

50 IRONMAN TRIATHLONS / 50 STATES / 50 DAYS

# IRON COWBOY

REDEFINE IMPOSSIBLE



JAMES LAWRENCE

**Iron Cowboy**

**Redefine Impossible.**

**50 Ironman Triathlons, 50 States, 50 Days.**

**James Lawrence**

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First Iron Cowboy LLC hardcover edition, March 2017

Library of Congress Control Number 2017902912

ISBN 978-0-9987188-0-4

Interior design by: Mindslap, Inc

Cover photo by: Derek Israelsen

Internal photos by: Jessakae Photography

Printed in the United States of America

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Words and Music by Pat Alger, Larry Bastian and Garth Brooks

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*In memory of Tim Watson*

*Tim:*

*A friend and brother whose life was cut short. Thanks for the laughs, the memories, and some incredible journeys! Thank you for encouraging excellence, particularly in your family and closest friends, through always giving 100% no matter what activity we were competing in. Your desire to always win pushed us to work harder and be better. We miss your quick-witted trash talk, your competitive spirit, and your contagious smile. Thanks for all the laughs, the memories and for sharing your incredible life's journey with us.*

*We miss you!*

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## **Acknowledgments**

*1. Getting Up*  
*Days 17–18*  
*Kentucky, Tennessee*

I was woken by the tickle of lips against my beard and by the sound of those same, familiar lips whispering in my ear.

“James.”

When I opened my eyes, I saw my wife, Sunny, seated beside me on the fold-out bed I’d passed out on fifteen minutes earlier while sipping kombucha during a break between the cycling and running segments of today’s solo triathlon. The only other people inside the motor home were my wingmen, Casey and Aaron, workhorses responsible for everything from preparing my morning oatmeal to driving me through the night to the next state. They stood looking down on me gravely from the foot of the bed.

“You have to get up, love,” Sunny said gently. “It’s almost seven. You need to start running.”

*I have to get up.*

This simple thought released in me the mother of all sinking feelings. A gory blister in the nail bed of the second toe of my left foot that had been bothering me since Missouri had become increasingly painful during the last hour of the ride I’d just completed. When I got off my bike and put my full weight on the foot, it felt as if I had been shot by a staple gun.

To complete today’s triathlon, I now had to run a full marathon, a task requiring approximately 15,000 high-impact landings on each foot—or 15,000 more staple shots. In the best-case scenario, the torture would last until one o’clock a.m. In the worst case, it would end much earlier, when I couldn’t take the pain anymore and quit, abandoning my dream that was years in the making. My next triathlon was scheduled to start 300 miles and one time zone away (we’d lose an hour en route), in Chattanooga, at six o’clock a.m.

Sunny slipped an arm behind my back and raised me to a sitting position. I buried my hands in my face and began to tremble. More than one hundred local supporters were waiting for

me with audible restlessness outside the motor home. I had not slept longer than five hours in eighteen nights.

“I can’t do this anymore!” I sobbed. “I just can’t!”

Sunny rubbed my back in slow circles, saying nothing more until I’d cried myself out. We both knew I wasn’t really giving up. I just couldn’t hide my suffering behind a brave face any longer; I needed to let it out, to be vulnerable, and to ask for help.

“Come on, let’s get you changed,” Sunny said. “I’ll run with you. If you can’t run, we’ll walk. We will do it together.”

I nodded.

Aaron hustled to hand me the bin that contained my running gear for the day. I stripped off my wet cycling shorts and put on a pair of knee-length black running shorts with American flag side stripes, clean socks, a headband, and running shoes. Then we filed out of the motor home and into a steamy, southern summer evening. A smattering of cheers and applause greeted my appearance, and I mustered a bleak smile in response.

Everyone was wearing the Iron Cowboy 5K race numbers that our eldest and youngest children, Lucy (twelve) and Quinn (five), had distributed while their dad was procrastinating, napping, and weeping in private. These two were now palling around with the middle three—Lily (eleven), Daisy (nine), and Dolly (seven)—and some of the many kids who had come out with their parents from their homes here in Henderson, Kentucky, and from across the bridge in Evansville, Indiana. Out of school for the summer, Sunny’s and my blond brood had spent the day at an Airbnb house, the day’s ninety-nine-degree heat, with unbearable humidity, having spoiled their plans to visit an amusement park.

