

IRONMAN® France - Nice

RACE REPORT

By Leon Foster



The Ironman had arrived. What was once a mere concept, at other times a improbable notion, was actually happening. We were up at 3am, with a 1 hour drive before the 6.30am start.

It is without bravado that I can honestly say that I felt no nerves at all. For once, finishing was the sole aim, there was no time to beat, no positions in mind. Whilst I had set myself a benchmark of 12 and a half hours, that is all it was, a benchmark. I also knew I had the training in the bank, and was as ready as I am ever likely to be for the challenge ahead.

In the bike park, I ignored all the expensive bikes which seemed to be everywhere, and for the swim I positioned myself in the 1:24+ pen, aiming to start conservatively, having read several horror stories about the carnage the start involves. The sky was clear and the air was cool. For now, the Mediterranean was calm. I told myself to enjoy the moment, and looked about at the other 2700 people who were about to swim. There was an air of excited energy. The gun went, and I was almost straight into the sea. The first few strokes were fine, but as more and more people began to crawl, space became limited. It became impossible to practice breathing every three strokes, something it had taken me the full 4 years to perfect. This was a blow, though not entirely unexpected really. I tried my best to stay focused and keep moving, but it was very difficult not to get annoyed as people grappled with your feet, clipped your head or simply barged past you. But I told myself they probably saw me in the same light. Struggling to get a pattern going was not helped by the incredibly claustrophobic feeling I obtained when looking down into the water, I was virtually blind, and combined with the physical presence of other athletes, my breathing was irregular and seized up. I consoled myself with the thought that my regular turns above the water kept me on a fairly good course for buoy number one, which was about 1.1km out to sea. A very long way! I tried to maintain pace with some of the athletes around me, which helped me gain some forward momentum.

Eventually we reached the first buoy, where more chaos reigned as we all swung 90 degrees right. I could tell I was slipping backwards but this didn't concern me that much, in fact I was gaining some more space, but still there were swimmers crossing my bows every so often. One corrective motion I made was to concentrate on my arm action, using my legs too much would cost me later for sure, and this was something I wanted to avoid. I still wasn't swimming with great motion, but was going forwards. I wasn't really enjoying



this first lap, but I reminded myself that this was the smallest section of the Ironman myself and also I couldn't swim properly when I started training, so just doing 2.4 miles is a achievement. The shoreline got closer and closer, eventually, with the sun finally rising above the hills of Nice, we

reached the shore, and were helped out onto the beach as I staggered on the rocky beach. We then ran 15 yards up, along, and back into the sea for the second lap. As I got back into the water, something clicked, and my breathing became looser, free, and calmer. I was able to breathe every two strokes, and sometimes every four, with a good rhythm. For the first time, I felt swift, and confident. I was now enjoying the swim. I suspect this was because I had the confidence of having the worst part out of the way, and also the swimmers around me had also got used to the conditions, and most of the people I was swimming with were of a similar pace, so there was less chance of collision. As we rounded the two buoys that formed the outer part of the second lap, the sun reflected from the surface, and we headed for the shore for the last time. I really stretched out on this final 600m and powered home, looking forward to the bike, but also knowing that I could obtain a decent time. Keeping my legs loose, and reaching ahead with my arms, the Ironman buoys came closer and closer, and soon I was once more being helped out onto the blue mats, doing my best to fall over as the transition from horizontal to vertical proved problematic again. Over the timing mat, I was amazed to see the clock say 1:21. Not in my wildest dreams 4 years ago could I have contemplated such a time, and even 3 months ago, 1:30 looked a big ask. This was a great start to the Ironman, and gave me a real boost going into the bike. Probably the last time you'll find me 1100m out to sea by myself though!

After bumping into Steve in transition, we had a quick chat, and I said I'd see him in a bit, before slapping on the sun cream, the helmet, and the cycle kit, and off to get my bike. At this point I was convinced I was last of the six of us. Turns out I was 4th. Still I wasn't panicking, and set off down the *Promenade de Anglais* determined to enjoy it, and with 112 miles to cover, to take it easy to begin with.

There were riders everywhere and I was right in the thick of it, everyone seemed very focused. At this point it wasn't too warm but I had a gel straight away and a fair bit of water. After hanging a right at the airport, we headed out of Nice through some industrial estate, which was a bit grotty, but I caught Steve and so we cycled together chatting until the first water stop, where I had a bit of trouble taking on a bottle of Infinit energy, while Steve dropped me having taken his on the move. The Infinit tasted horrible. But it had to be drunk. After about another 1k we turned left and up a very short, sharp hill. It was about 300m long but people were weaving all over the place, some were walking. Luckily a passage was clear on the left for me to get out of the saddle and reach the top. Here I retook Steve, but there was no time for chat, and that was the last of the team I saw until the run. The next 20-30k was steadily uphill, nothing serious but you aware of the gradient. It was time to get into a rhythm and start working a bit. Luckily most of this section was sheltered as I could feel myself getting warmer.



