

Some thoughts on my 2011 Ironman season.



Last year I completed Ironman Austria after - relatively speaking - very little training compared to previous years. It was a late decision to enter having taken some time off training post Ironman Hawaii the previous October, but still I finished Austria in 9hrs 27mins; a good time for me. That result got me to thinking. Breaking 9hrs might just be an achievable goal. On the right day, on the right course, it might just be possible. Back in 2008 as a young whippersnapper of 41 years, on a miserable cold and wet day in Roth Germany, with a time of 9hrs 17mins, I briefly held the Irish Ironman record. Ever since, I have always felt that on a dry day with a good build-up I could go faster on that course and perhaps even sub nine. It was worth another visit.

Now that Luke was very much his own man; a hard task master and independent of mind as most two year olds are, I knew he was going to demand a lot of my attention this year. Gone were the mid day sleeps that allowed me to sneak in a regular short (very quiet) training session last year. The bulk of my training would now have to be very early morning and very late at night (often these two distinctions were much the same thing - thankfully as we get older we need less sleep). Nor could I abandon Eimear for hours on end and head for the hills at weekends. Eimear was pregnant and expecting in April. If I was to get into sub nine shape I would need to overhaul my somewhat casual approach to training and adapt it to my limited time. Gone were the long aimless meandering winter turbo sessions and many of the long runs. I upgraded my much abused turbo trainer for one that displayed power to make sure I eaked everything I could from shorter efforts. My runs were to be higher tempo, shorter and included quite a few brutal hill sessions and a lot of treadmill running. I swam with Wexford Tri Club once a week to have an experienced eye look over my technique and to ensure one good session a week out of my usual three where I would just settle for a few steady lengths.

My hope was that any endurance base I had accumulated over the previous five years of ironman racing would stand to me. Obviously I would not recommend anyone new to the sport neglect the long distance stuff in training, but I had to be flexible with my time. The only long bike sessions this year were on my always eagerly awaited and most enjoyable annual three day pilgrimage to Neil O'Brien's Tour Tailtearn over the St Patricks bank holiday weekend.

Emily arrived on the 11th of May at 10:30 in the morning. We brought her home at teatime that same day. As we wrapped her lovingly in blankets and placed her in her crib for her first night of sleep in this world, she opened one beautiful eye, looked at us and cried. She cried all night. Somewhere buried deep under all the other more important emotions racing through my mind at the time a little voice suggested I might be having a rather long taper for Roth. Emily never cried again, at night or during the day. She is a great sleeper and when she is not sleeping she smiles, laughs and studies her hands intently. Luke was an easy baby but Emily is extraordinary. It is only thanks to the good nature of my children, their fondness for sleeping and also a very easy going, supportive (and resigned to the fact) wife that I can train for these races.

I have to say I did enjoy my training this year - I always do, but particularly this time with the adjusted emphasis it was in many ways new and refreshing. I became a morning person. I enjoyed having the early morning country roads, forest trails and nature to myself. Even the snow that wreaked havoc on the country and destroyed the bitumen around here was beautiful to run knee deep in. I enjoyed chasing numbers on the turbo trainer and treadmill. I even revamped my playlist and discovered some great new tracks to train to.

It all seemed to work. My first of two hit outs before Roth was at the Tri-Athy Double Olympic distance race in early June where I overcame a big deficit on the swim to place a very close second. My highest ever position in any race. Another second at the Skerries sprint the weekend before Roth had me flying out in good form.

Roth is a different place in sunshine. Logistically with the separated transitions not the easiest to navigate before or after the race, but it deserves its place as one of the great long distance triathlons of the world.

This year on race day the weather Gods were kinder to us than 2008. I was four minutes faster in the swim. Transition was quick and for the first of two laps on the bike I felt very strong. Perhaps it was a combination of being one or two long training rides short and some daft surges I put in to keep ahead of a small pack of riders whose antics were annoying me when I should have just let them go that the second lap saw me struggling for a while. But by the end of the bike I was feeling better again and although I didn't know it at the time the 4hrs 49mins I recorded was my best ever bike split.



