

IRONMAN® France - Nice



MMX IRONMAN RACE REPORT

By Steve Woonton

The day started at 3am when the alarm began chiming. Even though it was so early the anxiety of the day meant I was bolt upright the moment the alarm went. I made a brief call to my fiancée, Hannah, to wish her a happy birthday, got some porridge down me and did my final prep before the MMX six made their way to Nice. Upon arrival we headed to the transition area, put our wetsuits on and did a final photo call of the six of us before dropping off our streetwear bag and making our way to the beach for the big start at 6:30am.

I decided to go very conservative in terms of picking my pen and went for the 1hr25 as it was furthest left, in the hope that I may avoid the crush of being in the middle. Regrettably I was wrong. I don't believe being in any of the other pens would have been any better but with 2700 people all entering the sea at once, starting on a 30meter stretch of the beach, the start was always going to be chaos. Well chaos it was, as the claxon went we all pounded into the water thrashing our arms to swim out towards the first buoy. Immediately you were sharing space with 5 or 6 other swimmers, clashing arms, legs, sides, ears, anything that could be clashed. As you got held up you had to resist turning to breaststroke because that would lead to a frog kick into someone else's side. I can only assume someone else did this to me as just a few minutes into the swim I got a foot thrust into my side winding me. I attempted to carry on swimming but could not catch my breath. Breaststroke became the only option but then everyone else was frustrated by me. It was a complete nightmare because everywhere you turned there were a school of arms. Now I am not normally a claustrophobic person but this was really uncomfortable, I did all I could to head as far left as possible to find some clear water and eventually reached the edge of the pack, here I turned on my back desperately trying to catch my breath. I could see a rescue boat eyeing me up and I thought to myself, *"get on with it Steve, you have been building up to this for 4*



years, don't bottle it in the first 10 minutes" so I turned to my front again, gave the rescue boat the eye, as if to say "back off", and continued along the route. There was little improvement in terms of congestion, it was manic, and you could not get any distance without clashing with someone, I'd say it wasn't until I turned back towards the beech on the first lap that I finally got into my stride, after the first lap it began to become more manageable, I left the water to go through the checkpoint and returned in to do the second and thankfully shorter lap, this went much smoother and 1hrs and 17minutes after the race started I finally finished the swim and headed to the transition. A little slower than I had hoped, but I wasn't going to complain, I finished, and physically felt ok, but it was a hellish experience, at this point I swore to myself this would be the last time I did a mass start swim event, I had found it much worse than I expected, and this was supposed to be my best discipline.

Into transition I went, a sea of naked bodies, stripping off their wetsuits and putting on cycle jerseys, I decided to take my time, it wasn't worth rushing and forgetting anything, I got changed, stretched a little, took on some water and fruit pastilles, and after a brief chat to Leon who entered transition as I left, I got on the bike. Off on the *Promenade des Anglais*. The first 20km was very pleasant, and quite a relief after the swim, it was busy but everyone was very polite, giving way to faster riders etc, I questioned if these were the same people who were thumping each other in the water. Shortly before the 20km aid station Leon caught up with me, we chuckled together as we saw a guy dress as a green bottle promoting his shop helping a cyclist repair a puncture, but it just summed up the supportive nature of the spectators and onlookers. The atmosphere throughout the cycle was fantastic with people cheering you and shouting "Allez, allez", the first 50km seemed to go by pretty quickly, much of it was steady with the odd sharp bit, but nothing too challenging and the buzz got you through it without concern, then the dreaded *col*



d'Ecre began, I knew it was due at any time and after turning a sharp corner and starting a steady incline of about 8% around the 50km mark I realised that this was the start of it. A 21km stretch of continuous incline, minimum of about 6%, maximum of about 10%, so it wasn't out of the saddle killer stuff but it was relentless and at that speed 21km takes a long time, well over an hour for even the best riders. Thinking back I

