

Ironman Australia Race Report – 6th May, 2012

By Colin Thornton (#540)



What follows is an account of my first tentative step into the world of Ironman (Registered Trademark. All rights reserved) in Port Mac on the weekend. Many of you won't be interested in reading it all so don't feel obliged. I just feel that the ultimate in self-indulgent pursuits deserves no less than the ultimate in self-indulgent race reports so I have spared no detail.

The Build up

My brother Dave entered me in the Port Mac IM while I was away in the US last year, thinking that I'd win it easily if I just trained up a bit! For several months, although I was aware that the race was on the horizon, it wasn't until the beginning of 2012 that I actually committed to competing. I'd had a minor heart issue in September and former Miler, Dr Andre La Gerche, had suggested that about the worst event I could undertake with this condition was an Ironman. So after a few months of doing nothing, the gravity of his words seemed to fade and I decided to give it a crack.

At that point, I had 16 weeks until race day. Under normal circumstances, this would be more than enough but I was starting a very long way behind having not trained seriously since Boston in April. With that in mind, I thought that at the very least it would be a perfect way to gain a rock-solid endurance base to kick off the AV season and ultimately the Melbourne Marathon.

I knew nothing about Ironman or how to train for one. Duncan and Em Miller-Blake came down to stay at our house in Geelong a couple of times and I made the most of that time to grill them for information. Duncan is a meticulous planner and has an amazingly deep level of knowledge about all things Ironman. The information he imparted was absolutely invaluable and I wouldn't have got through the training or racing nearly as well without him.

By and large, the training went almost perfectly to plan with a methodical and gradual build up of hours and KMs, peaking to 20 hours/week about 4 weeks out.

Multi-sport is different to single sport training. On the positive: it is not nearly as monotonous; you do different sports with different people; you don't get as many niggles (or I didn't); you develop muscle-mass and actually feel "athletic". On the negative: Instead of niggles you walk a very fine line of over-training which is far more insidious; you need to do 2 sessions pretty much every day; no matter how much you are doing, it never feels like enough; you are seemingly never more than 8 hours away from your next session; you have to swim laps.

It was about 3-4 weeks out that I had basically had a gut-full. I realised what I had sacrificed in this selfish pursuit of my own glory and I resented it. I was spending so much time getting fitter, yet felt permanently tired. I was burning all my energy on the sport and had nothing left for my family, friends, work, house, garden. This is no way for a grown man to live his life.

Fortunately, all the hard work had been done by then so after a couple of weeks in the doldrums I came back around and started looking forward to racing (or at least getting it over with).



The Event

I was reminded of Boston in the way the entire town gets behind it: Baskin-Robins were giving free scoops of ice-cream to participants “because you’ve earned it”; the cook at the burger shop was wearing his red volunteer T-Shirt after spending a day on a corner; and everyone who served you at a shop smiled and said “congratulations”.

It was also great to be sharing the event with Dave and his family. There was no home town support to speak of so it was a real boost to see Dave a couple of times each lap, and his waving kids and wife when I went past our house.

The Race

Pre-race goals

I had kept my pre-race expectations pretty loose. Having blown up at 10k and finishing the Geelong Half with an extremely miserable 77:30 a few weeks before, I was scared to death of having to endure similar pain for 9+ hours, so I decided to err on the side of caution regarding my pacing.

Throughout the campaign I was certainly motivated by the prospect of getting into Hawaii, however, as race day loomed, I had pretty well decided that we would struggle to afford the trip this year with a major renovation planned. I set a line in the sand: I would go to Hawaii if: a) I broke 9 hours; or b) I won my Age Group. As I was pretty confident that neither of those things would eventuate, I was able to take the pressure off myself and sleep well at night.

“Executing my nutrition strategy” Fury.