The 5K had been both the shrewdest and most naïve idea we’d come up with in planning this campaign, the Fifty, as we called it. Inviting all comers to run the final 3.1 miles of each triathlon’s marathon leg had proven to be an effective way to get local communities involved in our mission. The presumption that I would never fail to complete all but the last 3.1 miles of each triathlon by the advertised 5K start time of seven o’clock had been laughably optimistic.

By Day 6 in Nevada, we were already behind schedule and losing would-be participants who weren’t interested in waiting until after dark for the privilege of running with me. It took us three more days to implement the obvious solution of starting the 5K at seven o’clock no matter

how far I had managed to run by that time. Now here I was on Day 17 having failed to complete a single step of the marathon before seven.

Before each 5K, I delivered a short speech. Today's participants formed a half-circle around me, smiling expectantly.

"I'm James Lawrence, also known as the Iron Cowboy," I began.

On any other day, I would have gone on to thank my local supporters and talk about my goal of drawing attention to the problem of childhood obesity. Unfortunately, today my heart just wasn't in it because of my suffering.

"My toes are messed up," I said instead. "I'm just going to walk. Don't bother waiting for me."

With this rousing battle cry, the Iron Cowboy 5K began. The herd stampeded away from me as I limped along behind them with Aaron, Sunny, Lucy (making good on a pledge to do all fifty 5Ks with me), and my seldom-seen project manager, Jordan. The first landing of my left foot brought an involuntary grimace to my face, but I kept going in the hope that the mysterious analgesic effect of exercise would kick in and dull the discomfort. It did not. After two blocks, I'd had about all I could take. I stopped.

"This isn't going to work," I said. "We need to think of something."

The five of us brainstormed together and came up with the plan of finding a pharmacy and scoring some lidocaine. With any luck, it would numb the pain just enough to allow me to finish. We resumed walking south through Atkinson Park toward the center of town. Fifth Street looked promising, so we turned there. But within two blocks the pain forced me to stop for a second time.

"I need to lance this sucker," I said to Sunny.

"Do you want me to run back and grab your cuticle clippers?" Sunny asked.

I sat down on a strip of grass by the sidewalk and removed my left shoe and sock. Sunny was back in a few minutes. I gently poked the instrument between the toenail and cuticle, poised to snip. I might as well have stabbed myself with a red-hot kebab skewer. My foot recoiled like a startled animal. I handed the clippers back to Sunny with a disappointed shake of my head.

Just then, a young man dressed to run approached us. Eric, as he introduced himself, had arrived at the park just after the 5K began and had dashed after the crowd in the hope of catching

up with me. Eyes focused on his target, he had run right by me without knowing it and had circled back after learning I was struggling.

“I heard you’ve got some blisters,” Eric said.

“You heard correctly,” I said.

Eric removed a running pack from his back and pulled out moleskin, duct tape, and superglue.

“You brought all that for a 5K?” I asked.

“I was planning to run with you longer,” Eric said, blushing. “Is there anything here you can use?”

“What we need is a pharmacy,” Sunny said. “We’re hoping a little lidocaine might give him some relief. Is there a drugstore around here?”

Eric worked his cell phone and discovered there was a Rite Aid two blocks away. He ran off, having insisted on paying for the medication himself. We followed behind at a walk. When Eric exited the store, bag in hand, he found me circling the parking lot, inching painfully toward accumulating 26.2 miles of GPS-measured distance on my Garmin watch (it didn’t matter where or how slowly I did so, only *that* I did). I plopped down on the curb, bared my hideous foot again, and applied the medication.

It did nothing. A block away from the store, I was once again sitting on a patch of grass and contemplating my mutinous toe. Just then a couple came along, also dressed in running clothes. I recognized the male half of the pair, Tom, as one of my earlier cycling companions. (Anyone was welcome to join me for any amount of swimming, biking, or running during the day.)

“This is my wife, Kelly,” he said. “She’s a physician.”

