

Ironman UK 2008

It is all beginning to feel very familiar as we pull up outside the hotel at two o'clock on Saturday morning - the delayed flight, the longer than need be drive and the shut up shop look to reception. Another night in the car it seems is on the cards. At least in Roth I had a few days in hand before the race to catch up on my beauty sleep. This time, Ironman UK is tomorrow. Thankfully, very soon after a somewhat apologetic phone call we are in. Now, all I have to do is smuggle my dismantled bike into our room for assembly without being spotted. I am always a little worried that it will be banished to a back shed. I would fully understand if it were. Soft furnishings and oil do not mix. By ten o'clock, we had slept, breakfasted, my gleaming P3C had been lovingly put back together, hair had been dried and straightened and Eimear and I were on our way to Sherborne Castle - race HQ. I still have to register, sort out transition bags, test my bike mechanic skills, attend the race briefing, check the bike in and have dinner.

Sir Walter Raleigh happened upon Sherborne Castle when travelling to Plymouth and took an immediate shine to the place. He petitioned Queen Elizabeth to "persuade" the Church, who owned it, to relinquish the estate to the Crown.

The lease was very quickly transferred to Raleigh who decided to build himself a fitting home on the site of an old hunting lodge and the rather impressive new castle building came to be. Not too long after, accused of treason, Raleigh lost his head. Sir John Digby purchased Sherborne Castle in 1617. The Digbys have lived there ever since and for the last four years the family have just about tolerated the staging of Ironman UK on their grounds.

The finish, swim start, transition and the Ironman village are all set very close together. Transition is huge and well laid out making it easy to find your way around. Everything fits comfortably on the front lawn of the castle! Registration and bike check-in go without a hitch. I am struck by how polite everyone is. There is a definite English country garden fete feel about it all. The atmosphere is quite relaxed as we take high tea, cheese burgers and chips on the lawn.

There is not as much Lycra on display here compared to the other races I have done. Posing and posturing is at a minimum. Many of the tops I notice proudly display Irish Tri Club logos and I recognise quite a few faces from home races. It seems the Irish are to be well represented on race



day. Aisling Coppinger joins us on the lawn. A mad mountain and ultra marathon runner, Aisling is “stepping down” to the Ironman distance for a change. Mad because she couldn’t swim a few months ago. She is also new to cycling but makes a mean energy bar and generously passes them around.

Of the 1,500 or so bikes in transition I spot only two others sporting a rear disk wheel. Travelling Ryanair doesn’t allow the luxury of bringing a choice of race wheels, so I had committed, irrespective of weather on race day, to the disk months ago. The bike course is an undulating three lap affair with a few big hills thrown in and with the forecast of wind for tomorrow I can somewhat understand the lack of other disks. I have not raced this wheel before, but my brother Ferg had used it to good effect at a very windy Kilkee during the summer. A rear disk should not really be problem in windy conditions, a deep rimmed front wheel is a different matter of course. I was still getting a little anxious about my decision to go with it all the same. The fact that it was a Zipp Sub9, of course played a big part in my decision. The sales propaganda claims a “positive lift effect and zero drag”. How could I resist that? Surely if you hit the hills fast enough it will practically lift you up over them - maybe not!

Just as we are about to make our way to the very polite race briefing, the sky clouds over and the heavens open. Images of the deluge in Roth come back to unnerve me even more. The global wet season continues.

It’s a very cold blustery morning. Although the ground is still very wet and boggy from yesterday’s rain, thankfully it has now stopped. It is still far to dark to forecast what the weather may have in store for us today, but I have learnt to expect the worst and anything less is always a pleasant surprise.

The water in Lancelot “Capability” Brown’s magnificent 1753 addition to the Sherborne grounds is rather chilly. The pre-eminent landscape gardener of his time, Brown was very fond of including a serpentine shaped lake in his commissions. He refused all offers to work in Ireland, glibly saying it was “because he had not finished landscaping England”. Whatever the real reason, triathlon in Ireland has as a result probably missed out on a number of great race venues.

We are held for quite a while in the cold water. The black of night turns to a dark grey of night. There is no dramatic sunrise – there is no sun. At one point the tension is broken by a shivering male voice declaring his love for a partner whom he has lost amongst the bobbing head soup. His heart felt declaration is followed by a couple of other, “So do I’s”

before being completely drowned out by the gun and the sudden eruption of flaying limbs. We can just about make out the hazy outline of the first buoy and we all begin a frantic scramble in that general direction.