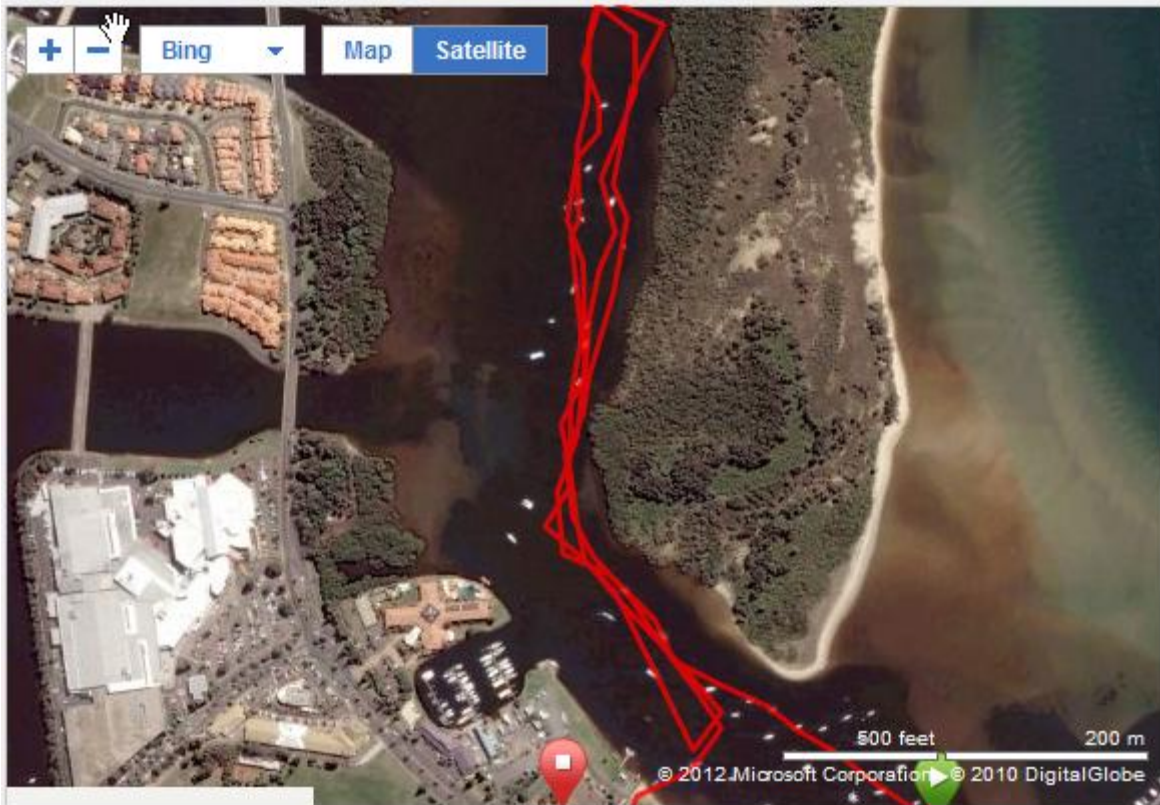
The big recurring gottcha in Ironman racing seems to be nutrition. It is a fine line between too much and too little so I tried to be formulaic about it. My nutrition strategy was this: every 20mins on the bike, I would eat something.

- On the hour: a gel
- 20-past: a gel
- 20-to: a small portion of solid food (eg. a third of a sports bar or some fruit cake)

Also 600mls of Gatorade per hour and as much water as I felt I needed. This was going to give me about 75g/carb/hour and a litre of fluid which seemed about right.

On reflection, I think it was just about perfect.

The Swim



My goal for the swim was realistic. Anything between 60 and 65 minutes I was going to be happy with. As I dislike swimming and swim training so much, I was probably only doing the bare minimum to achieve this (3 swims of about 3k per week with not much intensity).

My race plan was to tuck into a group of swimmers, draft as much as possible and enjoy the ride. About half way through the swim a surreal thought came into my mind: "I'm going to run a marathon today". It wasn't overwhelming but definitely reminded me to keep a lid on things.

