

Kona 09 Report -- Expect the Unexpected on a Long Day

Even driving 140.6 miles in an air conditioned car can take a significant amount of time and effort on the Big Island. For the Ironman Triathlon World Championship, this distance is covered by swimming 2.4 miles in beautiful Kailua Bay, biking 112 miles through the lava fields, and finishing off this journey with a 26.2 mile run. With the exception of 200 lucky lottery winners, professional as well as age-group athletes have to qualify through racing in other Ironman events all over the world, a process that selects about 1600 athletes from more than 50 countries out of a pool of about 75,000 people who attempt to qualify. Not surprisingly, many of us see the Hawaii qualification by itself as one of the biggest accomplishments in the career of an ironman athlete. Racing Ironman Lake Placid in July 09 secured me a spot for Hawaii.



The timing of this year's race (October 10, 2009) was less than ideal as Angeline was due on September 26. If the little guy was late by just a few days, it was clear that I wouldn't be able to fly. Luckily, both Angeline and Kai were incredibly supportive of my trip. He arrived on September 24, 11 days before my departure to Kona. While Angeline and I had been dreaming about traveling to Kona with all three of us, it became obvious that Kai would be too vulnerable to changes in his environment.

The 4am alarm on race day had me struggling to get out of bed. Some of the usual pre-race excitement was a little bit dampened by a sore right shoulder which I mysteriously incurred three days before the race. Perhaps the exhilaration of seeing about 15 large dorsal fins around me while swimming a mile in Kailua Bay ... my heart rate only somewhat normalized when they turned out to be dolphins that came within a few feet ... made me do some funny motion that strained a ligament. In any event, neither A.R.T therapy nor ice/hot treatment (I painfully learned what they mean by *extra strength* lotion) was able to get rid of it in the two days prior to the race. As I had not been swimming since, I had to see how the shoulder would behave during the swim warm-up on race day. I walked down to the bike transition area, got body-marked, pumped up my tires, and attached my water bottles to the bike. Because the hotel was within three minutes of the start area, I was able to go back to my room and relax for 30 minutes on the bed.

At 6:30am, the NAVY put on a pretty cool parachute show and the canon went off for the professional athletes at 6:45am. Jumping into the water at this point, it seemed that I could pull water with my right shoulder reasonably well as long as I didn't completely finish the stroke. No big problem I figured, a slightly slower swim would hardly make any difference. At other races, I typically start in the front row of the pack and after a few minutes of going pretty hard, the field thins out dramatically. However, with this race being the world championship, virtually every participant was a pretty fast swimmer and I seeded myself about



five rows deep. I looked around ... the level of energy in the water was tremendous. No doubt, everybody was ready to get going. One last look around this most beautiful bay and up the volcano that was covered in fog and clouds, and then the canon detonated a second time at 7am, this time for us age-groupers.

The mass start of the 1800 competitors did not turn out to be as chaotic as it could have been. Most people knew how to swim straight and perhaps the lack of wetsuits ... the water temperature was 80 degrees Fahrenheit ... made each athlete more aware of his/her surroundings and less likely to swim over each other. Not that it was a non-contact sport for the first mile, but it was far from unbearable. The water was fantastically clear and I admired the bottom of the ocean and the reefs for most of the way. After the turn around, the field dispersed more than expected and I swam by myself for large parts, not exactly the fastest strategy but at least I could be certain that nobody would hit my shoulder. I had to stop twice to empty my leaking goggles, a gentle reminder as to why I never wear goggles in lake swims; independent of their price and shape, goggles and I just don't mix. Either they leak or they are uncomfortable (or both). The very enjoyable swim soon ended and I walked into the transition area after 1:01h. I was very happy that the shoulder held up OK. First part of the mission accomplished.



The bike loop features a relatively short section in town before making the long trip to Hawi in the north of the island. Heading out of town and into the lava fields, the wind was surprisingly tame. A bit of a headwind, a bit blowing off the ocean, but nothing really bad; I was riding through the rolling hills of the Queen K Highway at a pretty good clip. The sun was already out in full force without any cloud coverage ... no doubt that it would be a hot day ... but might it also be a relatively windless day? This question was answered rather quickly after turning off the Queen K Highway and tackling the last 20 miles to Hawi. It started with some gusts here and there and as soon as we hit the long final climb up to Hawi, the winds were howling. Adding insult to injury, it was right into the wind. Without wind, the 10 mile climb is nothing to be afraid of; I had ridden it five days earlier on a windless afternoon and it felt just nice. This was a completely different beast. Everybody I saw tried to stay deep in the aero position to expose as little area to the wind as possible but I started to struggle on the last two miles.

