

Ironman Race Strategy

Introduction

Ironman racing is unique among the triathlon disciplines in that it not only requires exceptional fitness, but also a sound nutritional strategy and disciplined pace control throughout.

Over this distance, the winner is often not the fastest swimmer, cyclist and runner, but the most disciplined. Ironman is a race of attrition, in which your discipline and patience will be seen to pay off toward the end of the marathon.

Assuming you already have a sound nutrition plan, here's how you pace the race...

Swim

Always start towards the front, no matter how weak a swimmer you consider yourself to be. The swim is the one place where you are allowed to draft other competitors and the advantage of a good draft is enormous (up to 10s per 100m some say!). If you start at the back, you will almost certainly never get the opportunity to swim behind another (faster) swimmer as they'll have swum away! If you're not confident, then be sure to start right on the outside and "funnel" in as the swim strings out – with any luck, you'll find yourself on the feet of a faster swimmer who started further back.

Swim at a comfortable, but strong pace. Whilst the swim is the smallest and to many, the least important part of the race, it is nonetheless, part of the race. Time lost here won't be made up later.

Transition 1

Jog quickly into T1 and get out the other side as quickly as possible. Have as little in your transition bag as possible (I limit myself to my helmet and sunglasses). Leave everything else on your bike.

You can waste a lot of time in T1, so try to think of it with a similar mindset to Olympic Distance racing. Time spent in T1 is time spent not covering the distance. Most of what you can do in transition can be done on your bike.

Bike

Ironman cycling is all about patience and getting enough nutrition down to see you through the run. Pace the bike wrong and you will wreck your race. A 5 hour bike split is not impressive if it's part of a 14 hour race!

Settle into a rhythm as quickly as possible on your bike and start your nutrition strategy after about 10 minutes – and stick to it no matter how bored you get!

Split the bike into quarters as follows...

0 – 30 miles (0 – 50km)

Ride at a comfortable pace. This will be significantly easier than you can ride, but be patient and keep to it. People who pass you at this stage fit into one of two groups:

- Those who will fall apart later in the race because they're pushing too hard on the bike – most fit into this category.
- Those who are simply faster than you are – you won't beat them anyway; don't wreck your race by trying!

Use this part of the race to get on top of your nutrition. I eat a little extra in this period in an attempt to get a little bit ahead before I start to push harder.

31 – 60 miles (51 – 95km)

Ride strongly, but still very under control through this section. You should still be a little below the effort level you feel you could manage at this stage. Make sure you stay on top of your nutrition.

61 – 90 miles (96 – 145km)

This is the place to move up to the sort of effort level that you can ride for the distance. Your training should give you an idea of what intensity this is. Although you'll be pushing a bit, you should still stay aware of your nutrition all the time. "Pushing a bit" does not mean, "bury yourself!"

91 – 112 miles (146 – 180km)

Most of the pros will tell you that this is where their race starts – well, at 85 miles actually.

In order to make up a bit of time and to keep you interested, this is a good time to do a few intervals – as long as you are still feeling good. Try riding 3 minutes hard, 3 minutes steady, 3 minutes easy. In every easy stretch, have a drink or a gel so that you stay on top of your nutrition.

Transition 2

As with T1, don't mess about in T2. Running shoes, socks, sunglasses, a hat and a small drink or fuel belt are all you need in your transition bag. Get your running shoes on first and get moving – you can put on the hat etc while you're running.

While you're putting on your shoes, get a volunteer to put some sunscreen on your shoulders – a lot of sunscreen! It doesn't need to be rubbed in and works better if it's not.

Run

Ironman running is once again, about patience. You will almost certainly not be able to set off at a fast pace and keep running that fast throughout.

Again, break down your run, this time into thirds...

0 – 10 miles (0 – 16km)

Run easy at this point and make sure that you settle into your nutrition strategy. Like with the bike, this is an opportunity to eat a little more (though only a little more – too much will make you ill).

Focus on relaxing your shoulders, arms and hands. And get into a nice relaxed, efficient running stride.

10 – 20 miles (17 – 32km)

Continue to run steady through this portion of the run and stay on top of your nutrition. This is the portion of the race where most people start to lose it. Simply relax, focus and accept the distance.

Whatever comes up, whatever discomfort you feel, don't get upset, simply get on with it. Everything passes in time, few discomforts persist for the whole run!

20 – 26.2 miles (32 – 42.2km)

If you're still feeling good, this is the place to do some damage, both to your competition and your personal best. Pick up the pace gradually, mile by mile or kilometer by kilometer so that you're running at your strongest by the end.

Finish

Unless you're in a sprint finish to win the race/ your age group/ a qualification slot, take your time in the finishing chute and enjoy the experience. You don't often hear someone say for everyone to hear, "[Your Name], You are an IRONMAN!"

Decide before the race what you would like your finisher's photo to look like – the photographer will take what you present to him/ her. I'd suggest...

- Take off your hat and sunglasses
- Start to smile at the beginning of the finish chute and keep smiling until well after you cross the line
- If you're going to raise your hands, do so well before the line and keep them up until well after the line.
- Arrange to have your kids in the right place if you want them to cross the line with you.

Conclusion

Just a few quick thoughts before I finish...

- Early on the bike and the run, if you feel good, use the opportunity to eat a bit more. This will stand you in good stead later in the race.
- If you start to feel sick or tired, slow down and eat.
- Late in the race, if you feel like you're starting to get "flat," try to find something salty to eat – chicken soup is good, but anything will do.

Ironman racing will always come down to nutrition and pacing. Read this document again and memorise the strategy. Stick to it and you'll give yourself the best chance of having your best race on the day.

Now get out there and do the business!

