

Triple, Play?

Some people have a unique idea of fun.

BY TONY GIALANELLA

What a difference a good run can make! I woke up early on the morning of Saturday, August 16, 2008, and started to get ready for a 16-mile training run. My wife, Robin, and I were planning to run the JFK 50-Miler in November, and most of our training during the year had been focused on that goal. We ran the Austin Marathon in February, and in April and May I ran four other marathons and a 50K. The summer weather in Chicago was surprisingly pleasant and great for running. While Robin had established a detailed training plan to prepare herself for the 50-miler, I wasn't doing anything special.

My run that Saturday morning was at the Busse Woods Forest Preserve in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, just a few minutes from our home. It was one of my regular training locations, with an eight-mile loop. During the summer, you have to start your run early because by midmorning the path becomes clogged with cyclists, walkers, in-line skaters, and assorted other pedestrians. I started my first loop by 6:30 A.M.

Just over an hour later I was done. I hadn't intended to run that fast, and I really didn't feel that I had put forth any special effort. I grabbed something to drink and an energy gel at my car and started off for my second loop. I certainly wasn't expecting to match my first loop, and I didn't. I beat my time by almost three minutes! Maybe I was in better condition than I thought.

I usually run a marathon every month, but I hadn't run one since late May. I didn't have one on my schedule until October, although I was hoping to run one in September. I just hadn't decided which one. My great training run really had me fired up. By the time I got home, I knew what I would do. Why run just one marathon in September when I can run three? Especially when they are on consecutive days and in one of the most beautiful places in the United States. I was going to do the Tahoe Triple!

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What is the Tahoe Triple?

The Tahoe Triple is part of an amazing week of athletic events held at Lake Tahoe each September. There are bicycle, kayak, and swimming races; speed golf; the Lake Tahoe Marathon; and for a small group of special athletes (namely, crazy people like me), the Tahoe Triple, which consists of a marathon on Friday, a marathon on Saturday, and the Lake Tahoe Marathon on Sunday. Each marathon starts where the previous one finished, and since Lake Tahoe is 72 miles around, the runners end up circling the entire lake. I had done the Triple in 2004 and enjoyed the experience so much that I had always planned to return. I just hadn't expected it to be in 2008.

I flew into Reno on the morning of Thursday, September 25, 2008, and drove to South Lake Tahoe, California, which is just across the border from Stateline, Nevada. With gambling being legal in Nevada, Stateline consists mainly of large casinos, and the Horizon Casino was headquarters for the week's athletic events. Thursday evening was the pasta dinner and packet pickup for the Triple.

Most of the approximately 80 Triple participants made it to the pasta dinner. We joined some casino patrons who looked decidedly nonathletic in the buffet line before heading into our private room for our dinner and speakers. For first-time Triple participants, the event can be a little intimidating, and the running has nothing to do with it. Race director Les Wright provides bus transportation to the start for the first two marathons, but after each race, runners are on their own as far as getting back to their hotels. There are also few aid stations on the courses for the first two days. The third marathon is the official Lake Tahoe Marathon and has all of the assistance and amenities that are expected of marathons these days.

A good number of the runners had done the Triple before and were more than happy to share their experiences with the rookies. The table I joined for dinner was split about evenly between veterans and rookies. I'm sure that after 30 minutes of hearing completely contrasting descriptions of just about every part of the event, most of the newcomers had no idea what to expect. Luckily, the featured speaker was introduced, and we had to stop scaring the new runners.

Dick Beardsley was the entertainment for the evening, and he did his best to put everyone at ease. Dick gave one of his comic presentations, and everyone had some good laughs. Dick was not participating in the Triple, but he had taken part in the speed-golf game earlier in the day and was going to be running in one of the shorter races on Sunday. Then the race director spoke and tried to ease some of the fears about the logistics, if not the difficulty, of the events. I was staying at a motel about a half mile from the casino, so I walked home after dinner to get to bed early.

Day 1

Friday's marathon would start at 7:15 A.M., and the bus would leave the casino at 6:15 A.M. to take us to the start at Inspiration Point, high above Emerald Bay. The group of people congregating in the hotel lobby drew some strange looks from early-morning (or were they late-night?) gamblers in the casino. As we boarded the bus, it was evident that most of the runners were part of one of the 50-states groups or the Marathon Maniacs. So, as far as marathons go, it was a pretty relaxed group. By the time we reached Emerald Bay, on the west side of the lake, the sun was rising above the mountains to the east. There was a clear sky and the temperature was still in the 30s. Since I hadn't had any transition from summer running, I felt especially cold. I wore a sleeveless base-layer shirt with a light long-sleeve shirt and a throwaway long-sleeve shirt on top.

