

TRIATHLON TIMES

A Journey to Ironman Glory

2011 Almere Long Distance Triathlon Report

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Introduction

“Ben je klaar?” asked the young TV reporter enthusiastically in Dutch, thrusting his microphone into my face. His eyes were full of anticipation, keenly awaiting my response. His cameraman colleague was focussing on me, capturing my startled expression. “Do you speak English?” I replied, somewhat apologetically. “Are you ready?” the reporter translated quickly, the microphone back in my face before I knew it. There I was, standing near a beach on chilly August morning, making the last few adjustments to my bike 45 minutes before the biggest race of my life so far, the 2011 Long Distance Triathlon in Almere, Holland. I pondered my reply for a few seconds. I had trained religiously for this day for the last seven months, since 31st January to be precise, and in recent weeks had sacrificed many other aspects of my life to accommodate the high demands of the training programme. Today was the climax of months of dedication interrupted only by a minor ankle injury earlier that month, and a slight if persistent pain in my shoulder that had surfaced four days ago. “Yes,” I responded simply, slightly surprising myself. The microphone wasn’t withdrawn, the young reporter’s eager eyes remained fixed on me. Clearly, he was hoping I would elaborate somewhat on my sudden self confidence. So I rambled on about how I had trained hard for this day and how I had been lucky with my preparations to avoid any major injuries or setbacks. I then digressed and explained that I was competing with my wife too and that we had driven over from England two days before, the journey lasting 11 hours. After one or two more questions and answers he and his cameraman left me to continue my bike tinkering and, as they marched excitedly to another competitor, I hoped that they had sufficient material from our interview to edit a half decent clip for whichever obscure Dutch Triathlon TV Network that they must work for.

The Event

A triathlon is a multi-sport event in which competitors must swim, cycle and run; one sport immediately after the other. There is no respite, except for two quick transitions either side of the cycle to swap to the next discipline. A long distance, or Ironman distance race such as Almere, is of a specific distance: 3.8km swimming followed by a 180km cycle before running a marathon (42.2km). An Ironman distance triathlon is widely regarded as one of the toughest one-day endurance challenges for athletes who seek to push their bodies to the limit. A race like Almere requires significant training. I had been competing fairly casually in shorter distance triathlons for five years before Almere, without any structured training plans. My wife Sonja had given me the triathlon bug shortly after she did her first event eight years before and in 2010 she had qualified for and competed at the Triathlon World Championships in Budapest, a remarkable achievement. It was just before we flew to Hungary that year that we decided the year after would be defined by our first Ironman Distance race. The idea of tackling this ultimate challenge had several factors that appealed to me, none more so than finally attempting to do my triathlon potential some justice. Until now the sport had been a casual hobby on the side that I pursued with only moderate interest and little structure. I had often completed triathlon races feeling generally satisfied with my performance, but knowing I could probably have done a lot better had I trained properly.

After deciding to attempt an Ironman distance race, we had settled on Almere due to its fairly low-key nature (less than 300 competitors in total), and for the forgivingly flat course that it offered Ironman virgins like us. With perfectly straight roads and no hills to speak of, the cycle route wouldn’t require any technical bike handling skills or tough climbs, all we would need to do would be

rotate the crank on the bike about 22,000 times whilst pointing the handlebars straight ahead. How hard could it be? And after that run a marathon, again on flat roads and paths. In hindsight there was a danger of underestimating the mental strength required on a course that offered such little variety, but at the point of officially signing up online in February 2011 (to the tune of €200 each, a bargain by Ironman race standards) we were blissfully ignorant of all that.