must have just zoned out, the views really helped, and I recall Rich coming past me, but the rest is quite a blur now, I recall it being hard work and I was chuffed to reach the top, but accounting for the 90 odd minutes it took is quite tough. It was at the top that you could get your "special needs" bag, which you got to put whatever you liked in the day before. Until now I had insisted on cycling through each aid station just swapping my water bottles for new ones and taking some banana, but by now my stomach was beginning to whinge about the rank infinite salt drink I had been putting into it every 20km and thankfully I had thought ahead and put some sachets of "SIS Go" in my special needs bag. So at this point I took to decanting the "Go" solution into my water bottle and stuck to this approach for the duration of the cycle. Tip to anyone training for an IRONMAN out there, find out what is provided energy drink wise and if you don't like it bring your own, this definitely helped me. So after making

up my own drink and munching on some fruit pastilles I was back on the bike and delighted to be going downhill for about 30km, hardly having to touch the pedals. Highlight of that stretch was passing a snake which had clearly had a disagreement with a previous cyclist's tyre and come off worst. The remainder of the cycle was a mixture of downhill with the odd stretch of incline, some were challenging but none compared to the *col d'Ecre*. In my effort to remain well hydrated I found myself



constantly having to stop for a pee, something anyone who knows me will appreciate is not a rare occasion at the best of times, but seriously I must have been going every 30 minutes or so and it was quite disruptive, but hydration was far more important so I continued to consume 2 bottles of water every 20k and accepted the consequences, thank god I'm a bloke that's all I can say. Time really began to drag now and the shoulders were starting to ache, I had a keen eye on the clock as I knew there was a 10hr15 cut off if you hadn't completed the cycle and swim by then, my only objective was not to get stopped on the course and to finish. Historically the bike is my slowest discipline so I was keen not to take this leg too slowly and risk being pulled off the course. Thankfully I was nicely on schedule and even ahead of

expectations. The field thinned more and more throughout the bike and the final 30 or so kilometres were pretty boring, at this point I just wanted to get off the bike, my legs were ok but mentally it was becoming quite dull. Finally I was back on the road towards Nice and hit the promenade, the atmosphere lifted as I saw everybody on the run course and shouts of "*allez, allez*" from the crowds again. As I cycled in I passed along the 5km out of back stretch of the run and saw Machine, Leon and Gaunt as I headed for transition. As the final part of the cycle had been relatively downhill my legs at this moment felt ok, but my heart sank as I watched Gasman Gaunt walking along the promenade, hands behind his head. I had no idea how long he had been on the run course but this guy eats marathons for breakfast, if he was walking what would I be like in an hours time. I tried to put this to the back of my mind and just hoped the other 5 guys were holding up ok.

I entered transition, racked my bike and trotted down to the changing area, grabbed my bag and started my change of kit routine. Now I've done a few triathlons and normally the bike-to-run transition is pretty swift, a few minutes, 3-5 at worst, but this was different I had been on the bike for nearly 8 hours, I had almost 7 hours left to complete the marathon and I determined at this point not cramping up, blistering etc was the most important thing to ensure I reached the line. So I had a little stretch, took on some more fluids, topped up the sun cream as it was still 30+ degrees, applied blister plasters to the soles of my feet, changed all my kit and finally exited to begin the run. I knew this wasn't quick but to my horror I took over 15 minutes to complete this transition, disgraceful, but hey ho it's all about finishing. So off I trotted keeping in mind it was all about finishing before the cut off and I still had almost 7 hours to go, there was no point in setting off at pace and cramping. So I applied a strategy of slow plod followed by a couple of minutes walking at every aid station to take on some supplies. Almost immediately I heard frantic cheering of "Steve" from the crowd, I looked up and saw Hayley, a close friend from home who was on holiday nearby, supporting. It gave me a real boost and again got me to reflect on

the build up to this event, the sheer number of people who knew I was doing it and I knew I would be gutted and embarrassed to go home without the finishes medal around my neck. I continued battling on, passing my MMX comrades going the opposite way as I headed down the promenade, each one of them appeared to be