As has become the norm in recent races I very quickly begin to feel decidedly ill. I have experimented with different breakfasts to no effect. Some of it may be due to the wetsuit pressing on my stomach and of course my swim fitness is not what it could be. It takes the first of the two loops this morning before my alimentary canal begins to settle down. Apart from the queasiness and a narrow course I have a relatively smooth and thump free swim.

To avoid the physical stuff you either have to swim out front at the pointy end of the race, stay back at the start, or get shot out the back soon after the gun goes. I can see from the number of people swimming down the other side I am nowhere near the front. Nor did I hang too far back at the start. On exiting the water my suspicions are confirmed in transition as I begin to remove my wetsuit. Beside me is a rather mature rather cold woman rummaging through her over-packed transition bag. Out of the corner of my I eye I am sure I spot a lipstick. I can’t help but be impressed and I am tempted to congratulate her on her good swim but don’t for fear she might think me patronising. The sky still looks grey outside as I grab the optional arm warmers from my bag and shove the wetsuit in. As I run from the changing tent my neighbour seems to be shakily applying eye shadow. I am now very impressed. That said, I am always amazed at how much unnecessary stuff people put in their transition bags. It gets in the way. Today I only had the arm warmers. In Roth I had nothing. My helmet is on the bike. Unfortunately both arm warmers and helmet do not go on easily. After a little panic I get going again but my transition is slow.

Now I have to start making up some places. As soon as we leave the castle grounds we are greeted by the first hill. It’s a few kilometres long and takes us out to the main looped section of the course. The coarse bumpy nature of the road surface is immediately apparent. It is nothing like the smooth fast surfaces of the European and Kona courses. It’s another factor along with the wind and hills that is going to sap our energy today and curtail our speed. Heading up the hill it occurs to me that this is the first Ironman I have done on the left hand side of the road. I have never had to grab drinks bottles with my left hand before. I hope my suspect coordination is up to it!

Despite the challenging conditions, I immediately feel good on the bike and start to pass a steady stream of cyclists. The route meanders through a number of small quaint hamlets where all the buildings are made from fine grained yellow

sandstone. As I beetle along, heading south towards the turn north just before the spectacular “Jurassic Coast” my mind wanders back to the last time I was in this part of the world.

Many years ago when in college, myself and Eimear passed through here on a Geology fieldtrip. The geology of this area really is very interesting. I won't bore you with that; except to say that complete dinosaur skeletons have been chipped out of the rocks in these parts, much of which is now a World Heritage Site. Of course most of the real fieldwork was done in the evenings over a pint and a smoke. Well to be honest a lot of pints and smoke.

I smile at the memories and how things have changed and then drop my first attempt at grabbing a bottle. Concentrate! Although I do drink regularly, I only need to restock at every second or third aid station because of the cold. The occasional dropped bottle is not really a problem. I continue to work my way along eating my Lionbars and a couple of gels. It's an interesting course; there are very few flat sections. It's always either up or down. The wind is a big factor at times and despite the “zero drag, positive lift” of the disk the going is tough.

Apart from three missed corners due to other lapses in concentration, a saddle that suddenly pitches way forward and won't go back, two dead squirrels and the scattered remnants of a rather explicit pornographic magazine at the base of one of the climbs, the cycle is uneventful. I actually feel stronger on the last lap but am still surprised to catch the wonderfully luminous pink Bella Comerford and her matching bike before the end of it. Initially I think she must be having a bad day, but when I see the amount of media and official entourage around her I realise she is the leading woman. This is new ground for me. I have never caught the leading woman before.

On entering transition again I can see there are very few bikes in ahead of me. It's a pleasant sight and does lift the spirits. In fact, I am twenty second off the bike and having been 255th out of the water it

was a good cycle on a tough slow course.

A quick transition this time and I am straight into my running. The legs feel good. On completing the first short loop, I spy Bella leaving transition. I must be about three minutes ahead of her. Famed for her hard running particularly towards the end of the marathon I reckon it would be quite something if I could hold her off to the finish. An unlikely scenario I concede, but the challenge will certainly spur me along. She will be my new Mark Riseley! Obviously, an Ironman at the amateur level is really a race against your own demons, but it does help to have faces in the pack to pit yourself against.