Friday 26th August, day before the race

Having arrived in Holland by car the day before, we had spent the morning relaxing in the hotel with our feet up. Such was the training and preparation that had gone into the race that we had even created a timetable of the final three days before the event to ensure we were in the optimal racing condition come race day, with minimal stress. This timetable detailed exactly what we should be doing at what time in the days preceding the race, and that morning at 09:00 it was putting our feet up in the hotel. A few hours before, at 06:00, we had completed our final training session of the 30 week programme, a gentle 20 minute run along the dyke towards Amsterdam to keep our legs fresh. In those 30 weeks we had trained over 350 hours, an average of almost 12 hours per week! That included running over 1,000 miles and cycling over 2,500. I don't even want to calculate the number of lengths in the pool that I had done. In the early days it had been difficult to adjust to the rigours of a structured training programme and I had suffered a couple of small injuries. As time wore on however (and a cold winter gave way to a warm spring!) training more easily slotted into my daily routine and I found it less taxing to motivate myself for the sessions. As the weeks passed I think fear of undoing all of the good training I had managed until that point spurred me on not to skip any sessions through laziness. I also found myself watching motivational videos of the annual Ironman World Championships in Hawaii on YouTube and began to relish the thought of my own small dose of Ironman glory later that year. In the final weeks of training, when the average volume was nearer 20 hours per week, these factors combined to ensure I could bring myself to forgo almost an entire weekend for several weeks by training for at least seven hours on Saturday, and then four on Sunday. On top of the training hours there is the time required for kit preparation, stretching, showering, washing of smelly sports clothes, requirement for rest and the discipline of going to bed early every night. Social life inevitably suffered, I hadn't even seen my mum since she turned 60 last month! My life consisted of working, training, eating and sleeping for the final eight weeks! I have no doubt it is possible to complete an Ironman distance race on less training, but I was out to realise my triathlon potential and in strange way I was enjoying it. I was throwing my life and soul into this race. It became my obsession. Just as well my wife was doing the same!

At midday on 26th August we arrived at race registration as planned and collected the necessary race equipment such as race numbers and a swimming cap. This also included a timing chip to be worn on the ankle during the race. As well as allowing the organisers to automatically count laps during the race and consolidate results quickly, every time a chip passed over a race checkpoint the official race website was updated, allowing friends and family not at the event to track their loved ones' progress on the day. My parents (in England) and parents-in-law (in USA) didn't know it yet, but tomorrow they would be in for a nail-biting time! In the hall adjacent to registration we attended the race briefing, a young Dutch chap reading through a deck of fairly dull PowerPoint slides, painstakingly translating each of his sentences into English. We then drove to the race venue to leave our bikes in the transition area where we would find them the following morning. We wheeled the bikes from our car to their stands and, after packing our bike and run bags for the respective

transitions and handing them over to the race officials at the changing tent we returned to the hotel for an early night.

Saturday 27th August, race day

The alarm sounded at 04:30 and 15 minutes later I was sitting up in bed eating my breakfast of four energy bars, as well as sipping a bottle of Gatorade energy drink. Energy bars aren't the tastiest of snacks at the best of times, but they taste worse before 5am. Nonetheless, I had done my research and tested this breakfast at a shorter race earlier in the season, and they seemed to have worked then. After a quick shower to wake myself up and triple checking the race day checklist, Sonja and I got into the car and made the 15 minute journey along the A1 from our hotel to the race venue in Almere. Nerves and apprehension of the previous day had given way to a desire to just get the race over with. There was a calm focus about our final preparations. Almere is an unspectacular port town, battered by North Sea winds. That morning there was a chill in the air, but as it got lighter it became clear that cloud cover was only scattered and we would probably be spared rain, at least for the swim! Shortly after my stuttering interview with the Dutch TV crew the sound of bagpipe players was blasting out from the area just outside transition. We soon learnt that this group of unassuming enthusiasts for traditional Scottish music was to lead all 300 competitors along the 800m walk from the transition area to the start of the race; a modest, fairly dirty looking beach. After consuming a last minute energy gel and kissing Sonja good luck I placed myself towards the back of the group of competitors congregated under a huge red blow up arch at the water's edge that marked the official start. My swimming had improved a lot over the last few months, but four days earlier my shoulder had given way during my final swim training session. Since then I had hardly dared to move it and was totally unsure as to how it would react during the 3.8km swim. My strategy was therefore to seed myself at the back and take a few conservative strokes before playing the injury by ear. Sonja, a much stronger swimmer, was standing at the front. Many competitors had supporters at the race start with wives, husbands and children pressed up against the metal fences that cordoned the competitors off from them. I took one final look at the water and noticed how choppy it was getting, the wind was picking up. It would be a tough day, but I was feeling ready, I just wanted the start gun to go!

