

# Recollections of an IRONMAN

Can you imagine two and a half thousand swimmers setting off from a 120 metre wide stretch of beach and heading straight out to sea towards a buoy on the horizon? The mass of flailing arms and bobbing heads resembled a shoal of piranha fish zeroing in on its prey, or so I'm told. I couldn't see it as I was part of the melee of wetsuits and multi-coloured swim caps jockeying for position and trying to find a calmer patch of water where I could get into some sort of rhythm. Once underway, with heart rate steadying after the initial adrenalin surge, I started to enjoy myself despite the alien environment. The surreal nature of the situation brought an underwater smile to my face. This was it... ..the goal I'd focused on and trained for over the past six months was here and now...Nice, 6.30am June 28<sup>th</sup> - Ironman France 2009.



I remember being egged on to enter by JP. We'd had a few drinks. "I'll enter if you do", he'd said. It didn't take too much egging before I submitted my details and the 350 Euros entry fee. (How much?!). Swim 2.4 miles Bike 112 miles Run 26 miles. Doesn't sound too bad if you read it quickly. My running and biking would be okay with six months of full on training but my major concern was the fact that I could only swim two lengths of Todmorden pool...and I hated swimming.

I improved in the pool month by month with help and advice from JP and many other Toddie swimmers but, although I managed to acquit myself reasonably well in my first swimming pool sprint triathlons, my initial forays into open water proved to be a sobering experience. Increased heart rate brought on by the cold, and by a fear of the unknown depths below, caused me to panic if I got too far from the shore. With six weeks to go this did not bode well. I finally cracked my fear syndrome in Derwentwater. JP, Emma and Sarah had stopped to check on me a few 100 metres from shore. By now the head games had the upper hand. "The waves are too big", I'd almost persuaded myself. "Don't even think about going back", JP chided, "it might be this rough in Nice". I knew he was right and, blocking out the negative thoughts, I ploughed on and eventually found myself relaxing and enjoying the experience. This half Ironman swim round St Herbert's Island proved to me that I had the mental as well as the physical strength to do it. When we went swimming in Nice the week before the event I couldn't believe just how buoyant we were in our wetsuits in the sea. I finally felt ready. "Bring it on!".



And so it was that Emma, JP and myself found ourselves part of the thrashing shoal of would be Ironpersons swimming out to sea in the Bay of Anges. It was inevitable that there'd be some bumping and kicking with so many swimmers in the water but, despite a few collisions and the odd mouthful of seawater, I felt in control. I even upped the power for the second shorter lap and to my amazement (although I didn't know our swim positions until later) I finished the swim a few minutes up on Emma and JP. The vociferous crowd cheered us all as we ran unsteadily up the ramp, unbalanced by the sudden switch from prone to standing, and blinking in the bright sunlight as we peeled wetsuits down to waist level. I jogged into transition one (T1). I'd rehearsed the sequence of events numerous times in my head...pick up T1 bag...sit down and peel wetsuit off...bibshorts on, having applied a generous dollop of chamois cream to my nether regions... drink some water...slap on sun block. Socks and shoes, cycle top, number belt, gloves, sunglasses, helmet...Go.

Have you ever seen 2600 expensive racing bikes (with an estimated combined worth of over £5 million!?) racked up in sequence? A forest of saddles and wheels beyond wheels disappearing towards infinity as if reflected in two mirrors. Glad that I'd checked my bike's whereabouts beforehand I grabbed it and ran out of T1, over the start line and jumped aboard. With one of the slower swim times overall I hoped to make up some ground on the bike and run. Feeling good I powered the first flat 20km, overtaking lots of riders...but not Emma. She'd been 3 minutes quicker in T1 and a glimpse of her lycra clad backside as she glided past me on her Colnago superbike was all I saw of her until the run. At about 40km we reached

the village of Pont sur Loup and the start of a 21km climb. Some of the bikes cost more than a car but their technical wizardry is of little consequence when faced with a mega-hill; it's the legs that count.

The road wound its way up to the high valley of Coussins, not too steep, but relentless in its upwardness. Fortunately there was occasional shade from the hot sun and the fanatical cheering by the hordes of supporters in every village we passed through spurred us on. The race route undulated through picturesque Provence scenery, with ancient villages straddling the rocky ridges above steeply wooded valleys. The views, when you occasionally tore your concentration from the tarmac, were stunning. More pain as we reached another 7km climb. And yet more from my guts. There had been no gels at checkpoints for the first half of the bike which threw my nutritional plan into disarray. I wasn't able to eat or drink for nearly 3 hours of the ride due to stomach cramps. My "mooseman" impressions, as I tried to bring up the trapped wind, brought plenty of inquisitive looks from fellow riders. JP cruised past me as we raced the out and back to Col du Vence where Mandy, ChrisP, Richard, Jonnee, and George were cheering us on. Then the best bit. Big downhill...38km of it. Down on the drops, hammering the biggest gear, cutting the bends, occasionally 'caressing' the brakes on the hairpins and overtaking lots of less audacious riders. My smile, which had retreated since hitting the big climbs, had now reached Cheshire Cat proportions. The climbs were worth it just for this sheer exhilaration of speed. I battled with JP as we hit the last flat 20km and got into T2 ahead.

In a pre-planned sequence cycling gear was removed and replaced with running kit. A lithe French lady massaged sunblock into my shoulders. "Ooh la la". On jelly legs I ran out onto Nice promenade. Picture 50,000 spectators filling grandstands and lining the 10 kilometre route, cheering and calling our names (our names were on our numbers). "Bravo...courage". Thousands of runners, well spread out now, are running, jogging, shuffling, walking...staggering up and down the promenade under the searing south of France sun. Four laps - sheer purgatory. The heat and the lack of anything in my belly hit me with a double whammy. Only 4 km into the first out and back lap I was feeling dreadful. With the thought of having to run the same section of prom eight times playing havoc with motivation I had fleeting doubts about finishing. The dizziness and weakness were reminiscent of my ill-fated Verdon Canyon Challenge. "I mustn't end up on a drip and oxygen again", I worried.



Emma was at least half a lap up on me and JP overtook me looking strong. Mandy and the Toddie support crew jumped up and down and shouted encouragement every time I passed them. I resorted to walking for a few 100 metres at a time (obviously when Mandy was out of sight!) to try and drop my heart rate and reduce the searing fuzz in my head. We were given a different coloured wrist band at the end of each lap and, with a solitary blue band on my wrist, I spent much of lap two staring enviously at all the runners going the other way with two or three bands. The two lap white band eventually appeared on my wrist. The "half way there" motivation kicked in, as well as the gels I'd finally been able to get down, and the water showers, set up to douse us every two km, now seemed to have a reviving effect. I managed to up the pace, encouraged by the crowds, "allez allez Pheel", they were shouting. Lap three was easier and as I picked up the final red band I also picked up my feet and started running properly. This was more like it. I actually enjoyed the last lap and, finishing strongly, I waved to the crowd as I sprinted up the blue carpet to the timing arch over the finishing line. I raised a fist for the photographers, "Yes", I grinned to myself, "I've done it! ... I'm an Ironman". Emma and JP were waiting just past the finish. We hugged, elated in our success and having finished only three minutes apart.

I'll leave you to guess who didn't need a post-race drip...Ha!

**Phil (Ironman) Hodgson**