“Really? You’re a doctor?” I asked, a bit too incredulously. Sunny later teased me for thinking Kelly was too young and pretty to be an MD.

“Yes, I’m a doctor,” Kelly said, narrowing her eyes at her husband. “But I’m afraid I can’t help you with your feet; I don’t have any supplies with me.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “Just tell me what to do with it.”

Kelly crouched down and inspected the toe. She shook her head. “This stuff you’ve wrapped it with is worthless,” she said. Tom suggested toe caps that he used but told us that they would have to be ordered. He promised to order some for us right away, and ship them to an

address in a future state. Tom and Kelly agreed to later meet us at a pizza joint, where my supporters would be gathering after completing the 5K, in an effort to wrap my toes as best as she could, to try to relieve some pain. Jordan and Aaron went there directly while Sunny and I returned to the motorhome to fetch a different pair of shoes, in an attempt to relieve my toes. Rockhouse Pizza is located inside an old gray-brick building on a quiet corner in downtown Henderson. At the threshold, I paused my watch. I had covered only 4.63 miles of my marathon. It was already eight thirty. The restaurant was packed with runners. At a corner table, I spied five blond children. *My family!* Casey had gathered them up and brought them there in hopes of lifting my spirits, and it worked. They squealed with delight because they each got to order a glass of soda! They had smiles on their faces as they enjoyed their pizza and the buzz of the restaurant. For a moment my toe was forgotten.

Also present were Aaron, Jordan, and his wife, Jessa, the campaign's official photographer. No sooner had we joined them than we were approached by the owner of the establishment, Dave, a triathlete himself and another member of the day's cycling group. He offered us anything we wanted on the house. I ordered a large pizza with pepperoni, ham, bacon, sausage, beef, green peppers, mushrooms, onions, black olives, tomatoes, and banana peppers. It arrived quickly, and I destroyed five slices even quicker.

I had started the Fifty intending to maintain the same clean, natural diet that I followed back home, which I had developed over several years with input from my wife, my coach, David, and my chiropractor, Dallas. That intention had gone straight out the window when I ran smack into the reality of needing 10,000 to 12,000 calories a day to survive.

Tom and Kelly wandered in and found our table. For the fourth time in an hour, I took off my shoe and sock. "That's probably not a very appetizing sight," Tom said, frowning at my bad toe and gesturing toward the other eaters.

"These are my people!" I laughed. "Just wrap it!"

Twenty-six minutes after I sat down (according to my watch), I stood up again, having decided to try to finish the marathon back at the park. I would be able to do a quarter-mile loop, choosing whether I walked or ran. My official Kentucky host (or "ambassador," in the lexicon of the Fifty), Jim, left the restaurant with us and stationed himself under a pop-up tent beside the path, fishing cold drinks out of an ice chest for me whenever I got thirsty, which was often. An older guy named Neil came along also, and Dave followed along half an hour later. The kids

played outside while Sunny, concerned about time, tried various ways of hustling me along. She suggested I try running the long sides of the oval and walking the short sides. I obediently broke into a herky-jerky trot, but after ten or twelve excruciating steps, I gave up.

"Okay, how about we run the short sides and walk the long ones?"

I looked at my wife, and she knew there was no way I was running. Even walking was barely tolerable. The kids soon joined me. A couple at a time would do a lap with me. They would walk some with me, then split off and climb on the statues and benches that were on the path. Next thing I knew, they were chasing each other on the grass, and their giggles filled the dark night. I was so grateful that they were so happy, but I struggled not to let my pain consume me.

When it was time for the kids to go to bed (all five slept on the full-sized pullout bed in the middle of the RV or in two twin beds in the back of the RV), I stopped long enough to kiss each of them on top of the head. They begged to stay up until I finished, but we insisted they at least get ready for bed. Sunny gathered them all into the motorhome, as Lucy vowed to stay up until I finished. She wanted to see me after I had completed the day, to make sure that I was okay. Jim excused himself at eleven thirty, saying he had to go to work at four.

That left three of us. Dave, Neil, and I shuffled along together under a crescent moon, talking sporadically. Neil told me he had recently lost more than fifty pounds and that he had never run or walked farther than ten miles before today. The mention of distance prompted Dave to ask me how far we had to go.

