

# IRONMAN<sup>®</sup> France - Nice

## RACE REPORT

By Richard Davies



Sunday began with breakfast at 03:00 as we devoured our final meal to be ready in time for the IRONMAN's 06:30 start. I hoped that a combination of porridge and a boiled egg would provide me with sufficient energy and release it slowly enough to keep me going on the mountainous bike section. Walking along the *Promenade des Anglais* at such an early hour was surreal as there were hundreds of people (late night revellers, tri-athletes and their friends and family). The noise was tremendous – a combination of anxiety, exhilaration and encouragement – from all parties! As we were all racked in the same area, we gathered together to change into our wetsuits and prepare our bikes before heading to the waterfront for our 2½ mile Mediterranean swim! We then split up into different time pens, apart from Martin and I who stayed together in the sub 1hr14 bracket. While this was an accurate prediction from Martin, it was lamentably short for me...

With the helicopter hovering overhead, the countdown began and before we knew it we were surging forward into a veritable scrum of arms, punches, kicks, clambering bodies and spray as more than 2,500 tri-athletes took a direct route 1km out to sea to the first buoy. It was terribly claustrophobic to have so many people thrashing all around you and to have to pull the toes of those ahead of you to the side to get through. I gave as good as I got but, all the same, nothing had prepared me for this! My game plan rapidly fell apart and the carefully developed rhythm which had evolved over the course of two months swim training in the River Yealm failed to materialise! After about 15 minutes, the field gradually started to spread out and I desperately tried to regain my composure and

### RACE SPLITS:

|              |                 |
|--------------|-----------------|
| SWIM         | 01:31:32        |
| T1:          | 13:25           |
| BIKE         | 06:44:08        |
| T2:          | 15:32           |
| <u>RUN</u>   | <u>04:15:46</u> |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>13:00:23</b> |

rhythm. My normal routine is to breathe every 3 strokes but in the maelstrom of activity I had to breathe every stroke. As I was now lifting my head to the side 3 times as often, I needed more oxygen and thus began a vicious circle whereby I became less and less able to adopt my routine. I did eventually recover, find some clear water, calm down, find my bearings and head towards the first buoy however, I was about to enter a disastrous new chapter of this event.

My training in the River Yealm had been good endurance practice but had not prepared me for some of the challenges of swimming at sea. By the time I headed back to land, a slight swell had developed - something I was quite unaccustomed to in the tranquil backwaters of the Yealm but which, on its own, should not have caused too much of a problem. However,



the resulting seasickness was compounded by a sense of vertigo which I developed looking down into the bottomless abyss of the crystal clear Mediterranean devoid of the rocks, seaweed and buoys that had helped provide me with references during my training. I was seasick twice which was not only physically devastating, as I was surrounded by salt water and could not re-hydrate, but very depressing from a psychological perspective particularly as I had spent two days meticulously planning my diet and re-hydrating to be on peak performance on the swim whilst also ensuring that energy would still be released on the bike section. It meant that I was massively dehydrated and running on empty with 139 miles still to go! This really put a downer on things and forced me to abandon front crawl in favour of breaststroke which also enabled me to take off my goggles which by now felt like a vice around my head. I spent the remainder of the swim alternating between crawl and breaststroke whilst taking nervous glances behind me to ensure I was not too close to the back of

the field!!! Suffice it to say, the end of the swim could not come fast enough and I can say I will never do anything like that again! I finished in 1:31:32, which was disappointing but I had to put it behind me and refocus on the remaining 139 miles!

The bottle of water I had in my transition bag was a godsend and worth its weight in gold in terms of re-hydration. After ensuring I was as dry as possible and that my cycle helmet was on (to avoid a time penalty) I ran to my section of the bike rack. Alas, my morale took another kibosh as my bike was the only one left in my rack of 50 bikes, which meant that all my team mates were ahead of me! Regardless, the bike was my discipline and as I raced down the *Promenade des Anglais* with the refreshing breeze in my face and the rest of the city waking up around me, I began to get back into a routine. I had a lot of people ahead of me and began to gradually hunt them down one at a time. The more people I overtook, the stronger I felt- especially when cycling up some of the steeper sections where some people were even pushing their bikes.