It was a nice surprise to get out of the water in 61 minutes and it was a bit of a weight off my mind to have my weakest leg over and done with.

T1

Ironman transition is great. You don't leave your gear next to your bike like other triathlons, you grab your bag off a hook and take it into a changing tent where a volunteer helps you pull off your wetsuit and takes things out of your bag for you while you get ready to go.

It is the little things like this that make the IM such a special event. Today, the athlete is king and swarms of people will do whatever it takes, with huge smiles and positive attitudes, to help you on your way.

The Bike (<http://app.strava.com/rides/8212577>)



Race Ready: the bike that PM wants to have violent congress with. Wheels courtesy of D. Blake.

The literature was unanimous: ride easier than you think possible. Any over-exertion on the bike will be punished later. Patience will be rewarded.

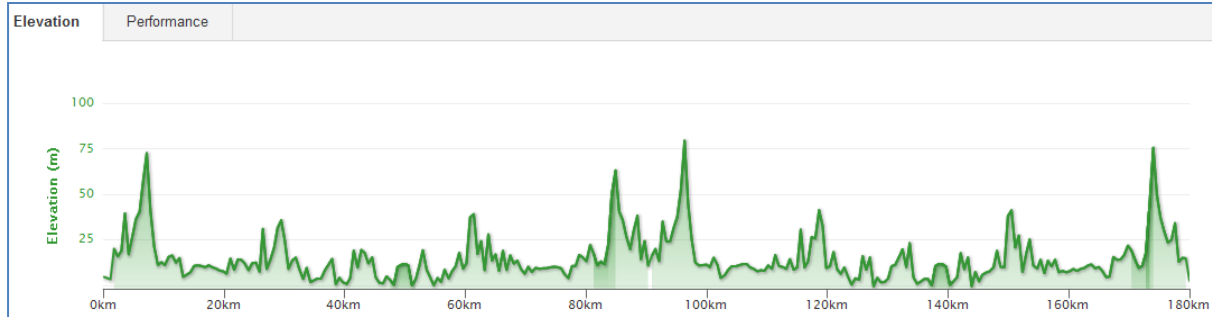
Having witnessed the carnage at KM 35 in straight marathons, I knew that the run alone was not to be under-estimated. So I basically soft-pedalled the entire ride – I had heard that a good approach was to find a gear you are comfortable in then go one easier. I kept this in mind as a number of people passed me in the early stages of the ride and disappeared into the distance. Gladly my usual competitive instinct was not roused by these guys (mostly with numbers of younger age-groups) as I was convinced that I was doing the right thing by me and was happy to stick to it. Patience will be rewarded. Patience will be rewarded.

Thus my ride strategy was overly conservative. Based purely on heart rate, I decided to start super-easy and get a bit more solid as the ride wore on if I felt OK. Roughly:

- 1st 45k @ 130BPM, or less;
- 2nd @ 135BPM;
- 3rd @ 140BPM;
- 4th @ 140 + digging a little deeper for the hills if I felt up to it.

This was a great way to play it. By the 2nd half of the ride I was making up a lot of places - obviously good swimmers who had gone out too hard. I dread to think what they must have gone through in the marathon. But most importantly I felt overwhelmingly positive about the situation – I was in control, I rode my own race from KM 1 to KM 180 and people were coming back to me by the dozen.

When I jumped off the bike I felt almost fresh. 5:20 was a bit longer than I had hoped but it was a tough course and I wasn't fazed in the slightest. Time to run a marathon!