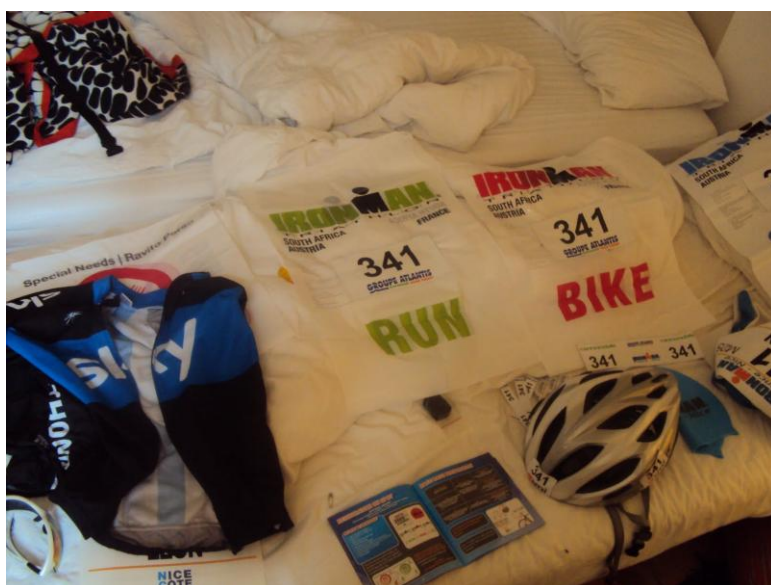
There were good crowds on the side of the road, especially when passing through villages. Everyone had their name and age category on their number, and it was impressive to note the number of veteran competitors maintaining a fair old pace, especially on the female side. Soon the climb got a bit steeper and in one village we rounded a hairpin

in front of the biggest crowd yet. It was then I looked up to see the road rising a sweeping left, with many cyclists in few. This ladies and gentlemen, was the feared *Col D'Ecre* – 14k of climbing with a 650m ascent. At first I was climbing well, but the road soon widened as it clung to the mountain side, and the tree cover disappeared. This was the first time I felt the heat of the mid morning sun, and the climb became steadily more difficult. The climb was also visible for a long way ahead, so it became clear it was really time to dig in. Round one of the many corners came the latest drinks stop, which was absolute carnage as the full width of the road was taken up by riders refuelling. You had to stop whether you liked it or not. The 130km to go so was an unwelcome thought. The final stretches were the most difficult, as the riders about 1km up the road were virtually above us, meaning we had some big climbing to do to reach that level, which we did via a couple more hairpins. Soon the summit finally arrived, and I relaxed in anticipation of a nice long downhill.

Unfortunately, we only dropped from 1150 to 1050m before reaching a wide sweeping plateau, something we are not accustomed to in England. This was a bit of a blow, and my legs were hurting from the climb, so I took it easy for a bit and took on more fuel. Some 10k later we finally hit a long gradual downhill. Some of the more streamlined bikes came flying past, but I took comfort in the fact I was ahead of them anyway. The half way point came and

I briefly wondered how the rest of the team were doing. My legs began to feel better and so I picked up speed on the remaining descent, before we kicked up again, but I was able to maintain a decent pace on this climb. Then came the flattest bit since Nice, on a 5k out and back section, and with the road being cut in half, it was possible to get a good slipstream from the riders around me. Then came what was the final climb, which again included a number of hairpins, and was a real grind. Luckily we were back in the shade for this one, and the feed station was again very useful, but the Blackcurrant power gel was pretty horrible. The signs at the side of the road indicated we had again broken 1000m in height, and with only 50k to go, I knew some good downhills were ahead, with the last 20k being flat.

And so it proved. I took a few good lines on the way down, knowing the roads were closed, and it was great fun rounding the hairpins, breaking late and powering out of the corners. I overtook quite a few riders who were a bit more cautious and there weren't many who went past me. I also became aware I would be well on course for finishing inside 7 hours. The last section was the



reverse of the first, back through the industrial area, which wasn't very pleasant as there was a headwind, and the legs were beginning to hurt again. Some cheeky slipstreaming was going on ahead, so a French marshal came and blew his whistle a lot, which seemed to solve the problem. I decided that when I reached the airport I would

really take the foot of the pedal and get ready for the run. This I did, and I saw the future horror that awaited me for the first time. I knew it was a marathon and I knew it would be painful, but there seemed to be a lot of people waddling/walking at this early stage.