"I don't want to know," I said firmly.

It was approaching two o'clock in the morning when I looked at my watch and saw the number I wanted to see: 26.20 miles.

"Where can I get cleaned up?" I asked my escorts.

The motorhome had a shower, but it was cramped and only had cold water. I used it only as a last resort.

"I live half a mile from here," Neil said. "You can shower there."

When we got to Neil's place, I was dismayed to discover he lived in a second-floor apartment. I walked backward up the stairs. While I scrubbed the stink off my body, Neil blended smoothies for us. He said they had been a key contributor to his weight loss. This made

me smile, thinking of my sweet wife who insisted that I drink a smoothie every day. I couldn't count how many very green smoothies that I had consumed in preparation for this adventure.

It was pushing three o'clock when Neil dropped me off at the park. Upon returning to the motorhome, Lucy had fought to stay awake, but was sleeping peacefully with the rest of my family. I looked around, felt the silence, and thought of my love and appreciation for my family. I strapped on my NormaTec compression boots, which would squeeze my sore muscles while I slept, bringing circulation to them and accelerating the recovery process. I lay down on the pull-out bed that had been the scene of my earlier meltdown. Sariah, who worked for one of my sponsors, ZYTO, and whose primary job was to use a high-tech ZYTO scanner to assess my nutritional needs, jabbed an IV needle into my arm. I'd been taking saline infusions as needed since Day 8 in New Mexico when an emergency saline IV had brought me back from the brink of total physical collapse. I was unconscious long before the saline bag had emptied.

Just before he took the wheel to begin the long drive to Chattanooga, Casey snapped the long day's last photo to post on Facebook. The positioning of my body in the bed made it appear as though I were lying in a coffin. My body at that point bore more than a passing resemblance to a corpse.



A sudden awareness of falling ripped my eyelids open. I was on my bike, veering off the road to the right. Reflexively, I threw my weight in the opposite direction. Now I was falling in *that* direction. I landed hard on my left side and skidded briefly. A man's voice called out from behind, "Stay down! Don't move!"

A man came over, dressed in cycling clothes, and kneeled down next to me. A small crowd of other cyclists gathered around us. The man asked me a number of questions and examined various parts of my body. He seemed to know what he was doing. Convinced that I hadn't broken my neck, he sat me up. A police cruiser with flashing lights was parked on the shoulder of the road just ahead, and an officer was walking toward me.

"What am I doing here?" I asked him.

"You mean you don't know?" he said.

"Um, not really."

The policeman told me I was in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and had apparently fallen asleep on my bike. He then walked back to his car and returned promptly with a first-aid kit,

which he handed to the man who'd told me to stay down, who then expertly cleaned and dressed abrasions on my hand, elbow, and hip. The hip hurt the most.

A woman asked for my cell phone. As I handed it over, her name popped into my head: Robyn. She'd been with me all day, beginning with a swim in the Tennessee River. Things were starting to come back to me. Robyn called the wingmen and told them what had happened; the wingmen then called Sunny. I could tell from listening to Robyn's side of the conversation that she'd expected them to react hysterically and was both relieved and somewhat disturbed by their nonchalance. Robyn handed the phone back to me and then passed me a small bottle. "Drink that," she said. The label identified the product as an energy shot. I trusted Robyn, but at that moment anyone could have told me to drink anything, and I would have willingly submitted.

"I have to get up," I said, as much to myself as anyone else.

The longer I remained on the ground, the more my body would stiffen, making it harder to get going again. The guy who had told me to stay down, whose name (and occupation) I also now remembered—Doug, fireman—helped me up with a handclasp and an arm pull. I showed off my dressings for some photos to be posted online and then we set off again. My watch showed I had ridden a little more than thirty miles when I went down. I still had eighty-two miles to go—and then another marathon.

My next challenge was finding a position I could ride in comfortably. When I rested my forearms on the time-trial bars, the pain in my banged-up, left forearm intensified. If I moved my hands to the top bar, the worst of my discomfort migrated to my bandaged palm. My hip hurt regardless, and my bad toe was still sore, though not quite as painful as it had been yesterday in Kentucky.