It was so elating to see the ice cream store in Hawi which signaled the turn around. Going back, we were just flying with the wind in our backs for about 15 miles, often without pedaling as I was spinning completely out of gears. While it was clear that this magic carpet ride would soon come to an end, I did not expect that the Queen K Highway that was so friendly to us just 2-3h ago would turn so badly against us. The wind that was coming now diagonally from the front was relentless and brutally strong. With the black lava fields absorbing the sun rays, I have a new appreciation for why convection ovens are so powerful in heating up objects. The temperatures were above 100 degrees Fahrenheit and even with pouring water over my body at every aid station, it was literally as hot as hell. I later read that some of the professionals that quit the race after the bike, or walked parts of the marathon, cited this section of the race as their downfall. I didn't have a bike computer with me but I would think that I was going at less than 15mph despite pedaling very hard. Just when I had finally accepted that this would be a very very long haul back into town, the wind weakened substantially and the last 10 miles of the bike ride were actually quite fast.



Traveling on the Kuakini Highway on the way to the transition area, I reached down to one pedal to unbuckle my first shoe, a simple procedure that saves a little bit of time in the transition area and that I had safely done 100 times before. This time turned out to be different. While loosening the strap of my shoe with one hand, I also made a gentle turn across the 2-lane highway as I am approaching the intersection with Palani Road. Really ... a very simple maneuver unless you forget that the highways on the Big Island have widely spaced and about one inch-high metal reflectors that separate the lanes. As I was hitting one of these reflectors unexpectedly without any visual warning, my carbon horse shook me off like a novice rodeo rider and I go down. I am sliding across the road on my right side with alternating thoughts between “please let me not slide into something sharp” and “what a way to end a race”. Fortunately, this not so magic carpet slide ends before I hit the curb and after two spectators who line the road at this sections about 2-3 rows deep help me up, I realize that I was very very lucky. Much of the skin on my entire right side is gone ... in particular on the knee, hip (my shorts are shredded on the right side but still hold together ... thank you DeSoto), arm, and shoulder ... but it is also pretty obvious that I didn't break anything and that the abrasions are really only skin deep. I decline the request of two officials to sit down for a while, adjust my brakes, get back on my bike, and roll down the hill to the transition area that is less than a quarter of a mile away. The announcer had already figured out my name and the spectators are going nuts, cheering me on to continue the race.