At 7:00 A.M., we gathered for some photos of the whole group before carefully moving into position to start the race. The roads are open to traffic on the first two days, so we had to watch out for cars speeding along the usually empty early-morning road. Then, with a shotgun blast, we were off. The first three miles are screamingly downhill through a series of switchbacks that make it harder to slow yourself than to just let gravity take over. I knew that I had three long days in front of me and would have to pace myself to get through the Triple, but you just have to let yourself go for the first three miles.



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▲ Runners gather at Commons Beach prior to the start of the 2008 Lake Tahoe Marathon, the third day of the Tahoe Triple. Race Director Les Wright (right) is ready to start the race with a shotgun blast.

Finally, the course reached lake level, and we moved off the road for a little while. We ran through Camp Richardson and the final miles that we would be running to finish the marathon on Sunday. With only 80 runners, we were pretty spread out by this time. I wore a belt with a water bottle and energy gels since the water stops were infrequent. After passing through Camp Richardson, at about seven miles into the race, we came to the Y where we turned east to run through South Lake Tahoe and Stateline. This was also the location of one of the aid stations, so I stopped for some water before heading into the least scenic part of the course. Although the lake was to my left, I was running on a very congested part of the road during the busiest part of the morning rush hour.

Just before we got to Stateline, the course detoured off the main road to bypass the busy casino area. In and around the beach we passed, I could see the kayakers and swimmers in their races. I stopped at the second aid station for something to drink and to fill up my bottle. By this time, the sun was warming things up considerably. I took off my gloves, rolled up my sleeves, and got ready for the very difficult second half of the marathon. Once the course left the Stateline area, we were headed to Spooner Summit. If you're running a marathon and headed toward someplace named "Summit," it can mean only one thing—hills!

I was now heading north on the east side of the lake. Some rolling hills for four or five miles took us through the final aid station at Zephyr Cove. Then the fun really started. The road in this area is a busy four-lane highway, pretty far removed from the lake. Cars and trucks zoomed past at 60-plus miles per hour, and the shoulder of the road was about three feet wide. As I passed through the Cave Rock Tunnel, I was at an elevation just below 6,400 feet and had five miles to reach the 7,044-foot elevation at Spooner Summit. This was the toughest part of the Triple.

I was able to keep moving on the winding climb to the finish. Occasionally I had to cling to the guardrail and bend away from the road to avoid the wind draft created as a large truck flew past. My goal for the Triple was to complete each marathon in less than four hours. In 2004, I had run 3:52–3:48–3:48. I was a little worried in the early parts of the climb, but when I finally saw a road sign saying that Spooner Summit was one mile away, I knew that I would break four hours. It wasn't easy, but I finally reached the summit and could see the finish line at the end of a parking lot. The flat last few yards felt great, and I sprinted (sort of) across the finish line with a time of 3:56.

Now that I had finished the first marathon, I faced my toughest challenge of the day. I had to get back to my hotel, which was 13 miles away in South Lake Tahoe. Since I was alone in Tahoe, I would have to find a ride with someone else. I had put the phone numbers for the local taxi companies in my cell phone, just in case. Jared, from the Sacramento area, had finished a few minutes in front of me. His friend Dwayne had been crewing for him, and his pickup truck was

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parked at the finish. As they were walking back to the truck, I asked if I could get a ride back to South Lake Tahoe, and they graciously agreed. We passed some of the other runners still on the road as we headed back to town, and a few minutes later I was in my motel room.

One of the pieces of wisdom that I had learned at my first Triple, and one that was repeated frequently at the prerace dinner, was that as soon as possible after the race, you had to spend 10 to 20 minutes in the frigid waters of Lake Tahoe. Immersing your legs in the cold water would make the next day's race much more bearable. It had worked for me in 2004, and I walked the few blocks from my motel to the lake to do it again this time. When I reached the beach, a few other runners were also standing or crouching in the lake and more joined us during my short stay in the water. Everyone was in pretty good spirits as we discussed the difficulties of the final miles. I spent the rest of the day relaxing in my room, having an early dinner, and getting a good night's sleep.

Day 2

Saturday's race, and the bus ride, started 30 minutes later than Friday's, and it was a pretty cheerful group that had gathered for our bus ride. The day was going to be a little warmer, but it was still fairly cool at Spooner Summit as we waited to start. Finishing a race at a summit was not so enjoyable; starting a race at a summit meant that we would be running downhill. This might seem like a great way to run the second of back-to-back marathons unless, of course, you had to run another marathon the next day. Day two of the Triple is the easiest of the three courses, and it's very easy to get carried

► The author runs along the shore of Lake Tahoe during the third marathon of his 2008 Tahoe Triple.



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away. If you go flying down the hills of the first 15 miles (as I did), your quads will remind you of your foolishness on the following day (as mine did.)

It was just too hard to hold back, and I ran easily for the first half of the race. We passed through Incline Village, Nevada, and saw the amazing homes that line the lakeshore. Saturday was also the day of the bike races, and we encountered many cyclists riding toward us along the way. As we continued along the north shore of the lake to reenter California, we encountered some rolling hills, which, thankfully, slowed me down a little. Again the temperatures moved quickly from winter to summer, and I was glad that I had dressed more appropriately.