Every now and again, as I coasted down a hill, I tested the mangled digit by lifting it and pressing the blistered nail bed against the top of the shoe, then curling it down into the sole. Even when I wasn't engaging in such masochism, the toe was tender enough that I could feel my pulse in it. If I'd been so inclined, I could have measured my heart rate by looking at my watch and counting the toe throbs.

The police car trailed behind us, lights still flashing, as we pedaled along a tree-lined country road in rising heat. The tunnel vision, caused by severe sleep deprivation, that had precipitated my unconscious tumble did not return. Doug tried to keep me engaged in constant

conversation, though it hadn't worked the first time. He'd been doing the same thing before the crash, having become concerned by one or two things I had said that struck him as a little off.

"Like what?" I asked him.

"Like asking my name three times," he said.

It was seven thirty in the evening and still ninety-three degrees when we returned to our staging area (or home base) at Southern Adventist University. At least sixty people were there waiting to start the Iron Cowboy 5K. I made them wait a little longer while a local massage therapist, Crystal, did what little she could to work out my kinks inside the RV. Sunny soaked the tip of a running sock in Young Living essential oils and handed it to me to put on.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

In my experience, wet socks *caused* blisters; they did not cure them.

"Trust me," Sunny said confidently.

We ran the 5K on a pristine greenway, 1.55 miles out, 1.55 miles back. I was at the limit of my pain tolerance from the very first stride. Each landing of my left foot sent shock waves up my leg and into the bruised hip socket, triggering an echo of the original crash impact. On the bright side, the pain in my toe seemed minor by comparison.

On the inbound portion of the 5K, a boy on a bike came flying by us from behind on the grass verge. He was passing right next to me when a culvert caught his front tire and launched him into a spectacular accidental flying dismount. The boy's father happened to be running with me. He and another guy, Paul, stopped to help. When I was speaking with Paul later, he told me that when the boy found out that the Iron Cowboy had crashed earlier, had gotten up and kept going, he too got up and kept going.

At the staging area, I hung around for a while in front of the motor home, meeting people, posing for photos, and autographing whatever was handed to me. Rick, my ambassador, stayed close, acting as a handler of sorts.

"I know you're having a rough day," he said in a quiet moment. "You need to come back to Chattanooga when you can actually enjoy this place."

"Oh, I'm fine," I said. "I'm having a good day."

What I meant was that my earlier accident had left me feeling oddly relieved. I had known for some time that a wreck was inevitable—I'd fallen asleep on my bike in previous states. The only question was whether I would get back up when it did happen, and I had.

Night fell and people left. I went inside the motor home to eat and put off completing the marathon. A fan, who happened to be a chiropractor, gave me an adjustment; she was thwarted by my inability to lie on my painful, left side. At 9:45, I sent Casey out to ask my lingering supporters if there was a lighted area nearby where I could run on a soft surface. Paul said he knew just the place. He made a couple of phone calls and got the lights turned on at the Ooltewah High School track.

Another absurdly optimistic assumption we'd made in planning the Fifty was that I would always travel in the motorhome with my family. But the motorhome was slow and needed more time to get from state to state than our smaller vehicles. Sometimes I finished triathlons so late that Sunny was forced to leave me behind to follow along later in the van or the Subaru. Tonight would be one of those nights.

Lieutenant Starnes—the police officer who had tailed me while I was on my bike—drove me to the high school and dropped me off. When Aaron arrived in the Subaru fifteen minutes later, I was already running. The track had been resurfaced two years before and had a nice, rubbery give underfoot. About a dozen supporters had come over from the campus to run with me.

On our first lap, I made a courtesy announcement. "I apologize, but I fart a lot, and I pee a lot," I said. "Now that I've gotten that out of the way, I won't say any more about it."

If nothing else, the Fifty had taught me to do what needed to be done in the most efficient way possible, regardless of social norms. In the days ahead, I wouldn't even bother warning people about my bodily functions.

At midnight it was still eighty-four degrees. My shirtless torso was soaked in sweat. One by one, people said goodbye, wished me luck and drove away. But we gained a body when Lieutenant Starnes returned, having traded his uniform for running clothes. The five or six others remaining with me had already shared their stories. Starnes now shared his.