finding the course different to the next. Leaf was completely in the zone, on his final lap by the time I saw him and completely oblivious to my cheers of support, Gaunt was in a similar mind set but still walking at this time, teeth gritted but battling on. Leon was a lot more conversational but by now his legs had given in and he had also resorting to a long term walk. Rich was bounding along, quite vocal and full of encouragement, on the surface he seemed to be well in his stride, as was Machine, but did we expect anything else, chest out stretch, focused on his movement, I had little doubt in Machines capabilities at this point. The course was perhaps the dullest you could possibly imagine for a marathon, an out-and-back along the promenade four times, passing through the same aid stations out and back, so you actually visited each one 8 times. The aid

stations were nice and regular and I treated each one as a goal before I could walk for a period. I say the course was dull and for an ordinary marathon I would not be pleased about this, but for the end of an IRONMAN this was perfect, it meant that you had many more people to run with, and saw your friends, the support was always there and you could tick off landmarks to yourself. The marathon was slow but I can honestly say it didn't feel as long as a typical marathon, purely because you could take each chunk at a time. After lap one you could say that wasn't so hard, just 3 more of them, and repeat this each time. After each lap you got a wrist band to prove you had completed it, after 3 wrist bands you were allowed to enter the finishers funnel. It was slightly depressing as you came to finish a lap and saw runners peeling off to finish as you continued on, but you just got on with it. It was also useful to look around at others and spot how many laps they had done by their wrist bands, especially as the laps went on and you could see others who had done less, selfish I know but it helped boost moral when there was little else to think about. I continued my strategy from the bike of drinking at every aid station and eating something to keep my energy levels up, I did find this gave me slight stomach cramp, but I convinced myself this was much better than suddenly having no fuel for my muscles so religiously I stuck to this for every said station during the marathon. The other thing I have to mention as I write this report is the toilets, there were 3 sets of toilets on each lap, and with the hydration tactics I'd implemented my bladder continued to require attention throughout the run, unfortunately these portaloos were extremely well used by the time I hit the run course, and clearly the infinite drink and powerbar had not agreed with everyone's stomachs. The state of those toilets and stench inside them was horrendous,

SWIM	01:17:42
BIKE	07:51:13
RUN	05:11:28
OVERALL	14:46:17
RANK	2119
DIV.POS.	185

Christy knows how people managed to spread their muck in such a way, but it was revolting and in every bloody toilet too. I think entering the sweltering hot toilet for 30 seconds and peeing as quick as possible without passing out from the stench was harder than running and that was saying something. Anyway, enough about that.

Finally I entered my last lap, my tactic of run/walk had been working well and except from the odd twinge I had avoided cramp. I now had over 2 hours to complete 10k and I knew this could be done even just by walking. The course was thinning down,



the temperature began to drop as evening crept in and around me almost everybody was at walking pace or close to it. My legs were drained and I decided to act sensibly and for most of the penultimate 5k dropped down to a walk with the odd jog in between. This was a slow stretch and on reaching the end I looked at my watch and realised that at this rate I'd be over 15 hours before finishing. I'd always aimed for sub-16, the cut off time, but decided it would be nice to have a 14 at the start showing that I was comfortably under the cut off, so I decided it was time to up the pace, or at least to stop walking, I built into a steady trot and focused on picking off each of the markers on the promenade until I finally reached home, by now I was ignoring the niggles and cramp feelings in my legs and stuck to a solid rhythm, I knew I could do it now, picking off aid

station 1, 2 and finally 3, meaning just minutes to go until the end. Finally after 14 hours and 46 minutes since the hooter went off on the beach just a few meters from where I was now, I entered the finishing funnel to a chorus of cheers, pom-pom girls dancing and music booming, I crossed the line shattered but in one piece, after 4 years of aspiring, and with plenty of ups and downs along the way, I could finally call myself an IRONMAN!