When I signed up for this race last year I was particularly attracted by the marathon course. Much of it was to be run on a dual-carriageway. Although it had received a lot of unfavourable comment from many of last year's contestants, I was actually looking forward to the dual-carriageway section. I like cycling and running in straight lines. Cycling because my cornering is appalling and running because my hips only work in one plane. Sometime after Christmas the marathon course completely changed. Hats off to them for actually finding this new one. It had everything, bends, hills, mud, grass, potholes, quaint streets, gardens, school yards, back lanes, forest trails and barriers. It was interesting indeed. The organisers wanted to bring the race into Sherborne town and involve the local community more. It was working a



treat. The atmosphere in the town section is great and to be honest the challenging course was actually fun.

There are a number of turnaround points where I can check my progress against Bella/Mark and it seems I am holding her off; the charge will come soon no doubt. At one point, I recognised a face just ahead of Bella – Declan Doyle another Irishman whom I have had a few good races with in the past. He beat me well in Austria last year. I was denied the opportunity of revenge in Hawaii last October when he unfortunately crashed badly at the start of the bike. Now there were two.

I press on, taking anything I can grab at the aid stations. Gel, Coke, Gatorade, water, it doesn't matter what. Everything goes in and most of it manages to stay there. At every vantage point I can see I am maintaining the gap on Declan and Bella. Of course they are probably not aware of me but that doesn't matter at all. I have no idea how many people are ahead, but I do manage to overtake one or two. It's hard to be sure because on a three lap course there are others joining all the time. I am overtaken on my last lap by two runners who storm past together. Initially I think they must be the leaders lapping me as they are moving so well. Of course it later occurs to me that if they were the leaders they would have to have been on a lap of honour – very unlikely and I chastise myself for not attempting to stay with them but it's too late now.

The best part of doing an Ironman is not the finish. It's that moment as you approach the end when you suddenly realise you are going to do it. A broad smile breaks out across your face, all pain disappears (temporarily) and you allow yourself to get excited. Soon you turn off the course and see the carpet ahead. Your feet get lighter and you float along, lifted by the crowd to the line. I have done six of these now and the sense of elation never diminishes.

This time I hear the announcer mention that I am first of the over forties in. This is more new territory for me. It was a relatively slow race all-round but I am delighted with my time of 9:45, nearly half an hour ahead of the next person

in my age group. It's particularly satisfying as I gave up 17 minutes to him on the swim. I have also recorded the fastest bike and run splits in my age group and am a little stunned to learn I was 15th overall; fifty places better my previous best position.

It turns out that one of the two lads who overtook me on the run was Alvin Cooney an Irishman living in Liverpool. Alvin came in 14th, second in his age group. Declan came in just behind me in 16th also second in his age group. Three Irish, 14th, 15th and 16th; not a bad result at all and all three of us qualify for the World Championships in Hawaii. No mean feat at a race where Hawaii slots are few and far between.

The hardest part of the weekend was having to decline my Hawaii slot. But Alvin and Declan will be there flying the flag along with Tara Nolan. Watch out for some great results from those three. I am particularly pleased for Declan who has some unfinished business with the Kona course. I mentioned earlier that he crashed last year, but despite a broken wrist, a collection of cracked ribs, a punctured lung and some fine road rash he still managed to finish. I think his finishing may even have involved sneaking out of the medical tent to start the marathon – crazy! Best of luck to them all. I would love to be there. Maybe next year and after I have learnt to swim. If anyone has any advice on how to swim properly I would love to hear it.

As I am wheeling my bike back to the car a green singlet flashes past on the marathon course and speeds up the next hill. The mad ultra marathon runner Aisling it seems has got through the swim and bike and is well on her way to recording on of the fastest woman's run splits of the day.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed my IM UK experience. Unfortunately, it seems the present Lord Digby doesn't share my enthusiasm. Because of the rains in the lead up to the event, race day traffic churned up the grounds and made a bit of a mess of his lawn. The grass will always grow back but it seems the race will need to find a new home for next year. It's a pity; it was a great venue for a challenging race.