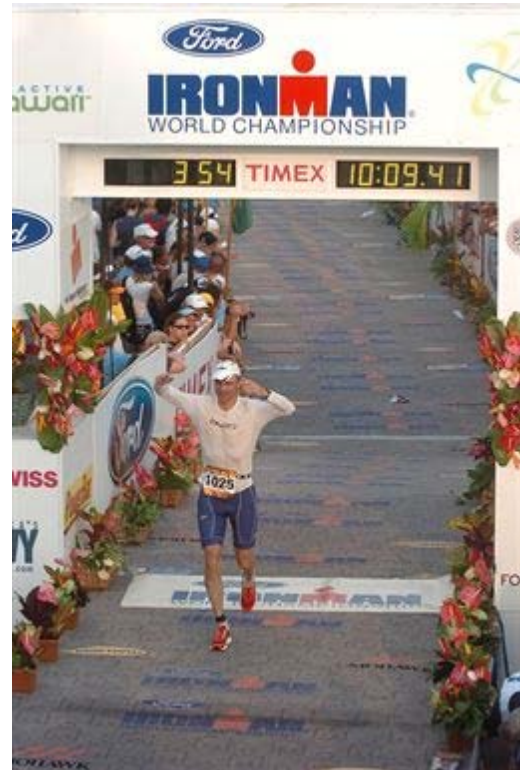


Quitting was actually the last thing on my mind. Rather, I was extremely grateful that I had a white long-sleeve shirt in my transition bag that covered all wounds on my upper body. Two volunteers helped me putting it on. Jogging slowly out of the transition area, I find myself in excellent company. One step ahead of me runs Ken Glah who has finished this race 25 consecutive times ... most of them in the top 20 overall ... and Joe Bonness, a multiple age group winner, right behind me. The legs feel good but we start out very cautiously. The stomach feels tight from all the fluids I consumed on the bike. Nevertheless, I decide to restart my nutrition as I am ever paranoid of running out of calories. One gel and my abdominal muscles are cramping up. Damn ... should have waited for another mile. I take some salt and water but the cramps continue. If there is something I learned over the years, it is to address stomach problems immediately as they never simply go away. Last time I ignored this and tried to push through the run, I ended up walking the last 15 miles of the marathon (IM Austria 2006). Ouch. Thus, before even reaching the 2mile marker, I am walking ... which

stops the cramping immediately but any return to running makes them reappear just as quickly. At the 3mile aid station, I am offered coke (among water, gels, fruits, ice, etc) and while starting to drink coke so early into the marathon is against conventional wisdom as it typically induces a sugar crash later on, I also know that coke has a soothing effect on my stomach. As I am walking already ... there is nothing to lose. I down two cups of coke, thank the volunteer, and continue my walk-jog journey. Same procedure at mile 4 but I add a piece of banana for some potassium. By mile 5, my stomach feels a bit better and I only walk through the aid stations where I use plenty of cold water and ice to keep me cool. My wet white shirt works like a charm and keeps my core temperature down ... but there is no denying that it is brutally hot. Hardly any wind at this point.



At mile 10, a steep climb has the runners exiting the town before getting onto the Queen K Highway and into the lava fields. My stomach feels OK, not great, and I figure that walking up the hill might conserve some energy for later. But all of a sudden I feel a little rush of adrenaline coming on. This hill is no worse than Thompson Street, part of our weekly Sunday run. You can do this ... wussy! Just run it up very very slowly. Almost immediately, I feel much better. The aid station on the top of the hill is the first one where I don't stop running (I still get my 2 cups of coke and plenty of water and ice). Once on the Queen K Highway, I approach a large group of spectators which so aptly blast AC/DC's *Highway to Hell* into my ears. They are awesome! I high-five all of them and start my journey to the infamous Natural Energy Lab, the last turn around before heading back to the finish line. The road in the Natural Energy Lab is known as the hardest part of the run, something that is not entirely apparent when entering. In fact, it starts with a long gentle downhill and finally a bit of a breeze. Unfortunately, I also realize that some people coming out of this section are looking just about as happy as if they had been kissed by a *Dementor*. While I stay clear of any soul sucking creatures, the pace of my last 3-4 miles that had made a sub-10h finish again possible, slowed tremendously. Coming back onto the Queen K Highway, I felt like the Natural Energy Lab had taken me in, tested in so many different ways, decided that I am not worthy, and spit back out. I knew I had paid a price over the couple of miles of extreme heat in the Energy Lab and that the last few miles back into town would be a bit slower. But I also knew that I would finish the race steadily without walking. The excitement set in. The last mile, now back in town, I had seen so many times on TV. Actually running it and finishing the race was an incredible feeling. The last few seconds of my race are at <http://liveupdate.ironmanlive.com/ppv/wmf.php?rid=261&bib=1025>



This so unique and beautiful race was easily the hardest one I have ever done. I was fortunate that the race worked out so well for me and I was very very pleased with Madame Pele who allowed me to dig as deep as possible to complete a tenacious run after an easy swim and a hard bike. Many things will change with this race. After drinking approximately 40 cups of coke on the run, I will never be able to look at this beverage the same as before. More seriously, I am in many ways excited to report that this was my last Ironman for quite a while. I am so grateful for the unbelievable encouragement that I received from all of you. You got me through the run. Special thanks to Angeline's mum Jeannie who stayed with Angeline while I was gone. None of this journey would have been even remotely possible without the infinite support and love of my beautiful wife Angeline. Mahalo. After completing this race, retiring from Ironman racing feels easy. Athletically, this was by far my most successful year. More importantly, I am very much looking forward to embarking on a new voyage with Angeline and Kai. Aloha.