The swim

BANG! We were off! Competitors at the front of the pack rushed into the water, whilst those of us at the back waded in a little more cautiously. After 40 seconds I was horizontal in the swimming position and moving my right shoulder for the first time since early that week. So far no pain, but would it last? Within seconds my initial strategy was blown out of the water, literally. I somehow found myself quickly surrounded by other competitors and consequently had to make more forceful movements with my right shoulder just to stay above water. Triathlon starts are notoriously violent and the least favourite part of the race for many triathletes. It is often likened to being in a washing machine, with hundreds of flailing arms and legs thrashing around creating huge splashes with nowhere to escape. Added to that today were the growing waves coming in from the sea, being whipped up by the wind. Our first task was to negotiate a shorter loop of 1.1km out to a bright yellow buoy and back to the beach, before running round the red arch, getting back in and swimming a longer stretch along the coast to where we had left the bikes. Swimming out to the

buoy was utter carnage with everyone swimming over each other into the oncoming waves. I was trying desperately to give my shoulder an easy time, whilst also make some sort of progress to the distant yellow buoy bobbing up and down furiously in the waves. As we reached the buoy the swimmers converged even more as we all sought to take the shortest, tightest route around it. I resorted to breast stroke for a few seconds just to keep my head above water and then settled back into a conservative front crawl once I had rounded it and was heading back towards the beach. A couple of minutes later the field had started to spread out and, with the waves now in the direction I was swimming, it was time to take stock. My shoulder felt ok, although whether that was through pure adrenalin was uncertain. I was also able to look up and locate the red arch. I put my head down and headed for it, still paying attention to my shoulder, suddenly enjoying the comfortable undulation of the waves as they guided me back to land.

My hand scraped along the sand and I stood up clumsily, glancing at my watch. I had swum 1.1km in 20 minutes, not bad for me, especially since I had been swimming with a restricted stroke. After a 10 second dash around the arches I threw myself back into the water and took on the oncoming waves once more. My shoulder was still not causing any noticeable pain, so I stretched the stroke out a bit which helped me to swim a little more efficiently. After reaching the yellow buoy again we turned left to swim parallel to the coast, about 500m out. The biggest challenge now became not to be caught taking a much need breath just as a swell was about to break. This happened a few times, resulting in forced swallowing of murky, gritty water and a desperate gasp for air immediately after. Taking just a small sip of this water whilst on the land would make me feel queasy, but in a triathlon it is one of those things that just seems normal.

By now the field was nicely spread out and I tried to follow the procession of pink swim caps in front of me as we went from one yellow buoy to the next, at intervals of about 250m. The swim felt like a constant battle with the waves, even though we were swimming perpendicular to them, which can very quickly become exhausting. Most of my swim training had taken place in the swimming pool or, occasionally, calm lakes. My training certainly hadn't prepared me for storm like conditions in the North Sea! As such it felt like I had swum further than I had and at one point I became convinced that the next buoy in the distance must be the last one before we banked left for the coast and swim finish. To my horror, as the buoy approached I spotted another one further on! I had to dig deep mentally and brace myself for another 250m of fighting the sea. It wasn't until that situation had repeated itself once more that we finally started to swim towards land. As I came up to breathe every couple of strokes in the final metres I caught glimpses of spectators looking out of their apartment windows and standing on their balconies cheering the competitors on, with a slight sense of bemusement. Some must have been wondering what possesses people to jump into the North Sea at 07:30 in the morning and swim through the harbour between the imposing, anchored ships. I guess that only triathletes themselves could ever know.