The hills may not have been monsters but it was pretty relentless

<rant>Drafting is an unfortunate by-product of triathlon. Some people do it, most of them get away with it, and the time and energy savings for those who draft are huge. After 45K, I got caught in the ‘traffic’ of a large group of riders. It was too big to get off the front, yet felt too slow when back in the pack. I eventually decided to let them go and with their shameless cheating, they would have put a good 10 or 15 minutes into me over the next 135K – I saw them a few times on each lap and they were all but swapping turns. I am very comfortable with my decision not to draft, but it is a race and it seems like a pretty uneven playing field between those who decide to do the right thing (the vast majority of competitors) and those who don’t.</rant>

The Run (<http://app.strava.com/runs/8212610>)

I read that after winning Ironman NZ in 2002, Cameron Brown described the IM marathon as “20 miles of hope, 6 miles of reality”. It wasn’t until about mile 20 that I knew what he was talking about. Sadly for some others, who were basically walking from about the first 1k, it was going to be a lot more than 6 miles of reality.

Em had said that the going got tough for her in the Melbourne IM at 20K of the marathon, so I was happy to make it all the way to 26K before I started to feel the pinch. For the first time that day I was out of my comfort zone, but I was positive as I had made it this far and I don’t remember ever having done a marathon where I wasn’t starting to feel pretty ordinary by 26K. However, by 32K things were getting ugly and I knew the last 10K lap was going to be misery.

At one point, with about 8k to go, I thought I might alter my gait slightly which was a huge mistake as I was seized by a cramp in my hamstring. I kept running until at 5K to go I was nearly knocked flat by another monster hammy cramp. While stretching it out I actually thought that it might be game-over and I’d be finishing at a walk. Fortunately, after a few sticks of vegemite from the aid station the cramps didn’t come back.

KM	Time	Comment
1	04:09.8	
2	04:15.5	
3	04:17.3	
4	04:12.9	
5	04:15.8	
6	04:11.8	
7	04:10.9	

KM	Time	Comment
8	04:13.8	
9	04:17.2	
10	04:10.9	
11	04:14.5	
12	04:18.1	
13	04:21.2	
14	04:17.5	
15	05:24.5	toilet stop
16	04:18.2	
17	04:06.4	
18	04:11.8	
19	04:16.4	
20	04:21.4	
21	04:07.1	
22	04:11.9	
23	04:12.0	
24	04:11.4	
25	04:15.9	
26	04:20.4	
27	04:13.3	
28	04:19.7	
29	04:24.3	
30	04:49.9	Up hill
31	04:25.1	
32	04:32.3	
33	04:35.3	
34	04:32.6	
35	04:42.1	
36	04:50.6	
37	04:52.9	
38	05:34.5	Cramp
39	04:54.7	
40	05:01.9	Up hill again
41	04:58.1	
42	03:57.6	I started my watch about 500m after the run started so course appears short

The Wash-Up

SWIM	BIKE	RUN	OVERALL	RANK	DIV.POS.
1:01:16	5:20:07	3:06:50	9:33:44	31	8

What an amazing event! The organisation was first class and the volunteers made the day. The crowd support on course was also unreal (although I am told this got a little too rowdy on the run-course later in the evening as the fans drank on).

The finishing chute was pretty cool when I went through but it was absolutely jumping at about 10pm! The amount of energy the crowd was putting into those late finishing athletes was just incredible. There was a DJ playing and a couple of MCs whipping the crowd up into a frenzy for each finisher. This is a truly unique spectacle and I can't imagine any other event that has this much support for every finisher in the field. In fact, I am pretty sure the guys finishing in 15 hours were getting way more from the crowd than the winner.

Dave finished in a touch over 13 hours and was happy to have been part of the experience. He'll be back!

Next Steps

I think another Ironman awaits. I see a fair bit of up-side based on this performance: if I get off my arse and join a swimming squad I reckon a 10 minutes could be saved in the swim without any more effort on race-day; 10-minutes could be found on the bike if I was prepared to push just a tiny bit harder; and then a bit more fitness to finish off with a 3 hour marathon would give me another 6 minutes.

So *hypothetically* taking 26 minutes from 9:33 is 9:07 which would have put me 2nd in my AG.

Anyway, it won't be next year - probably 2014.

Melbourne Marathon 2012 next up!

Thanks for reading,

Thorny.

