

IRONMAN® France - Nice



Ironman for Scholarships – 27 June 2010 By Martin Gaunt

Ironman France began with a scene that will live long in the memory. Two and a half thousand competitors stood on the pebble beach in Nice, the sun just breaking the horizon over the *Baie des Anges*, and 226km of racing ahead of us. The first milestone on that journey, a buoy a kilometre offshore that marked the first turn of the swim, was barely visible.

At 6.30am the gun went off, and all hell broke loose. Everyone surged forwards into the sea, and the race was underway in a scene of utter carnage. The time spent perfecting my stroke over the past four years went out of the window- the first km was simply about avoiding too many kicks to the head, trying to gulp in more oxygen than I did water, and moving forwards as best I could with the hope of clearer water ahead.

It wasn't until around the halfway point of the swim that I really began to relax and get into my stroke. By then, my main problem wasn't so much the other competitors swarming around me, but the difficulty I was having swimming in a straight line. Easy in a pool, somewhat trickier at sea. However, with a few hundred metres of the 3.8km swim left, my confidence was returning, I was feeling strong, and actually, to my surprise, enjoying it.



Out of the water and onto my bike, the first 50km or so slipped by in no time: west along the sea front, and north towards the Alps. Turning left out of Pont du Loup, the dreaded *Col de l'Ecre* began winding upwards. In the next 20km we climbed to an altitude of 1180m. The scenery was stunning – the village of *Gourdon* apparently a past winner of the most beautiful village in France – but I'd never tackled a mountain quite like this before. By the time I reached the top I was in a pretty bad way. I'd done a strong climb – perhaps too strong – and I was pretty spent.

At the summit was a penalty box – any competitors that had been drafting or otherwise infringing the rules and therefore shown a yellow card were forced to take a six minute time penalty here. I had received no such penalty, but I was not to be denied! I lay horizontal on the roadside for a while, and as the medical staff began to circle, the enormity of the Ironman hit me. I still had 110km to go on the bike, and then a marathon.



The good news was the next 20km was mostly downhill. As I freewheeled off the mountain, I forced down as much of my lunch (*du pain et du boursin- no vin*) as I could stomach, and I felt myself beginning to recover. The rest of the cycle was incredible. Sharp inclines and plunging descents, hairpin bends, the locals on the roadside shouting “*Allez Martin! Allez courage!*” – it felt like we were in a mountain stage of the *Tour de France*. The 30km descent from *Côte de Coursegoules* back to the coast was spectacular, but also fairly hair-raising.

Although I'd partially recovered physically, I was quite mentally fatigued by this point, and I vividly remember shouting at myself to stay focused – I knew a major threat to me not completing the race was a crash on this descent.

Safely back at sea level, the small peloton I found myself riding with noticeably backed off the pace. The marathon lay ahead, and we began to prepare ourselves.

I've done lots of marathons in the past, but this was to be a whole new experience. As I crossed the start line I was already exhausted, my legs were like jelly from the cycle, and the temperature was touching 30 degrees. Four laps out and back, each just over 10km long- I was about to become all too familiar with Nice promenade.



The first lap was slow but just about bearable, the second much less so. (Less bearable that is.) My run-walk strategy was gradually becoming more and more dominated by walking. My legs weren't too bad, but every time I tried to pick up the pace into anything resembling running my chest really tightened up badly. The periodic sound of ambulance sirens up and down the course was a reminder not to push things too hard! At least I had my teammates for company- Andy was well ahead of me but passed breezily by on his final lap, while the rest of us were closely matched and locked in a grim survival battle to reach the finish – it had long ceased to be a race. For a few kilometres Leon and I comically ran-walked together – neither of us had the energy to speak, but the camaraderie helped a bit. That was until I could no longer keep up, his walking pace too much for me.



Finishing the third lap something changed. As the sun dipped the conditions became much less fierce, I was spurred on by the atmosphere I could hear at the nearby finish line, and I received generous encouragement from Andy (who by this time had long since finished). I also saw the clock – it was just shy of twelve hours – and I realised that if I could run the last lap in an hour, a respectable sub-13 hour finish time was mine. And that was what I managed. It was no more than a steady plod, but such was the devastation on the roadside by this point, I don't think anyone went past me. In front of the grandstand and over the finish line I punched the air – I had finished the Ironman in 12 hours, 52 minutes and 54 seconds.



I spent the next three hours laid out on a patch of grass near the finish, too exhausted to move. Our team were gradually reassembling – Matt had finished a few minutes ahead of me, and Rich a few minutes after (although it was several hours before he was discharged from the “field hospital” at the finish line). Next came Leon and then Steve. From the moment the plan was conceived four years previous, it had always been a team event, and it was a really proud moment when we realised we’d done it and all finished the Ironman. At 10.30pm – the 16 hour cut-off for the

race – fireworks went off in the *Baie des Anges* – a magnificent end to a momentous day.



Videos, race splits, photos and more at www.tinyurl.com/ironmanfrance

Sponsorship Update



Thank you very much for your sponsorship. Thanks to everyone’s generous support, we managed to reach the fundraising target for Onechild Ghana of £2000. We will be investing these funds in student scholarships. Onechild Ghana works with fourteen schools

in the Ashanti Region, Ghana, and the plan is award two scholarships – ideally to one boy and one girl – at each of the schools, a total of 28 scholarships for a full three year vocational course.

The scholarships will be awarded later this summer – the headteacher at each of the schools will invite applications, and the most deserving students will be nominated on the basis of financial need, commitment, and academic potential. The nominations will then be agreed with the Regional Director of the schools, and finally approved by myself. The scholarships will be awarded in time for the students to begin their courses this autumn. In December, I’ll be spending ten days on a self-funded trip to Ghana, where I will meet some of our scholars, and check on the progress of our scholarship programme and Onechild Ghana’s other projects.