



I Am Athena, Hear Me Roar

by Susan Farago-Walker

I started out competing in the sport of triathlon along with all the other 30-34 age group females and quickly came to realize that many of the top placing women had several things in common: 1) they were fast, 2) they were in great shape, and 3) they were mostly about 5'6" and wore size small spandex. While I would like to think I have the first two things in common with them, I am, as my husband affectionately refers to me, a 5'10" "Amazon." How the heck was I ever going to place in one of these races? One strategy that crossed my mind was to just wait these petite-elite women out and perhaps when I hit 50 I'd stand a chance. Then I had another thought: why not become an Athena!

Being an Athena has two requirements, being female and weighing at least 150 pounds. I had the first requirement covered but I wasn't too sure about the second one. Not owning a scale, I used the one at the gym and came to find out that I weigh 148 pounds on an empty stomach and 151 pounds on a full stomach. So before packet pickup I'll just have to make sure I eat a big meal.

My first triathlon race of the season came and I was registered as an Olympic distance Athena. I had trained hard and I was ready to compete with women who were more my stature. Move over little women, the big women are coming through! I raced that morning in May with all I had trained for and I felt good about my time and was hopeful that I had met my goal of placing third. When the race results were posted I was amazed to find out that I had placed not third but fifth. Fifth place? Well, that was better than my usual double or triple digit placement. But I had underestimated these powerful Athena women! As I scanned through the race times, I realized the top five women (myself included) had all finished within five minutes of each other. My mind began to replay the entire race: if only I'd pedaled a little faster, if only my transition times were 30 seconds shorter, if only I didn't stop at that last water station, if only...

These Athena women were a formidable force to reckon with but not impossible to overcome. So a new strategy started forming in my mind. I'd have to train faster, become stronger, and look at ways to cut down my transition times even more, all while not losing any weight.

My next triathlon was a sprint-distance and again, I was registered as an Athena. At the pre-race meeting on race morning the race director listed off the swim waves: wave one for men 20-24 and men 30-34, wave two for men 25-29 and men 35-39...and finally wave eight for relay teams, Clydesdales, and Athenas. I was a bit dismayed at this last category, which seemed like a veritable

dumping ground of remaining racers. I was even expecting the race director to add on, "and anyone else who feels like racing but doesn't fit into any of the neatly defined age categories." I donned my pink swim cap and when my wave started, I marched into the water, said my usual "please don't let me die" prayer to no one in particular, and hit the waves when the whistle blew.

The Texas sun was in full force by 10:00 a.m. and given that the race started an hour late, and swim wave eight started 30 minutes after that, I was just getting off the bike and starting the run as the heat of the day was replacing the cool shadows of the early morning. The run would prove to be tough and even with a strong swim and bike, I had mentally adjusted my goal of placing third amongst my Athena sisters to wanting just to finish the race without my heart actually exploding out of my neck. I crossed the finish line and despite the marginal effort I gave during the run, I felt pretty good about the race overall.

After cooling down and getting my heart to move from my throat back into my chest, I wandered over to check the race results. Scanning over many score sheets, I found my group, read the results, and nearly died – I came in first! First place? Surely there must be an error. I checked and rechecked and even had my husband check. Sure enough, I came in first place! I believe I was more stunned than thrilled.

This was the first race where I actually stayed for the awards ceremony. During the awards and announcements, I kept thinking they weren't going to include the Athena category. Does the Athena category really count? After all, it's usually the "elite" category that everyone gets all excited about. As my name was called and I accepted the award, it finally occurred to me, "darn right the Athena category counts!"

So to all my Athena sisters out there – let them hear you roar!

Susan Farago-Walker spends much of her free time training, and receives much support from her husband and new training partner, Leary (who is not a Clydesdale).

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