Transition 1

I grabbed hold of the make shift rail protruding into the water of the port and hauled myself out of the sea. I steadied myself then checked my watch. 1 hour 6 mins for the swim! I couldn't believe it, I would have been happy with that time without the worry of a potentially injured shoulder, as it was I had achieved that whilst swimming for the most part within myself, paranoid of aggravating my shoulder. That excitement gave me sudden rush of energy and in my restrictive neoprene wetsuit I

waddled with haste along the 200m carpeted stretch lined with supporters, towards the bikes, overtaking a couple of other competitors in the process. I approached the transition area and entered the changing tent. The bike bags we had handed over yesterday were all lined out in the long tent and I quickly located mine and tipped it out at my feet before yanking off my wetsuit. I had even rehearsed this transition in the weeks before the race, stripping and changing at full speed in our living room! I reached for my towel, dried myself quickly and put on some heavy duty cycling shorts for the 180km road ahead. Once my heart rate monitor and top were on I dashed out to my bike, put on my helmet and sunglasses and started pedalling.

The bike

The cycle route consists of three 60km loops around the countryside of northern Holland. The first 15km is an out and back along the dyke, with a strong cross wind blowing in from the sea. It then follows a near enough square along pan flat agricultural roads with sides of about 11km. 11km inland, turn left. 11km parallel to the coast, turn left. 11km back to the coast, turn left. 11km to complete the lap, turn left. Repeat, twice. The littering of gigantic wind turbines visible throughout the course, blades whizzing around at full speed, gives the cyclist reason to fear that left turn back to the coast as the wind that had been so kind in acting as extra forward power on the inland leg suddenly becomes your worst enemy. That was one challenge of the Almere course we had definitely overlooked when signing up. Another, less obvious challenge is the loneliness. Apparently Holland is the most densely populated country in Europe, with more heads per square km of area than any other. The Almere bike course is another matter altogether. With just 300 competitors spread out over 60km, you rarely see more than three to four other cyclists at a time, and at times none at all, which leaves you wondering whether the race is still on! It is reassuring when you come across a lone race marshal, dutifully standing at one of the few junctions to hold traffic up in the rare instance that a car needs to cross the course as a cyclist is passing. And then there are the aid stations, punctuating the course every 15km or so, manned by half a dozen marshals eagerly advertising their offerings of bananas and water bottles as you approach. I began to feel guilty as they trudged back to their tables in disappointment in the middle of nowhere after I had cycled past without taking anything, knowing it could be a while before another cyclist came along. My nutrition plan had been tried and tested in training and everything I would need was attached to my bike. I planned to consume one energy bar and two energy gels per hour, as well as drink my way through 3 litres of fluid. That works out at about 400 calories per hour. The monotony of the course meant that eating times (every 15 minutes) became little milestones to look forward to, something to do that broke up the long journey to the start line of a marathon.

My progress on the bike was promising. When we signed up for the race my goal had been to finish; even better if I could get round the swim, bike and run in less than 13 hours total. As we got closer to race day, I began revising my goal based on training times, a practice which is generally not recommended. My new goal was to finish in less than 11 hours. If I could complete the swim in 1 hour 10 mins, each transition in 5 mins, the bike in 6 hours 10 mins that would leave 3 hour 30 mins for the marathon. The goal time for the bike was split into 6 hours pedalling time and 10 mins for a couple of potential toilet stops, given I would be drinking 3 litres of liquid. In hindsight, those 10 mins were a bit of an overestimation, especially after passing a couple of male competitors hanging conspicuously over their stationary bikes on the side of the course, their stream diverted by the wind. Based on those examples I recalculated I would need maximum 1 min per toilet stop, however

it transpired that I was able to avoid going completely until I returned to the transition area at the end of the cycle course. I had cycled the first 60km in less than 2 hours, which meant that, given my better than expected swim, I was well within budget and had some minutes to spare. I had also been careful not to go out too hard on the bike early on, a well known rookie mistake in long distance triathlon. The danger of making this mistake is even higher at Almere, since pushing hard is an obvious way to combat the boredom of a flat and lonely course. I remained patient however, as some of the slower swimmers powered past me on the bike in the early kilometres. I didn't know what they were capable of, but I wasn't going to let my race strategy be distracted by other competitors. I just concentrated on trying to hold an average speed of 30km/h.