I quickly got into the run. It was hot but very manageable with good shade for the first few kilometres. I was catching people quickly. I had no idea of times or pace, I was running on feel and I felt great. The only person to pass me was Brian Campbell ten kilometres into the marathon. Brian is a beautiful runner and to have him overtake me is no disgrace. Twenty one kilometres into the marathon and the now all too familiar sudden and violent urge to go to the loo strikes. The half way point of the run is also the most crowded with many hundreds of spectators lining both sides of the track. After some anxious minutes and a lot of grimaces a portaloo appeared just in the nick of time. You know you are tired when you would rather sit amongst the stench and the flies in a steamy sweltering portaloo than get up and continue. Eventually as my complexion takes on a lurid green tinge that has nothing to do with the sunlight streaming through the green plastic walls; I am forced to abandon my refuge. Back running and the annoying task of catching people I had already overtaken begins. Three kilometres down the road and I have to do it all again. It was even harder to get up for the second time but when I do I find I am back running very comfortably again. The psychological boost of being over the halfway point in the marathon is always good. Thoughts can begin to turn to finishing and I always allow myself to get a little excited. Heading up to the last turnaround in the run I find I am closer to some people I recognise than expected and now possibly running quicker than them too. A good time may still be on the cards.

Just before the finish line the run takes a cruel right turn for a two kilometre loop around the old town centre of Roth. The atmosphere here more than makes up for the course planners little joke. Right in the town centre we run through a narrow chute lined with 100's of beer swilling sausage eating Germans. An announcer calls out the names and nationalities of everyone passing through. Music is playing and high fives are being exchanged all round. I am lamping it at this stage, looking forward to finishing and grinning like a big kid. I leave the hullaballoo of the town centre behind and head towards the finishing stadium a kilometre away. Soon I begin to recognise some buildings and street furniture that I have seen before. Before I know it, having somehow missed a turnoff I am back at the town centre being announced to the crowds for a second time. Try as I might this cranky little Irishman could not muster a smile second time round. Still when I did get to the finish line my time of 9 hrs 9 mins was a big personal best and fourth place in the 45 age group.

Without the few little incidents I can't say if I would have broken 9 hours, it might have been close but there is no point beating myself up over it. What rankers more is I was only thirty seconds off a podium spot in my age group and not too far behind the over 45 age group winner either.

I hadn't made any plans for after Roth. Usually that's it for the season but there was a little itch that needed scratching. I had a sense that I had let myself down just a little with the wrong turn and hadn't quite done justice to my training. The GI issues were unfortunate but the wrong turn was stupid. I began to formulate a cunning plan for another long distance race this year to hopefully make amends. Barcelona in October seemed to fit the bill and I forcibly put my case before Eimear. A flying visit, October sunshine, beaches, babysitters. She couldn't refuse. Barcelona has the potential to be a fast course which was also appealing.

A fifth place in a sprint tri in Wexford was my only build up race before Barcelona. Recording the fastest run split was very encouraging but a spill on the bike after successfully negotiating the most technical part of the course was a sore reminder of my bike handling limitations (I can't believe - nor would anyone else who knows me, that I could ride my Raleigh 18 to and from school with out

touching the handlebars back in the 1970's).

Five weeks before Barcelona the Ryans decamped to Kinsale for a family break. I brought my gear for some very early runs while everyone else slept. There is some marvellous scenery and bracing runs along the Old Head of Kinsale and something about the salty air and soil down there that produces the best blackberries I have ever tasted whilst out running. Nicer than any old energy bar you might bring along.

On the Tuesday morning for a little variety I decided on a bit of a hill session. The intention was ten sprints up the King of the Hill triathlon course hill. On my sixth ascent while chasing and overtaking two mature ladies on bikes something gave in my calf. I would swear I heard a snap. I stumbled to an unseemly halt and continued to swear. I think I must have scared the ladies because they never stopped to inquire as to my wellbeing. A few minutes later I found myself knee deep in the cold soothing waters of Kinsale Harbour watching the sunrise over Charles Fort. I knew immediately my calf was knackered and that there was very little chance of running on it before Barcelona. The morning was so still and the scenery so magnificent that strangely enough I found I wasn't too upset by the consequences of it at the time.

I knew what ever happened Eimear and I were going to Spain and I was going to race. The offer of fulltime babysitting for a long weekend away was never going to be declined. If I had to walk the marathon I would. But I wanted to give myself every chance to run it. I adopted an aggressive approach to self treatment. A combination of anti-inflammatory cream, hot and cold therapy which often included parking my calf directly over the steam outlet in the steam room at my local pool until I couldn't tolerate it any more followed by very cold water. Plenty of painful vigorous deep tissue massage and compression was administered. But what I found worked best was using a TENS machine Eimear had acquired to help with labour pains. The TENS uses a small electrical current to stimulate the nerve fibres causing the associated muscle to twitch. I used it on full blast for days on end. My right leg took on a life of its own much to amusement of Luke. I even tried to sleep with the TENS on but neither Eimear nor myself could sleep with my leg thrashing around between us – I was kindly asked to stop after a few hours. I doubt there is any real science to back up any claims but every time I used it my calf was a deal better.