Finally, I saw a fellow team member, this being Martin at the first drinks station on the run, as I headed in on the bike. The sun was really baking the athletes now, and I told myself to take my time in transitions, to have a breather, and to get ready for the run. I crossed the bike finish having done the 112 miles in 6 hours 35, average speed of 17mph. Like the swim, this was very pleasing and ahead of what I expected.

I entered the transition tent and changed into proper running kit of vest shorts and cap, put a bit more sunscreen on, and my sunglasses. One more drink and one more gel and I stepped out onto the run course...

I had imagined something around 4 hours was realistic for the run, so I had settled for 1 hour per 10k given my time on starting the run. The course was incredibly dull, especially in comparison to the bike, consisting of 4 out and back laps down the *Promenade de Anglais* to the airport and back.

Obviously I wasn't feeling fresh when I started, but I didn't feel too bad, and completed the first 5k going as slow as I felt was necessary, in 25 mins. I passed Martin going the other way, and we gave each other support. On the way back, the first cramp kicked in, and I had to stop and stretch, at which point Andy breezed past, on his final 5k, looking probably as tired as I have ever seen him. With just cause! Anyway, back trotting, I completed the 2nd 5k in 28mins and was still on course. My insides were now causing issues, I had over done the gels and felt pretty sick really, so limited myself to water for the next few stops. Just about managed the 3rd 5k in 30 mins, as the stops to shake off the cramp became more regular. However, given the heat, and number of casualties at the side of the road, the heat wasn't proving a problem mentally at least. Also I made sure I didn't run through the showers as I remembered stories of horribly blistered feet from last years race. In fact you could hear the squelch from some runners who had over done it. I settled for pouring water into my cap and over my head. At the end of the 4th 5k, my calves were really seizing up. However, at the end of 5k #4 I caught Martin, who was having a bad spell, with chest pains. We gave each other some encouragement as we crossed half way, walking, before Martin wisely took shelter in the shade for a few minutes.

I ploughed on, but was now spending more time walking than running. I took on some salt to try and stop the cramps, but it was no good, and near the end of the now never ending 5th 5k, a toilet stop was in order as I threw up some excess gels. I wasn't feeling good. When I left the toilet, the familiar Nottingham green vest was 25m up the road, as Matt had passed me, running well in a steady shuffle. I told myself to simply keep moving forwards and the finish would get closer, but mentally this was just as much a battle as physically as the dullness of the run kicked in. Running stopped as soon as it started as my calves froze. Soon, a refreshed Martin came past, and we stuck together in comedic fashion for about 2k as we stumbled forwards for about a minute at a time, before reverting to a walk. As we neared the end of the third lap, Martin managed to push into a steady trot which was simply too much for my legs, and he disappeared off at the start of the final lap. I got into a walk as fast as I could, knowing I would finish no matter what, and I would do it as fast

SWIM	01:21:26
BIKE	06:36:47
RUN	05:14:10
OVERALL	13:34:54
RANK	1750
DIV.POS.	160

as I could. All the while as we crossed each other, we shouted each other, Steve and Rich being especially vocal. In fact, it wasn't long after Martin left me, that Rich overtook me with a friendly slap on the back, and I smiled at the thought of how close Matt, Martin and Rich would be at the finish, in true

14AC tradition! And looked forward to them passing me on their final 5k. I kept walking, and was manage 5k in about 46 would take nearer an final 5k I tried once trot, but it wasn't when to start my 'run' there was no way I finish line, no matter would cause. Having drink and all sorts of passed the last aid 1k to go and tried to It was too early, and longer. I felt incredibly of athletes who were of the course knowing in the required 16 became my turn to matting with 200m to go, to realise the dream, and to become an Ironman. I hobbled, picked my legs up, and broke into a jog. Pain rushed down my legs, but I ignored it, and looked forwards and up. The finish was there within my reach at last. Amidst all the crowd, cheers rang out, and I crossed under the clock in 13:34:54, I was now an IRONMAN.



surprised to be able mins, I had thought it hour. Entering the more to break into a happening. I debated to the finish line, as was walking over the how much pain it visualised a bed, a carrots, I finally station with less that break into a shuffle. had to wait a bit sorry for the couple slumped at the side they would not finish hours, but it then enter the blue

The relief and the feeling of accomplishment was amazing.

We did it!