Whilst I had cycled the full 112 miles in training, I tried not to think about how far I had left to go. It was, however, surprisingly easy to forget that we were participating in such a tremendous feat of endurance, given the spectacular scenery we were cycling through. Lavender fields, rustic farms, gorges, mountain passes, plateaus, meadows, forests and Mediterranean beach fronts, this route really

did have them all. At the back of my mind was the perennial fear of mechanical failure but I was fortunate enough not to be cursed with this particular *bête noire*!

Careful analysis of the bike course had identified the *Col d'Ecre* as the proverbial high point of the ride; this 21km climb, ascending 940m, seemed to stretch for eternity! The only saving grace was the resulting descent, which was to provide some valuable time to recuperate! Given that ascents such as the *Col d'Ecre* took over an hour, it was essential to re-energise at each aid station with a combination of coca-cola, energy drinks, water, energy bars and bananas. While these were not particularly nice, and the energy bars/ gels were particularly unpalatable, I knew I had to take them on board if I was to stand a chance of completing the marathon once I eventually got off the bike. The downhill sections yielded some exhilarating experiences! As most of these roads were closed to traffic, we had *carte blanche* to go down them at top speed reassured that tricky hairpins were well marshalled and signalled with yellow flags. Overtaking some of the other competitors and looking out at the valley floor thousands of feet below was tremendously exciting. There was a significant amount of support on the course, especially through the mountain villages. As I was wearing the famous Polka-dot jersey of an Italian bike manufacturer I received many shouts of "*allez les points rouges*" and also encouragement from several crowds of Italian supporters which certainly helped lift morale. Towards the end, the bike route headed back along the valley floor towards Nice and the focus shifted to recovering for the run. Cycling the final few kilometres along the *Promenade des Anglais* alongside the marathon course something odd struck me. I could not quite put my finger on it until I realised that about 95% of the runners were wearing a sun cap! I had packed a cap in my transition bag and, given the near universal uptake, I decided this was a fairly resounding endorsement for protecting yourself from overexposure to the blistering Mediterranean heat so heeded the wisdom of the crowd and decided to wear my cap too. I finished the bike ride in a highly respectable time of 06:44:08.

Prior to the event, my principle goal had been to finish and, barring any mechanical failure, I was hopeful I would be able to do this in a time of around 14 hours. Now that I had reached the run phase of the event, the realisation that I could actually finish sub 14 hours, despite my poor swim, was fantastically uplifting. Moreover, unlike the bike route, the run involved four out and back laps along the picturesque seafront to the airport, which helped to break



up the marathon into eight more appealing sections that I hoped to complete in under half an hour. Added to this, the distraction of the myriad private jets at the executive terminal and the conjecture as to what I would do when I finally crossed the line meant that the run passed quickly compared to the conventional marathons I have completed in London and Paris. The only real threat of failure at this stage was a serious medical problem so I forced myself to stop at every aid station and developed a well practised routine encompassing a shower, energy drink and gel, ½ orange and water. After reaching the halfway point I realised I was not in too bad a shape. By this stage, I had seen the rest of the team at various stages, due to the fact we were running circuits, and half of them had been walking consistently. I began to sense that the euphoria of experiencing the finish was becoming a probability and that I could not only break my target of 14 hours, but there was a real possibility of actually breaking 13 hours! Although the showers were refreshing, running with wet

trainers was taking its toll on my feet, however, I calculated that I could afford to take a gamble on the last lap and save some precious time by eschewing the last aid stations as it would take a while for me to absorb the energy by which time I would (hopefully) have crossed the finish line!

The last lap was truly amazing! The crowd were incredible and, given that the waterfront was not that long, the support was consistently lively but nowhere more so than the rapturous applause and cacophony of noise which we received as we entered the home straight! Regrettably, in spite of my best efforts I entered the straight to hear the 13 hour countdown reach "...1" whilst I still had approximately 100 meters to go! Nevertheless, I crossed the finish line with an immense sense of pride, exhilaration and exuberation. However, this was when my decision to try and break 13 hours really caught up with me! My calculation was pretty much spot on as my absolute exhaustion did not hit me during the race itself but, within minutes of crossing the line, I was stretchered off to the field hospital where I was surrounded by a collection of dishevelled, pale yet strangely humbled athletes and a small army of medical staff. I was violently ill over the course of 2 hours and put on a drip with several bags of saline solution to recover, so it was not until the early hours of Monday morning that I was reunited with the rest of the team and we had time for a priceless 'champions' photo before heading back to our villa for some well earned rest and relaxation!!



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