At almost half way through the second lap I came up behind Sonja. As expected she had exited the water ahead of me and had also been maintaining a healthy pace on the bike. We exchanged words of encouragement and no sooner had the welcome distraction of speaking to someone arrived, than we were alone again with just the wind as company in the flat, open Dutch countryside. I saw the same herd of half a dozen cows in their small field on the second lap as I had on the first. They hadn't appeared to have moved in the preceding two hours, they were probably grateful for the company of cyclists breezing past every few minutes. At this point I started to push a bit harder. The wind was picking up as the afternoon approached and I took advantage of the tailwind on the inland leg to average close to 40km/h. I felt comfortable and a sub-6 hour bike was slowly becoming more realistic, a pace I had only once managed to sustain during my training rides back in hilly England. The dreaded left turn into the wind on the second lap led to a sharp drop in speed, down to 26km/h, but that was still good enough I thought, it is the average that counts. Back through the town of Almere and the support that lined about 3 km of the course was another welcome distraction, a chance to see that people hadn't forgotten the race and we were still being willed on. On the third lap my lower back started to cause some discomfort, a result no doubt of pushing harder on the second lap. I eased off a bit, but still found I was able to maintain an average of over 30km/h. The sudden gathering of heavy black clouds above and the sight of the wind turbines spinning ever faster provided the motivation I needed to overcome the back pain and complete the bike leg as quickly as I could. One final left turn into the wind called for some gritting of the teeth as I struggled to control the bike and make forward progress in the seemingly gale force winds. My speed deteriorated as quickly as the weather on that final stretch, the rain starting to come down, but by then I knew I had probably done enough on the rest of the course to finish under six hours. I was in surprisingly good spirits.

Transition 2

When I finally turned into transition my bike split read 5 hours 38 mins – a time that exceeded all my pre-race expectations and consequently it gave me a huge lift. I stepped off the bike awkwardly and struggled to stand up, the stiffness in my legs only now becoming apparent. I changed out of my cycle shorts with their extensive padding and slipped hastily into some more comfortable running attire. I hurriedly replaced my helmet with a visor and put on my trainers before dashing over to the mobile toilet 20 metres away with a strong limp, my muscles refusing to loosen up. After 30 seconds I was out of the toilet and much relieved. I reset my watches and attempted to run.

The run

Thankfully it wasn't long before I settled into a comfortable running rhythm. Twice a week for the last 30 weeks I had practised running immediately after cycling, and that was a huge help at the start of the marathon. My legs didn't want to, but they knew the drill well enough by now and duly obliged. Another element of my training had been the increasingly popular run – walk strategy. For Ironman first timers, this is a strategy that aims to make completing the marathon easier without the need for long extended walking periods towards the end, when lots of time can be lost. My plan was to run for 9 minutes, then walk 1 minute. Then repeat. Every 20 minutes I would take on a sports gel and some water. It had worked well in training for me, but this was a race.

The run was again a three lap affair, half of the lap along a different part of the dyke to the bike course and half through the fairly remote cycle paths of Almere. The end of each lap went through the town centre where a make shift stadium had been erected and a couple of hundred people were seated to cheer the runners through. The finishing chute was also in the stadium and at the end of the first two laps you could only look and wish it was your turn to run up it, rather than head back out along the dyke. The run was well supported for a few kilometres, but often it was almost as lonely as the cycle.

As I progressed around the first lap I began making up lots of places and was pleased with my pace. In hindsight it was too quick; I completed the first lap in 1 hour 6 mins, well within my goal time of 3 hours 30 mins for the marathon. I felt great entering the stadium at the end of the first lap, the race announcer shouted my name over the sound system and I acknowledged the crowd. Europe's 1980s smash hit "The Final Countdown" was ringing out which got my adrenalin pumping. I felt so good that I waved my visor around and lapped up the applause of the spectators. If only I had known then how much I was about to suffer.

