

Ironman Race Fuelling Strategy

Introduction

Having observed numerous Iron distance races and having done 6 of them myself, I find it hard to believe that most professional athletes are relying on feed stations for their nutrition. After all, one bad bottle can wreck your day. I know this from bitter personal experience!

I asked myself whether I wanted to rely for my race day performance on a bottle mixed by a 12-year-old volunteer who doesn't know that the drinks are meant to be mixed to a certain (& quite specific) concentration. What's more, I tend to mix my drinks a little differently from the manufacturers' recommendation anyway.

Add to that that it's possible that your choice of gel, bar etc won't be available at the race. Have you ever tried to get hold of the obscure German energy bar that will be available in your race? And what if you don't like it or it disagrees with you?

I believe it's essential that you have a strategy that controls the things you can control... and your nutrition is one of those things.

What follows is what I came up with...

Pre Race

Eat breakfast 4 – 5 hours before your race start. This should be about 1000 – 1500 kcal from low glycaemic index foods. I eat porridge made from 1 cup of oats with water, 50g of raisins, 2 bananas & 750ml of my sports drink for 1000 kcal. Then I go back to bed for a bit.

Until 1 hour before the race, feel free to snack, but limit yourself to no more than 250 kcal. I tend to stick to my sports drink and the odd banana. This is also the time to use the glycerol hyperhydration strategy if it's a hot weather race.

In the last hour, stick to water only. Food in this period increases your chances of exercise-induced hypoglycaemia.

Swim

About 10 minutes before the start of the swim, consume 2 gels (& the appropriate amount of water) or as much of 600ml of sports drink as you can stomach – I mix mine to 8%. This will give you a bit of a head start, ~200 kcal of easily available carbohydrate.

I heard of someone who took a gel flask with him in the swim. Personally, I think he should have concentrated on swimming!

Bike

For your bike ride, start with 2 bottles on your bike:

- Mix one to normal strength
- Mix the other to 3 times normal strength

Any more than 2 bottles is a waste of energy, only serving to add weight to your bike, which you will have to push up every hill!

Also carry enough gels to get you to the special needs station + 2 extra (just in case). Tape them to your frame or use a "fuel box."

For the first 15 minutes on the bike, drink only water while you get your heart rate under control.

After 15 minutes, start feeding using the normal strength bottle, aiming to drink every 10 – 15 minutes. Once this is finished, collect a bottle of water from a feed station and drink from the triple strength and water bottles, using a ratio of one sip of energy drink to 2 sips of water. (If you use a front-mounted bottle, you can mix the drink 1 part sports drink to 2 parts water. Blow bubbles through it to mix it.)

Eat a gel roughly every half hour (with the appropriate amount of water).

At special needs, collect 2 fresh bottles, mixed to normal strength if you expect to be off the bike within the time they would cover or one mixed stronger to suit how long you need it to last. If I know it's going to be hot, I freeze mine the night before. Also collect more gels and some sort of "treat." Many of my clients like Pringles crisps, I now favour 50g of jelly babies (make it something you'll look forward to & consider a reward for all your efforts so far). Obviously, you will have to have stashed all these in your special needs bag & have handed it in (you laugh, I know someone who left theirs in their apartment on the morning of the race!).

About 20 minutes before you get off the bike, start drinking just water or electrolyte drink. This should dilute any unabsorbed carbohydrate and help absorption.

Run

On the run, carry 2 – 4 gel flasks in a belt (mine take 4 gels each, slightly diluted with water so that they “run” better). Mark the bottles so that it’s clear how much is 1 gel so that you eat the right amount.

Start feeding immediately you start the run and get into a routine. Ideally you want about 200 - 300 kcal per hour. Eat 1 gel every 20 – 30 minutes, followed by the right amount of water. (The water is important, as not drinking enough for the gels is a common cause of stomach problems on the run.)

As you won’t be drinking electrolyte drinks on the run in this scenario, use salt tablets to get 500 – 900mg of sodium per hour (1 ThermoTab buffered salt tablet is 180mg). Remember to check how much sodium you will get from your gels and include that in your calculation. Depending on your sports drink, you may need to supplement sodium on the bike too.

After the Race

Use sports drinks containing carbohydrate, protein and sodium rather than water. Feel free to eat as much as you like, but avoid high fibre foods.

Conclusion

In a 9 hour Iron distance race, you will burn about 8000 kcal. Assuming you’ve trained properly and you pace the race well, about 4000 kcal of these will need to be from carbohydrate sources.

Following this strategy, you will get:

- 1500 – 2000 kcal before the race
- In a 5 hour Bike, up to 2100 kcal
- In a 3.5 hour Run, up to 900 kcal
- For a total of up to 5000 kcal on race day

Usually, a longer duration race will have a lower energy cost, but if you work on the basis of 8000 kcal and tailor your nutrition accordingly, you’ll have the basis for a successful nutrition plan.

Remember to practise your nutrition strategy in your race simulation workouts. There's nothing worse than getting to your key race of the year with a well practiced nutrition strategy, only to find that what worked on a relatively easy bike ride does not work in the heat of competition.