I have always felt that because of the sacrifices I and other people make enabling me to do what I do, I owe it to them to do the best I can and to enjoy it. These races would not happen if it were not for the thousands of volunteers who also give up their time and I feel I owe it to them as well. Even with my new approach to training this year I have still invested a lot of time selfishly in his sport. Now because of injury I was probably not going to get the return in terms of performance I felt I deserved. But performance is not only a measured of time or position, it can also be how you manage adversity, how you conduct yourself on the day. Performance I guess can be measured in terms of sportsmanship and integrity as well. So I still wanted to perform well for those that matter to me.

As the race approached I was getting very apprehensive. All thoughts of a good time were put aside but I wanted to run the marathon, give the race my best shot and enjoy it. Two days before I went for a forty minute test jog and got through it. There was a little pain towards the end but that could have been my imagination. I was a little more confident.

We ran from beach into the calm clear waters of the Mediterranean on a still beautiful warm autumn morning. The swim in Barcelona is divided into wave starts based on age. The old boys like me were sent off shortly after the professionals and all other women but before the rest of the male age groups. It turned out to be one of the most relaxing gorgeous swims I have ever had. I swam hard without once clobbering or being clobbered by another soul for the whole thing. A slight current slowed everybody on the return to shore ensuring the swim times were not blisteringly fast.

I had a bit of a melt down in transition when I couldn't find my bike (Normally more people have left by the time I arrive and my bike is easier to spot), but could only smile when an over eager official waved a yellow card at me for running around like the panic stricken idiot I was. Another kind gentleman escorted me by the hand to the correct bike and assured me there was no penalty for being disorientated and unable to count.

After leaving town, the bike course hugs the coast; it's long, flat and thankfully relatively corner free. It

has the potential to be a fast course but is quite vulnerable to wind. Heading out of town was a bit of a grind but nice and fast on the return. I felt comfortable on the bike and pushed hard for the duration. Because of the early swim start I pretty much had the road to myself all day. Funnily enough my bike split turned out to be exactly the same as in Roth. Normally after 180km I can't wait to get off the bike, but this time I was quite nervous as the marathon loomed.

On starting the marathon my lack of running in the lead up was immediately obvious, whatever happened it was going to be a long day. Much to my surprise the course took us away from the beachfront onto a main road. It was now baking hot, there was no shade to be had at all and there were four laps of this to contend with. It was going to be tough for everyone.

You don't run an ironman marathon in 30 degree heat – you manage it. It's about settling into a sustainable rhythm, fastidiously managing your food and fluid intake, managing all negative thoughts and of course the hurt.

Usually I eat a bit of chocolate on the bike but today I cut this down to see if it was the chocolate causing my GI issues on the run. Again halfway in the marathon I discovered it wasn't the chocolate. I also learnt that when nipping off the course for a "refreshment" break; if a choice is available don't head for the nearest portaloo to the run course. This was so bad I had to clean it up a bit before leaving. I couldn't have someone else who was already feeling a little delicate find it in the same condition I had.

On the day the conditions on the run course were a great leveller. My pace was slow but consistent. I found I was making progress through the field as the day went on. The faster runners were slowing down and I was hanging on. At the end of each lap I refused to look up at the big screen to check my time. Confirmation of a slow pace plays too much with the mind and can upset the rhythm. Apart from some twinges on the steeper hills my calf felt fine. The rest of me though was shattered, but the excitement of crossing the finish line always keeps me going, finishing never disappoints. My final marathon time was relatively slow, but so was everyone's and despite my dodgy leg I recorded the fastest run split in my age group. My overall time of 9hrs 19mins was good enough to win the over 45 age group and a sixth place overall amateur position. So needless to say I was really pleased. I hope I did my family proud.

This was my eleventh Ironman distance race, eleven times finishing under ten hours, but all the stars would have to line up to get me under nine hours - I think time is probably against me. It would be nice of course, but my ambitions are primarily focused towards my age group position. With consistent top age group placings including a win in Ironman UK and now Barcelona and a podium at the Ironman World Championships in Hawaii, I really would love a serious shot at becoming a World Age group champion. For someone of my "sporting" background to stand on the top podium spot at Kona would be quite something. Obviously its still a pipedream, not to mention a logistical minefield but if anyone out there might be interested in sharing the journey and get their brand up on stage in Kona I would only be too happy to talk to them. Perhaps we can work something out.

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