The second lap was more challenging and soon I began feeling rather sick. I calculated that I had just taken on my nineteenth sports gel that day. I suddenly couldn't stand the thought of another one and almost retched as I contemplated the scenario. My pace had now dropped significantly. Whilst my run pace between walks had been around 4 mins 30 seconds per kilometre during the first lap, it was now down to over 5 minutes and tumbling further towards 6 minutes. I was also walking slightly more frequently as I took sponges and water from the aid stations that dotted the course at 2.5km intervals. Then at the start of the third lap the heavens opened to give the land and everyone on it a complete drenching. With shoes now squelching, visor dripping and pace dropping still further, I realised my 3 hour 30 min marathon seemed optimistic. I still felt hopelessly sick and decided to walk until I felt a bit better, which I did after 6 mins. I started to run again, but it was only really a shuffle and the sole consolation was seeing others shuffling along too now, heads down, shoulders slumped in the soft, silent drizzle that had set in. We took it in turns to slowly overtake each other, as if we got our own little lifts at different times, before reality kicked in again, slowing us down and resetting our positions. My 9 min run 1 min walk strategy had disappointingly morphed into an endless cycle of run for as long as possible before being forced to walk by screaming legs and a stomach in disarray. We passed another kilometre marker: 30km. That is still over 12 km to go. I thought of my long 12km training route back home in England and what it would be like stepping out of my house now to complete it. I couldn't bear the thought, yet that is the equivalent of what was now ahead of me. A little further on I had another check of the watch and started walking again. If I

walked all the way now, which seemed like my only option, 11 hours for the entire race would be touch and go. I had to start my shuffling run again. As I did, with enormous effort, I decided not to look at my watch anymore. It made depressing reading. I was still clinging to the hope of sub-11 hours, but the marathon was turning into a disaster. It was also tiring to lift my arm and concentrate on what my watch said! I hadn't eaten in over an hour and was beginning to feel hungry, if still sick. Still unable to face another sports gel I picked up a couple of slices of orange at the next aid station which seemed to provide a little boost, the taste of something fresh on my tongue. I was now shuffling more consistently and walking less. Suddenly we passed kilometre marker 37. Just 5kms to go! I was now even gaining on some competitors ahead of me, a major psychological boost! The dyke was so straight and flat that I could almost see the finishing stadium in the distance. At 40 km I found a new lease of life and made a dash for it, my pace quickened to the same I was running at the outset, albeit too little too late for the 3 hour 30 minute marathon. But I didn't care; there was still over half an hour to get the finish in a total time of less than 11 hours. Relief took over as I ran faster and faster, every step easier than the last as the music of the stadium, noise of the crowd and the race announcer's voice became louder and louder. As I entered the stadium I felt a little emotional that I had overcome some difficult moments on the run and as I turned up the finishing chute I savoured my moment of glory as the announcer switched from Dutch to English and congratulated me on finishing. It was a proud moment, the culmination of months of effort. My run had taken 3 hour 40 mins (the last lap 20 minutes slower than the first!) and I had completed the race in 10 hours 35 minutes (71st out of 277 competitors). I was elated and gave a pumped up cry of "Come On!" to no one in particular, clenching my fists in front of me in celebration. When Sonja crossed the line just over an hour later we excitedly exchanged our stories of the race, the trials and tribulations. She had also finished well within her goal time, despite being stung in the mouth by a wasp on the last lap of the run and requiring medical assistance! It was a proud day for us both.

After thought

Completing the Ironman after such a demanding training schedule was one of the proudest achievements of my life so far. I had read a lot about the strong emotions felt by athletes on completing this particular challenge, especially first timers, but luckily I was spared these. I feel very contented and would certainly consider doing another one, perhaps even with a new goal of less than 10 hours. But that is for another day and I am now looking forward to getting parts of my life back that were sacrificed to make that wonderful day in Holland possible.

Some pictures

Finishing the first swim loop in 20 minutes



Steadying myself after over one hour in the water



Battling the wind on the 180km bike course



Turbines in the open, flat countryside



A rare encounter with another competitor



Settling into a rhythm early in the marathon



Executing a planned 1 min walk



Feeling good after after the first lap



Pace beginning to fall as stomach plays up



Feeling sick and drenched after the downpour



Elation at the finish!



With my hard earned finisher's medal (after a shower and a massage!)



Sonja, another worthy medal winner!

