, with the exception of the two winners and the top several male finishers, there is no segment of the race that did not see its results corrupted by cheating. Sorry folks. While I am sure that there were some legitimate results, everyone gets painted with the same dirty brush when race directors allow events like IMC 2002, Austria, and others occur.

The remainder of the female pro race would have had a substantial alteration of results had there been a clean race. Not having to pedal for 112 miles makes for both faster bike and run times. It was plain to see that there was conspicuous and willful cheating by top female finishers. I don't buy into the 'it was unavoidable' argument for a single moment either.

Ditto for the top male age-groupers who took drafting to such an extraordinary level that the centerline ceased to exist. My bike time was probably slower because of the huge onrush of air that these swarms caused as we crossed paths. ☺

It is safe to say that with a fair race format a substantial number of coveted Hawaii qualifying spots would have gone to more deserving athletes that did not cheat. Further back in the field, more of the same according to all the reports.

The male pro race was probably the least affected as the athletes emerge from the water with open roads and less opportunity for malfeasance. Other than the annoying presence of some gross cheaters in the early going, ciao Niccola Carpenese, drafting did not have a significant impact on my race or the male pro race.

The once only and disinterested appearance of a race official meant that many male pros stayed closer than they would have otherwise and that more riders arrived together at the more challenging sections of the course, but the final standings of the top 4 males were legit. The next 10 finishers would have likely been more spaced out and altered somewhat had they been forced to ride with stricter adherence to the rules.

Overall the event that was staged in Penticton does not paint a pretty competitive picture.

Is drafting inevitable? If not, what is the fix?

Drafting certainly is inevitable when race officials are nearly invisible and those very few on the course are disinterested in officiating.

Hawaii has demonstrated that large numbers of racers can be accommodated while still having a fair race.

The formula is simple is really quite simple:

- make staging a clean race a priority
- supply sufficient number of officials to cover the course
- ensure that officials are more than window-dressing and will actually enforce the rules

Clearly, IMC was deficient in all of the above categories.

What can athletes do to get things on track?

Make a lot of noise beginning now, beginning with race directors who should want to listen to their customers.

Copy WTC as well. WTC certainly has an interest in protecting the brand name it has used its athletes to create for itself.

Don't sign up for races that do not serve the interests of the athletes.

Clone Charlie Crawford and his team of race officials.

Make a lot of noise to anyone who will listen. Sponsors do not like to hear discontent and race directors will have added incentive to clean up their act.

History: Flashback to Hawaii 1995 Men's Race

The debacle at this year's IMC and how to correct the problem is not without precedent.

The tainted 1995 Men's race in Hawaii provided the impetus for a dramatic overhaul in the application and enforcement of the no-drafting rule and which now ensures athletes a level playing field as they chase their dreams on the Kona coast.

The year 1995 saw a heated political battle between the International Triathlon Union (ITU) and World Triathlon Corporation (WTC) over the direction of the sport, with one of the core issues being the subject of drafting.

The ITU claimed that drafting was inevitable and that athletes should just accept it against their will. WTC, with overwhelming athlete support, staked out the moral high ground claiming that to accept drafting would be to destroy the individual nature of the sport.

Amidst this charged political arena a Hawaii rookie bike phenom named Thomas Hellriegel boldly charged to the front of the 1995 Hawaii bike course with an incredible solo effort. Behind him a tightly packed phalanx of a dozen riders, perhaps thinking they were in an ITU race, made a mockery of the alleged no-drafting rule by taking shelter from the howling winds while race officials were content to merely parade alongside them.

Hellriegel's gallant effort in earning a 13 minute lead in T2 would be for naught as he would ultimately be "run down" at mile 24 of the marathon by one of the pack beneficiaries. Most of the other pack riders had personal best run splits that year. As I stood on the podium frustrated by the previous day's event, I remember watching Hellriegel seethe as the *winner* that year tactlessly joked about the pack riding that had characterized his ride.

To its credit, WTC took dramatic steps to restore integrity to the sport's crown jewel race so that the best athlete might win. The following year saw new Head Official Charlie Crawford bring a well-trained team of officials to ensure a fair race. A revised set of rules was clearly explained, was stringently enforced, and Hawaii saw its best athletes win in all categories.

Hawaii continues to be a race where athletes can compete in a fair race. There are ample race officials and they are as dedicated to ensuring a clean race as the athletes are to being their best. In short, a win for everyone involved in the sport.

M2 Conclusions:

- Drafting is as much cheating as is taking illegal performance enhancing drugs
- Athletes overwhelmingly prefer a clean race, despite their willingness to cheat when presented the opportunity

- Organizers have an interest in taking steps to protect the credibility and long term health of the sport
This translates into having ample officials on the race course **and** who will enforce the rules for everyone's benefit
- The sport loses credibility with its seeming institutional disregard for fundamental rules
- The loud complaints that race organizers hear from penalized cheaters is paltry in comparison to the quiet discontent that is swelling in the general populace when races simply are not fair
- People will eventually first look for clean races, and in their absence, will look for other activities as their tri-experience becomes more an exercise in frustration and less a measure of individual ability

Back to the Present

Athlete report from IM Austria 2002:

I began the bike well but the no drafting lecture was BS. It was pelotons everywhere. I dropped the pro women asap and hunted down the leaders. The last 10k of 1st 60k loop I was swarmed by a group then at the turn around of loop 1. Pro women took advantage of the groups. Many packs! I remained positive but trying to suppress my frustration with the officiating and blatant cheating.

Hey, if I had a faster swim then I would have had to decide to draft with the leaders. Do I just join it? I decided not to and did a 4:49-4:51 bike split.

I haven't lost faith or belief...except for the system of triathlon. One can't fight it. Just get so fast and or join the drafting.

Excerpts from Steve Larsen's California Half Ironman (Kona qualifier) race report

...The course, with numerous out and back sections, soon gave me a chance to size up the competition. Although I was gaining time, it became apparent that the lead group was using any possible chance to work together (not a draft legal race) to catch Walton, and keep me at bay.

As good as I felt on the bike, on this relatively flat course I was no match for an organized group of eight. ...Overall, I was happy with my performance and extremely upset by the end result. In my opinion, the effort I put forth should have at least landed me on the podium and instead I was tenth. I tried to take solace in the fact that I raced a truly solo race and my fitness is close to that of last July.