

Ironman France (Round 3!)

Following on from Mark in 2003 and Greg last year I did this race a few weeks ago.

Why?

Well, having done a few triathlons after too many pure running injuries (to give a focus to swim and cycle training), it seemed like a good challenge...

I scoured the internet for information and actually decided on Ironman Canada – but couldn't get a place. France was second choice. A pleasant sea swim, a bike ride around the hills near Nice and a run along the promenade. Sounded fun!

I cobbled together a training plan and began the winter training. There was the odd Sunday morning in Feb when I didn't fancy a 4 or 5 hour bike ride but I persevered and overall the swim and cycle training went fine. Running (my strongest event) – not so good. Ongoing problems with a stress fracture meant I never got to run more than 10 miles beforehand. But that's life. I'd entered and paid for accommodation, flights etc., there was no turning back. At school there was to be a "Guess the time competition" to raise funds and the local paper did an interview. To be honest I quite enjoyed the attention but it was also scary and I found myself saying "I haven't actually done anything yet!" on many occasions.

As the day approached I was both excited and petrified.....

Sunday 25th June 2006.

3:45 am. My 3 alarms blast off. Just 5 more minutes – I've allowed plenty of time.....
Next thing I know I jump awake – **it's 4:40!!**

Christ! I don't know what woke me but I'm glad it did – I can't imagine how I'd have felt to have missed the start!!

I quickly shower and dress and am soon walking purposefully along the promenade, wetsuit etc in my rucksack. This was a surreal experience – on the other side of the road dozens of partygoers were being turfed out of Nice's beachfront nightclubs, with a few more asleep drunkenly on the benches – unaware of what was about to happen around them!

Transition was a nervous and busy place and as I pumped my tyres up I heard another bike tyre explode nearby. Not what you need just before such a big race. Poor guy (or girl!). For the first of many times that day I thought gratefully, "Glad it's not me".

A last slug of energy drink and then it's wetsuit on time. Here I met a friend and we ambled down the cobbles together towards the water's edge – ready for a quick dip in the sea. Everything felt good so I decided to put myself on the front line (albeit in one of the slower "pens"). That way I'd save myself having to run over too many sharp cobbles when we started. I didn't feel nervous or excited, just kind of numb really - not the psyched up "superhero" type of feelings I'd expected!
Probably a good thing really.

The gun went and we were off!!

Diving into the water as soon as I could, hundreds of arms and legs thrashing about....But it wasn't scary – it was kind of comforting to be surrounded by so many, especially as the water became deeper and the shoreline more distant. **Wow!** I'd never dare swim out this far by myself.....

I thoroughly enjoyed the swim. I was occasionally "squeezed out" by other converging swimmers – but I'd already decided not to waste energy by adopting an aggressive strategy towards them. The water was beautiful – calm and warm – and before I knew it we were heading back to the beach. I could hear the loudspeaker announcer and the crowds cheering. I clambered out of the water and glanced up at the clock.....**1:11:32** About 5 minutes faster than expected! Mind you, conditions were perfect.

I stripped to the waist and stopped for a few seconds under the showers to rinse off the salt water before running up the ramp to T1.

First problem of the day – no bike change bag on the transition rack! **WHAT?!!**

Where is it?.....A minute later and a marshal found it 30 yards away – dumped by a fellow competitor who'd obviously picked up the wrong one. Great!

This unsettled me a bit and in the turmoil of transition I resolved to stay calm. I took my time, including a double helping of sun cream to be on the safe side. By the time I collected my bike I knew I was well back down the field. No surprises there! Swimming is always my weakest discipline and a slow T1 hadn't helped.

But I began the bike leg feeling calm and positive, confident of sticking to my "game plan" – to ride steadily and within myself, always to feel I could go faster. I wanted to finish Ironman France at all cost.

Well, the bike leg started with 20 km of flat roads. By then, I'd already passed the first two "puncture victims". They had my sympathy. Then the climbing began. The best part of the next 60 km was uphill, into the Southern Maritime Alps. However, the gradients are fairly easy on good quality roads. And the scenery is awesome!

The aid stations came and went, thankfully full of provisions. The heat began to take its toll – on others - I realized they were suffering as I rode past them with over 100km still to go. But I didn't let myself get carried away as it's such a long race. So far, so good.....

To be honest, the rest of the bike leg was fine. The countryside and beautiful French mountain villages deserved more attention – but I spent a lot of my time desperately scanning the upcoming tarmac for possible puncture dangers. That was now my greatest fear – some sort of bike "mechanical". Luckily, I had no trouble, although I did lose some time on the descents due to an erratic front brake. That and a lack of nerve! The drops to one side of the road were quite spectacular! Better to be safe than sorry, I thought.

I was relieved to get back on the flat for the last 30 km and start re-overtaking people again. There was a nasty headwind for the last part coming back along the seafront but as I rode into T2 I felt great and I knew I'd made up quite a few places. There were already a lot of people out on the run course. More than I'd expected to see! Had I actually gone too slow on the bike...**7:27:11**

I dismounted and immediately realized the run was going to be a bit of a struggle.....My legs were seizing up and my stomach was cramping – bloated and uncomfortable. I think I must have eaten too much on the bike leg – not wanting to have a lack of energy. How can this be?? I felt great two minutes ago!!! I guess that's the nature of Ironman.

I forced myself to get changed, hurriedly visited the loo and set off on the run. With the crowds cheering my name (it's stamped on your race bib!), I began at a fairly swift pace. But within 5km I had slowed considerably. **Oh dear!** Running is meant to be my strongest discipline. Never mind. Keep going....

I struggled on from each aid station to the next one, chatting to others to take my mind off the pain. At the 15km mark, having just seen yet another casualty wheeled into an ambulance, I decided to adopt a survival strategy....I would have to walk for a bit. Luckily, at that moment someone I'd met earlier appeared on my shoulder! So I went on until 18k and then mumbled to Paul to leave me as I had to walk some. It sounds weak now but at the time I thought I was about to flake out in the heat – and I just didn't want to.

Immediately the sore legs, the stomach cramps, the breathing etc. were so much better. The next 12k or so were spent via a walk/run strategy – about 100m or so at a time – more if I could bear it. At the start of the last loop I realized that if I pushed it I could finish in under 14 hours (an important psychological barrier to me). I did push it and ran most of the last loop to finish in **13:55:37. Delighted.**

I knew I'd tried as hard as I could. I grabbed my medal and dived into the medical tent. There, I collapsed onto the nearest available bed and stared up at the ceiling. I felt awful.

"Oh no, why did I have to push it at the end just for a stupid time!"

"How will I get my stuff back to the hotel?"

"Have I pushed my body too far?"Etc.

The doctors checked me over and 20 minutes or so later I decided to get up. I felt guilty when I looked at the state of some of the others in there. I went outside and threw up everywhere. I wasn't ashamed and I certainly wasn't alone.

Recovery was rapid now and I took in the Ironman atmosphere for another hour or so, meeting up with various people I'd met along the way. It was good that everyone I knew had finished. I ambled back to my hotel and began taking my bike apart ready to fly back the next morning.

P.S. What next?

Never again?

A "fast" ironman to try to get a good time?

Ironman Canada – the course I'd really like to do?

I don't know yet.....

P.P.S. I have to mention both Mark and Greg again here and also Simon who kindly accompanied me on my first ever wet suit swim in Salford Quays last May. They inspired me to have a go.

Who's up for it next??!!!

- Simon Galloway