

## 2011 - The Year of the Ironman

"When was this ever a good idea?" I contemplated as I stood freezing, looking out onto the rough North Sea. "Ah yes," I reminded myself, "you had come up with this crazy idea after completing your first half ironman race last year, on a hot sunny day in England." Somehow, it had really seemed like a good idea back then...

Training officially started in January. I was incredibly excited to get started, after having done virtually no training for almost 3 months due to constantly being ill. Alas, I had been too eager and it doesn't take a sports scientist to tell you that going from 0km to 45km of running within a few weeks is a recipe for disaster. Piriformis syndrome meant I missed both the Wokingham & Reading Half Marathons and although I stood at the start line of the London Marathon, it was only to be used as a training run. My longest run having been 9 miles, I was happy to get to 17 on the day.

The Windsor Olympic Distance Triathlon was our first triathlon of the year. Unfortunately, I had an awful swim, exiting the water uncharacteristically far down. In my eyes, my race was thus over. T1 ended up being chaotic, and I set off on the bike in a foul mood, posting one of my worst bike splits ever. T2 was equally frenzied and I was still expected to run 10km. Simon meanwhile had a storming performance, finishing off with a sub-40min 10km run! I finally did check the results later in the day and would you believe it, I had only just been beaten into 3<sup>d</sup> place!! I had thus learnt my lesson the hard way: the race really isn't over until it's been run!

Two weeks later we took part in our second Half Ironman race, which was to serve as a dry run for the Ironman in terms of pacing, clothing & nutrition. With no pressure to race, I was actually looking forward to it! The day came and I finally had a decent swim, only just coming out of the water in second place. T1 was a much longer affair than normally, trying to remember the more complicated dressing procedures I would follow during the Ironman. I went out steadily on the bike and things seemed to be going fairly well until the second lap, when my stomach completely cramped up, forcing me to sit up and slow down for 10min. I finished the bike but had lost several places, entering T2 in 6<sup>th</sup> place. I had only managed to take in around 100 calories, hardly any fluids and my stomach was a mess. Unsurprisingly, the run was a challenge but I eventually stumbled across the finish line in tenth place overall in the women's. At least now I knew that my nutrition wasn't working at all and I needed to start afresh.

The next two months following the Half Ironman race would be the most intensive, including one 20hr-training week. I was hating it though; I was training more than ever, yet progress in terms of fitness development seemed painstakingly slow. It probably didn't help that Simon was experiencing the opposite effect; he was flying! It took me a while to get through this rough patch but about 4-5 weeks before race day, I finally managed to pull myself together to put in a final few good training sessions. Disaster did strike however with 3 weeks until the Big Day, when I picked up a foot injury, meaning I had to abort all running. It was a frustrating situation to be in, but I had to ensure that I got to the start line injury-free, even at the expense of my run fitness.

So there I stood, on a cold, blustery morning overlooking the vast watery expanse in front of me. No sane person would dive in there to swim 3.8km, but that was exactly what I was about to do, along with 300 other, maybe equally slightly insane people. The normal doubts crept into my mind: I knew I could complete the swim, but I had never cycled 180km, nor run a marathon; I could only hope that I had trained enough and reminded myself that my only goal was to finish, and I was given 15 hours to do so.

Before I knew it, we raced from the beach into the huge swells. I was surrounded by mainly tall, burly Dutch men, the start being total carnage as I was dunked, kicked, hit and pulled under! To my further distress, I noticed that I hadn't fastened my velcro strap tightly enough, and it started slipping down my foot. This meant having to flex my left foot to ensure I wasn't going to lose my timing chip. After the first buoy, we headed straight into the oncoming waves and I ingested a full mouth of sea water. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe and for the first time in my life, I experienced a completely alien sensation and started to panic whilst swimming! I coughed and spluttered, feeling completely disoriented, for a few seconds wondering whether my race would be over before it had even started! By the time I recovered, I had lost the lead group, but at least I was back swimming. After adjusting my velcro strap on the "land lap" (after 1100m, we exited the water and ran across the beach to commence the second lap), I continued my fight against the waves of the North Sea. The swim seemed endless and I was suffering from major chafing, but I did eventually haul myself out of the water after 1hr2min, a very disappointing time, and 4<sup>th</sup> woman overall. In hindsight, it looks like I had also followed the wrong course, and probably added a few hundred metres to my swim! Live & learn.

After what seemed like an endless run, I finally entered T1, which took almost 7 minutes. My name was again announced as I started the 180km bike ride, which would be a three-lap affair through the flat Dutch countryside.

Conscious of the fact that it was a rather long way, I ensured that I went out at an easy pace, ignoring those who came racing past me. My stomach wasn't feeling great and it would be 30min before I started eating or drinking anything. I completed the first lap in 1:56, which made me wonder if I had gone out too fast. Lap 2 arrived and the wind had picked up noticeably. The wind was more or less blowing in from the west, which meant a cross-wind for about 50% of each lap, a tailwind for 25% and then the dreaded headwind for the remaining 25%. On the first lap, I had managed to maintain a pace of 27-28kph into the headwind, by the second lap, my maximum speed would drop to 25kph. Surprisingly though, I completed lap 2 in 1:54, possibly spurred on a bit by Simon who came flying past me at the 80km mark, which made me realise that a sub-6hr bike might be possible!

