

France Ironman 27th June 2010



The day of the Nice Ironman finally came around after 5 years of build up, including: training weeks in the Lake District and Dorset, memorable cycles from Kings Lynn to Winchester and round the Isle of Wight, numerous triathlons dotted around the country, and hours of hours of swimming, running and (slightly less) cycling.

The day before, we racked our bikes and handed in our 'run' and 'bike' bags. This meant that on the day itself all we had to do on the day was to get to the start line for 6:30. Easy when you are staying best part of an hours drive away! Having carbo loaded on the Saturday and got an early night, it was up at 3 am to make sure we would get too Nice with plenty of time.



There was a hive of activity when we arrived. Still under moonlight, it was possible to just about make out the buoys on the swim course, about 1 km directly out to sea from Nice. At the bike park, we made any final adjustments to the bikes and got kitted out for the swim. As per most triathlons I've ever been to, the quality of the kit was unbelievable and, despite having up graded my bike, it was still dwarfed by the quality of the majority of the other bikes. However, my feeling is that "its not about the bike" though, its all about the rider. I worked out that there must have been about £4-5 million worth of kit in that bike park. Rich psyched himself up in his customary fashion (on a completely superior level to that witnessed at Notts 10!), while everyone just stepped into their wetsuits and pondered the enormity of the challenge that lay ahead.



By 6 am, we were being ushered down towards the sea and lined up in the swim pen depending upon your expected swim time. I put myself in the 1:06 pen, thinking that was in line with the pace I swim in training, and started to prepare myself for the sound of the start gun. At this point, I was thinking about my 3 major concerns I had going into the race: one being hit in the face on the swim, two getting a puncture on the bike, and three total mechanical failure on the bike. I was also contemplating further the sheer magnitude of the event, and how my body would cope with pushing itself to the limit for at least the next 10-11 hours.

With the 'Black-eyed-peas' song 'I gotta feeling' being belted out in the background (that clearly seemed to be the song of the race), the start gun went and there was a mass movement into the sea. Utter carnage. I was trying very hard to get a clear swim line, but the sheer number of people meant constantly swimming over people, hitting people's feet and generally finding it very hard to maintain any sort of rhythm in those early stages. It was great swimming a vast distance from the coast, something that I would never have the nerve to do on my own, and the further into the swim we got, the more spread out the field got. That was until the first buoy, when the carnage ensued and the pack was brought close together once again. After rounding one more buoy, it was time to return to the shore to complete the first 2.4 km lap. I had little sense of direction on this part of the swim, as the sun was immediately east and, every time I went to take a breath, I was badly affected by the glare. Needless to say, I had a very 'zigzag' swim line into shore but, having got out of the water briefly, lap 2 was under way and I knew that I had broken the back of the swim.

While I felt comfortable on the swim, I was concerned that perhaps I had pushed it too hard on this discipline and that it may have an impact later. Given that I was a good 30 minutes in to the swim, there was little I could do about this now, and so I just cracked on at the current pace. By this stage, it was nice to be able to swim in a relatively clear line and relax a little before heading into the cycle.

I emerged from the water to find the clock showing 1:03:48, more or less on track with what I had planned, and raced towards the bike park. After a quick towel down, change of kit, and a couple of energy bars, it was time to pick up the bike and embark on the 112 mile cycle. My plan was to average at least 17 mph: this way I would keep up a relatively fast pace but hopefully retain a good level of energy to take in to the run. The bike course took us out towards Nice Airport along the Promenade Anglais and immediately I was being passed by a considerable number of cyclists – this was despite doing 22 mph myself! The early stages on the cycle passed through some grotty industrial estates and followed the river up towards Gattieres. This was the point for the first climb, a short, sharp 500 metre hill with a gradient of 10%. The whole field bunched up together and I was surprised to see just how hard some of the other cyclists were finding this. I presume that, while these other cyclists found the hills tricky, their power and weight make them very good on the flat and downhill – this seems the complete opposite approach that I to have to cycling.

While there were brief respites from the hills, there was a clear theme to the ride so far that we were heading upwards and into the 'Montagne du Cheiro'. We were greeted with cheers as we passed through each of the 17 villages en route, and the 'kilometres to go' signs were gradually ticking down. I say ticking down, they were showing 130, 120, 110 kilometres to go which is still a huge distance to cover! Up to this point, I was heading backwards in the field, and the only time I ever made up places was on the hills – bring on Col de l'Ecre and see what damage I can do here! This 21km climb was spectacular. The road wound around the side of the mountain, and it was possible to get a good idea of just how high we had climbed already. Some of the cliffs above and below us were so impressive, and there were parts where you could look back down the mountain and see the long snake of riders gradually winding their way up the ascent (also it was comforting to see quite a large number of people behind!)

The aid stations on the course were essential and an excellent way to make sure that you took on all of the necessary fluids and energy required to get round. The set up of each aid station was simple: first there was the bottle and rubbish drop to get rid of any empty containers, then people handed out bottles of water, coke, isotonic drinks, gels, bananas and power bars, and finally there was one more bottle drop. At every aid station I made sure that I took on fresh water and coke/isotonic drink, and either a power bar or, towards the end of the cycle, gels. Keeping hydrated was key and I estimate that I took on a good 6-8 litres of fluids on the bike, along with 3-4 power bars, 6-8 gels, half a malt loaf and a couple of bananas. However at about 40 miles to go, I stopped taking on 'solid' fuel, as I didn't want any stomach problems on the run.