"Seven years ago," he began, "I weighed 425 pounds."

His daughter, Jessie Anne, was then nine. One day, out of the blue, she told him, "Dad, I want you to get healthier." It was a troublesome thing for Starnes to hear, but he knew that *he had plenty of time, being that he was only forty-four*. Six weeks later, Jessie Anne suffered a brain aneurysm and died. To honor her memory, her father took up exercise, changed his diet, and lost weight—172 pounds.

When the inaugural Ironman Chattanooga took place in September 2014, Starnes decided he would do the race the following year. He became a triathlete, and it was through some of his new training buddies that he heard about the Iron Cowboy and the Fifty, Fifty, Fifty. My cause of fighting childhood obesity struck a chord with him, so when he found out that I was coming to Chattanooga, he got permission from the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office to escort me through my bike ride.

"How far do you have to go?" Paul asked me after Starnes had finished telling his story.

"I don't want to know," I growled.

Around a quarter past one, Paul left to get a couple of hours of sleep before he went to work. But half an hour later he was back with a cooler full of iced towels for my hip, a bag of peanut butter and honey sandwiches, and a jar of honey in case I wanted more.

I grabbed a sandwich, pried the two pieces of bread apart, and gestured toward the jar with my chin. "Load it up," I said. I ate the small sandwich in five or six bites and then ate two more, also with extra honey.

With about three miles left to run, I asked the survivors if they knew of a way I could get into the university's wellness center to take an ice bath, something Robyn had suggested I do after my crash. Lieutenant Starnes told me he would take care of it and departed. I finished the marathon with six others, exchanged damp hugs with them, and hung out for a few more pictures. Aaron had been sleeping in the Subaru out in the parking lot. I knocked on the driver's side window, and he woke up as casually as if he'd only been feigning sleep.

At the entrance to Hulsey Wellness Center, a security guard nodded, swung the door wide, and waved us in. Starnes kept me company while I soaked and Aaron searched the neighborhood for food.

"How the heck do you do this every day?" Starnes asked me.

I heard this question often, and the question puzzled me. People seemed to want to hear something novel, some single nugget of wisdom, that I alone had discovered. The truth was simple; I believed that it was always possible to take one more step. I had this philosophy before the Fifty, and it remained my philosophy eighteen days into the Fifty.

"I don't know," I answered. "I get up. They escort me out the door. I don't want to go, but I know the other part of me does want to go. I get in the water, and I just start swimming."

Aaron came back with a couple of premade sandwiches he'd found at a gas station. One ham, one turkey. Both looked a week old.

“It’s all I could find,” he apologized.

I opened the ham sandwich and took a bite, chewed, swallowed. It *tasted* a week old. I forced down one more bite and tossed the rest away.

We left the wellness center a few minutes before three in the morning. Aaron and I thanked Starnes and the security guard and shambled over to the Subaru. I climbed in through the hatchback door and sprawled onto a pallet of blankets and sheets. There was only one position I could sleep in given the cramped space and the state of my left hip, and that was a fetal curl on my right side. If my blistered toe so much as touched the hatchback door, as it did a few times over the next six hours, it felt as though a wasp had stung it.



I felt the car speeding up, slowing down, turning one way, turning the other way. Without even opening my eyes I could feel the sun was up. We had to be close. Minutes later, the car stopped, and the engine went silent. The hatchback opened, Aaron looked in at me, and I looked out at him. My neck and my right shoulder were stiff and ached from having been stuck too long in the wrong position. My mouth felt cotton-filled. I had gone to sleep dehydrated and was waking up even more dehydrated. My tongue hurt.

*I have to get up.*

With no small effort, I propped myself up on my elbow. Aaron seemed very far away, almost unreachable. I wasn’t yet thinking about the 2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of pedaling, and 26.2 miles of running that lay ahead of me. I was thinking, *How the heck am I going to get out of this car?*

People often ask me what the hardest part of doing fifty iron-distance triathlons, in fifty consecutive days, one in each state, was. The hardest part, honestly, was waking up and getting started.

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