Lap 3 arrived however and the wind was howling; those large wind turbines towering above us along the course should have been a hint! It was so bad along the dyke that I had to get out of the aero position, as I wasn't able to control the bike in the crosswinds. By this time, my stomach was in major distress as well, and eating was virtually impossible. And that dreaded section into the headwind? Well, I struggled to maintain 21kph! It had also started to rain, and I was feeling a bit cold. The third lap consequently took 2hrs but I was ecstatic with my 5:51 bike split and entered T2 as 5<sup>th</sup> woman overall!

What in the world I did in T2 I cannot explain! I think I can claim the record for the slowest T2 of the day, with almost 11min!! This did include a toilet stop and putting on sun cream (in my haste forgetting the chafing on my neck and consequently hitting the roof in agony as the sun scream entered the open wounds!). But finally, I was off to try and complete my first ever marathon!

Another 3-lap affair, I once again ignored those speeding past me in the early stages. My stomach was a mess and kept cramping up, but I kept on going, sticking to my 9min run, 1min walk strategy. With the first lap completed in 1:19, I was excited to realise that all I needed to do was complete the next two laps in 3.5hrs to finish in under 12hrs! Lap 2 started off well, until the heavens opened; I was drenched and cold and my pace slowed as I struggled to fight against the elements. The stomach cramps got worse and my foot started hurting, consequently bringing me in at 1:26. My spirits did pick up again however when I realised now that an 11:15 finish was very possible. The rain finally stopped and although I was cold & hurting, I kept telling myself to keep going, the finish line really wasn't that far away anymore! But then, as fate would have it, another challenge was thrown at me. Having hardly eaten anything on the run, I decided to have a piece of delicious-looking currant bun, which was on offer at the aid stations. I grabbed a piece, took a bite and recoiled as I felt a sharp pain in my mouth; I had been stung by a wasp! I was immediately sat down by the concerned volunteers who took out the stinger and attempted to extract the poison, to little avail. Conscious of the fact that 11:15 was no longer going to happen, I tried to remain calm and all I wanted to do now was finish. Unfortunately, whilst sitting there I very quickly got incredibly cold, started shivering uncontrollably and turning blue. Luckily, the volunteers also noticed my state and a foil blanket was whisked around me. After 15min I convinced the kind marshals to let me go, I just wanted to finish and didn't care how long it would take me anymore; I wasn't going to let a pesky little wasp, which obviously had also decided it had fancied a currant bun, ruin my Ironman debut! I walked several kilometres with the foil blanket tightly wrapped around me until I felt like I was in a state to start running again. Feeling stronger by the minute, I managed to pick up the pace again and finally, there it was....the finish line! The race clock obviously had gone past the 11:15 mark, but it hadn't reached the 12:00 mark either, and I was elated to hear my name being announced with a finishing time of 11:46:07! After receiving my medal & t-shirt, I made a bee-line for the medical tent; my mouth was in agony and I desperately needed some painkillers & antihistamine. Simon had had an absolutely fantastic race, finishing in 10:34:32.

So how did I feel? Other than the obvious physical distress (wasp sting, foot pain, stomach cramps & just about freezing to death), I actually felt surprisingly well. I was happy with my race, although I cannot say that I had any overwhelming emotional feelings at having crossed the finish line. I had finished 10<sup>th</sup> in the women's overall and probably would have finished 7<sup>th</sup> if it hadn't been for that wasp. But all in all, it had been a good day and I couldn't complain!

So what comes next? I can't say I am jumping up & down to do another Ironman. I will probably do another one some day, but that may be a few years yet. Based on my first performance, I would like to think that sub-11hrs is within my abilities. But for now, I am simply looking forward to taking a little break from the intense training and going back to leading a more normal life again!

## STATISTICS

### *The Training (including races except for the Ironman)*

Total No. of Weeks:	35		
The Swim:	101hrs30min	322.0km	(2hrs54min / 9.2km per week)
The Bike:	174hrs25min	4,366.5km	(4hrs59min / 124.8km per week)
The Run:	111hrs30min	1,337.2km	(3hrs11min / 38.2km per week)
Total Training:	387hrs25min	6,025.7km	(11hrs3min / 172.2km per week)

### *The Race*

The Swim:	3.8km
T1:	~ 250m
The Bike:	180km
T2:	~ 200m
The Run:	42.3km
Litres of liquid consumed:	~ 3L
Number of calories consumed:	~ 1,000Kcal
Number of calories burned:	~ 6,000Kcal
Number of toilet stops:	2
Number of OW panic attacks:	1
Number of wasp incidents:	1
Positions:	4 <sup>th</sup> after swim, 5 <sup>th</sup> after bike, 10 <sup>th</sup> woman overall ☺ (Most likely 7 <sup>th</sup> had it not been for that wasp!)