At the top of the Col de l'Ecre, I thought it was sensible to ease off the pace and recoup some of the energy exerted on the climb. I was happy to freewheel and pedal easy for the next few miles and prepare for the remaining 110km. In fact, over the next 40km there was only about 5km of uphill, so by the time I reached Greolieres, I was ready for the next climb up to Coursegoules, via the 'out and back' loop to the Col de Vence.



The route took us straight through a very narrow street in the middle of Coursegoules and, once again, it was time for another long descent. Just as I hit about 74 miles, I felt as though my front wheel was losing some pressure. Disaster! Still, I carried on and continued for a couple of miles before catastrophe struck, and the front wheel was well and truly punctured. Team BMC did a great tyre change and I was up on the bike again within about 5 minutes, however the mechanics failed to notice that the speedo sensor was on the wrong side. A very quick pit stop 200m down the road ensued, and I was back rolling again. Despite checking the inside of the tyre rim for the sharp object before setting off, I was concerned that it may puncture again. Fingers crossed it would not. In fact, the tyre change may have been a slight blessing in disguise, as it allowed me to have a short break, toilet stop and take on a little more food.

On closer inspection of the tyre following the race, I noticed 2 very small shards of glass lodged in the tyre itself, one of which must have been responsible for the puncture during the race. I do not know when I got this glass in my tyre, however I was annoyed with myself for not checking the actual tyre itself before starting the race. I guess this is one further thing that I learnt as a result of the event.

With 40km to go, it was possible to see that we still had a considerable amount of height to loose before returning to Nice and the possibility of a sub 6 hour cycle was still on the cards. Finally, having completed the mountain section of the course, we returned to the flat section and the industrial estates, and continued back towards Nice. The other riders continued to come streaming past, but I knew I would take this lot on the run. The final 2-3 miles back to the finish were great because we had been funnelled into a narrow 'coned-off' section and drafting was the only option, thus allowing me to maintain a good 22-23mph with very little effort.

And so after 112 miles, I was back in the bike park and picking up my 'run' bag. I decided to go for a complete change of kit and emerged from the tent almost bang on 7 hours, ready for the 4 laps and 26 miles along the Nice promenade.

The first 10 km felt easy. My legs were fresh to running and the sub 3 marathon was certainly a possibility. A rather satisfying moment came on the first lap when I cruised past both the men's and women's leaders, however I was making a very big mistake here, as the quick early pace would cause problems later on. Overall, the run was fairly uninspiring: there were the occasional cheers for 'Winchester' (as a result of my vest), some recognition from the other members of team MMX, (although none of us could really muster much energy for a 'high-five') and lap after lap of trudging along Nice seafront getting ever closer to the finish.

Having reached half way in about 1:20, I already knew that I had gone out too hard too early. My legs ached, I was depleted of energy, I struggled to take on enough water let alone any form of energy, the temperature was in to the thirties and I was completely soaked having run through just about every shower on the course to cool down. Although this paints a rather grim picture of the run, the thought of crossing the finish line was a great way of keeping me going, and of course it was getting ever closer. I knew I was going to be able to finish, and in a respectable time, and I was still overtaking a number of people, so at least everyone else must have been feeling in an equally tiring state.

By the third lap, my pace had dropped considerably, and by the time of the fourth, I realised that only a miracle would bring me in less than 10 hours. Therefore I decided to try and enjoy the last lap as much as I good, and prepare myself for heading up the final runway. When I crossed the 40km marker, I knew it was just about 10 minutes more of running to do and, shortly after, I was onto the blue carpet and fast approaching the finish.

Going up the finish straight was an amazing feeling. With my arms firmly in the air, and the pace having been lifted considerably, I ran up the ramp and literally jumped through the finish line in 10:09:20. While mentally the jump seemed the best thing to do, I hadn't really considered the physical impact and landed up cramping all down one leg! However, what did it matter at this point? I was just elated to have completed the 140.6 miles, to have the medal round my neck and was now happily lying in a heap, drained of every last bit of energy in my body. It was no great shock that within 10 minutes I was in the medical tent, rigged up to a salt/sugar drip (along with rows of other athletes), but once I had taken down that, along with some food, I went out on the course to watch the other competitors.



I got myself to the finish grandstand and was fascinated to watch all the other runners coming in and completing their goal. There were those who picked their kids at the start of the finish straight and ran in with them, there were those who 'high-fived' every single person in the front row of the grandstand, there were those who came in hand in hand with other competitors, and there were those who were so drained of energy that only the finish line was on their mind. I stayed to watch Matt, Martin and Rich come in quick succession of one another and, while congratulating each other and gradually recovering at the finish, Leon and Steve finished the race.

It was great that all six of us completed the challenge and fulfilled each of our personal goals. The immediate consensus was 'NEVER AGAIN', however I don't think that I'll rule another Ironman out completely just yet!

SWIM	01:03:57
T1: SWIM-TO-BIKE	00:04:59
BIKE	05:48:10
T2: BIKE-TO-RUN	00:03:34
RUN	03:08:40
TOTAL TIME	10:09:20
RANK	106
DIV.POS.	12

