

Ironman, Kona, The World Championship, is the Holy Grail for many in our sport. It's difficult to qualify for and even more difficult to execute a good race. You know it's going to be hot and humid and the winds will be howling on the bike course, but until you get there and actually do this race you simply can't grasp the level of difficulty. Even if you have raced it before, the preservation part of the brain tucks the experience away so somehow you forget just how hard it is.

The days leading up are pure excitement and adrenaline. Early morning practice swims in the warm ocean waters with pro and amateurs side by side. Watching runners and cyclists cruising Ali'i drive and the Queen K highway all week long and at all hours of the day and night. Some of them going way too hard and/or way too long. Yes, the excitement and anticipation is getting the best of them. The super-serious Euro-types, always with the stern looks and tight clothes and bike brands you never heard of. You want to tell these folks to relax and enjoy the moment because you might never be here again.

As for me, my journey started in April of 2007. I'd let myself get very unfit for 4 years and decided, with age 50 looming, that I needed a big goal so why not Kona. Eighteen months and many miles/yards traveled here I am trying to enjoy the atmosphere of the superfit, relax and not get too intimidated. A mid-distance training ride where I lost about 5 pounds in water weight reminded me to drink constantly and swallow salt capsules like a depraved drug addict. I noticed on the same ride that the winds weren't too bad. What's the big deal I thought? Ha! On race day 20-40 mph crosswind gusts as we approached Hawi had your hugging your bike like your long, lost best friend. Note to self: deep dish aero wheels can and will work against you in some situations.

But let's start on race morning. A dramatic pre-start to the swim diverted my nerves for a while. The navy circled a C-130 where 3 navy seals (these guys are always recruiting) parachuted out, landing in the water then swimming to the start to get body marked. OK, now I'm thinking I'm not so tough. Then as we're funneling down the steps to get in the water, volunteers squeeze by carrying an athlete with no legs. Ok, now I know I'm not tough and I should stop worrying about how hard the day will be because it's going to be a helluva lot harder on some others.

The swim is awesome. Very little turning, not as much kicking and punching as usual, clear waters so you can see the fish and the thrashing of humanity all around you. But who ordered these choppy waters part way through the swim? And why does 2.4 miles seem to take forever? Perhaps because I'm not a very good swimmer? Yes, that's it.

The bike course in Kona is deceptively difficult: fast in the beginning, but hardly ever flat. It just keeps on rolling and climbing. I somehow forgot that part. I also forgot how it feels when someone way older than you screams by you like you have a flat tire. Or descending at 45 mph in a tight tuck and getting smacked by the island's ferocious crosswinds and having your heart come out of your chest because you just moved 6 feet across the road in a split second. But fear gets back pocketed because, after all, this is a race. Limbs and skin be damned. Go hard or go home. At 70 miles I get very, very tired even though I'm eating and drinking and, I think, pacing myself pretty well. So I back off

and try not to freak out as my average speed drops from above 20 mph to just below. In an Ironman you simply can't panic. There will be good and bad patches. You just have to be patient, think them through and ride them out so to speak.

A look around at the competition shows that a lot of people are feeling the effects of the winds. Suddenly just about everyone looks like they are suffering. I welcome the company. It all starts feeling good again at about 90 and I press on the gas and head for home. It's funny how at the end of an exhausting bike leg you actually look forward to running. Well at least my butt was looking forward to it!

Salt-encrusted, wobbly-legged, I shuffle into T2 and run, not knowing if it's going to be good or bad, fast or slow or worse, a death-march. A 7:35 first mile that felt easy gave me encouragement, but I've done this before and I know not to get too excited. Eight miles later I'm still moving well and I realize that I'm going to run well today for the first time in 7 attempts at the Ironman distance.

You know it's tough when you pass pros that look fried. This race humbles many including the very best. The energy lab section with 100 plus degree temperatures just didn't feel hot to me this day. In fact, I never felt hot or overheated during the run. Maybe it was the VOG (volcanic smoke) that blocked out the sun. Or maybe it was my Portuguese genetics or mid-afternoon 20 mile runs in Sacramento's summer. Who cares? I managed a 3:35 marathon with no walking, no death marches for a change. My 10:35 finishing time included twenty Thermolyte electrolyte capsules, 2700 calories ingested, gallons of water, lots of self-doubt, lots of pain and suffering. And we call this fun.

I have to say crossing the finish line (coherently this time) is one of the great experiences in triathlon. It made me want to go back and do it all again. I'm sure my brain will have blocked out all the difficult parts of the day and I'll naively and enthusiastically toe the line thinking, "how hard can this be"?

Side note: my good friend and local Gold River resident, Elizabeth (Leenie) Calkins won the 30-34 age group and broke 10 hours! She was second overall amateur female by only two minutes and if not for a flat at mile 100, would have easily captured first. Having done one long brick workout with her in the lead up to Kona I can attest to her extreme fitness level. She just flat out kicked my ass. Congratulations Leenie, one of the very best amateur half and full triathletes in the world.