At mile 23, there is a substantial climb but one much shorter than that of the previous day. After reaching the top of the hill, it is mostly downhill into Tahoe City. The organizers had warned us that the course was slightly longer than 26.2 miles. I had learned this the hard way in 2004, so now I knew to adjust my expectations slightly when I passed the 25-mile marker. I crossed the finish line in 3:46—happy, but a little concerned that I had run too fast. This time I finished a few minutes ahead of Jared. The race finish was close to a beach, so Jared and I joined some of the other runners in the refreshing, but very cold, water. He and Dwayne offered to drive me back to South Lake Tahoe again, and I readily accepted.

Day 3

“Who are all these people?”

After two days of running with a small group of experienced marathoners, I was now waiting in a long line with hundreds of people. Sunday morning is the official Lake Tahoe Marathon. In addition to the runners, the buses are also used for spectators who will then ride back along the course to watch the runners. Following the long bus ride, we gathered on the beach on a beautiful morning for the start of the marathon.

It was a little odd to have so many people on the road with me. Each day of the Triple, the runners were given a new singlet with “Tahoe Triple” prominently displayed. I hadn’t worn my singlets the first two days, but on Sunday I put it on over my regular singlet. Most of the Triple runners wore their singlets today. It was kind of fun having people recognize our achievement, and many of the other runners would ask about the Triple as we passed them (or as they passed us).

The first part of the final marathon is flat and runs right next to the lake. My quads were a little sore from the previous day, but I was feeling all right. Having more people around made the running easier, and the road was mostly closed to traffic. I made it to the half-marathon start point before that race had started, but that meant that I would shortly finish the easy part of the course. After the half-marathon point, there are about two miles of good downhill running that made

me sorry for my enthusiasm on Saturday. At that point, I reached the “Hill from Hell,” or some such designation. The organizers placed signs indicating each 100-foot change in elevation. The fact that they needed a few of these signs was not a good thing. With some occasional walking, I finally made it to the top.

By this time on Sunday, I was spent. I still had about nine miles to go with two downhills and one big uphill. I decided that my best chance for a decent finish was to go as hard as I was able on the downs, do a lot of walking on the ups, and then try to survive the flat final three miles. I was able to fly down the hill at mile 18, but as soon as I started up to Inspiration Point, I felt as if I had hit a brick wall. I walked most of the next mile and finally reached the place where we had started the Triple two days before. I had run around Lake Tahoe and still had six miles to go. Again, I let gravity help me and flew down the next three miles. I passed a bunch of other runners, including a few other Triple participants, and I was sure that I would break four hours again even if I had to walk the final three miles.

Unfortunately, I pretty much *had* to walk the final three miles. I was completely exhausted and could usually run only for about a quarter mile before having to walk.

All of the people I had passed coming down the hill now passed me. The winding path seemed as though it would never end, and the sun was very warm. I could hear the announcer, but I still couldn't see the finish area. Finally, I rounded a bend, and there was the finish line. I was able to run the final quarter mile to finish in 3:54. After crossing the line, I grabbed something to drink and sat down for about 10 minutes. Then I was fine. I was right at the beach, so I waded into the lake to cool off my aching legs. There was a big party on the beach with food and

► The author crosses the finish line of the 2008 Lake Tahoe Marathon, completing his second successful Tahoe Triple.



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drink and runners from all of the races. I had a few beers and something to eat before happily boarding a bus back to town.

Three days of fun—really!


Three marathons in three days! My total time was 11:37, which was sixth fastest of the 75 finishers of the Triple. My time for the Lake Tahoe Marathon on Sunday even earned me second place in my age group!

Although it may seem to be a daunting challenge, I think that most of the Triple participants find the event to be quite manageable. This is a group of experienced marathoners who know how to pace themselves. The finishers tend to have very similar times from day to day, and there is a fairly even distribution of total times for the three days. Chuck Engle was the 2008 Triple winner with a time of 9:14, while Suzanne Wetzel was the fastest woman in a time of 11:09. Seven runners needed less than 12 hours for the three marathons while five others had times of more than 18 hours.

I would definitely recommend the Triple as a very manageable challenge for experienced runners. In 2004, I ran it with months of very specific training and

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many back-to-back long runs, and in 2008 I was training for an entirely different type of race and was still able to have a successful Triple. You get plenty of stuff for your entry fee as well. In 2008, I got three singlets, a wind shirt, a carry-on bag, a marathon finisher's medal, a license-plate holder, a Triple finisher's award, and the prerace dinner. And you get to do it all at Lake Tahoe. What could be more fun? 

◀ Sean Meissner, four-time Tahoe Triple winner, soaks in the cooling waters of Lake Tahoe following a leg of the Triple.