

**Race Report : IRONMAN 70.3 World Championships  
Chattanooga, TN  
September, 10, 2017**

One of my 2017 goals was to qualify for the 70.3 World Championships as it returns to the USA for the first time since 2013, after which WTC began selecting different race sites each year. I raced it in Las Vegas (2013) and Clearwater (2010) but passed on Canada and Australia and failed to qualify the year it was in Austria. As 70.3 races have proliferated like rabbits to more than 100 annually, 2017 also marks the first year the women's and men's races will be held on different days, enabling a total field of 4500 athletes – the largest IRONMAN event ever held.

With IM Louisville only five weeks off, I haven't set any performance goals for this race. Never having been a podium threat in World Championship races, I'm not particularly concerned about time. I've taken a short taper from peak IRONMAN training volume, but not enough to race at my best.

Donna and I arrive by car on Wednesday afternoon and have time to visit the race site and eat at a local brewhouse. I've scheduled Thursday morning for modest aerobic sessions - a 1500 yards swim at a nearby YMCA, a 45 minute run which allows me to explore a little of the run course on either side of the Tennessee River, and an out and back ride on the bike course. On the bike, I pass on the climb up Lookout Mountain that starts at the five mile point and instead ride backwards on the flat, finishing portion of the course before turning around at 10 miles. Later in the morning, we move to the Springhill Suites which will be our home for the next 4 days. Located riverside and a short walk to the transition area, it's a very convenient location for the race. As all hotels in town were booked when I qualified at Raleigh in early June, I made the reservation through Endurance Sports Travel, which we used both times at Kona. It's apparently also the preferred location for WTC senior staff and their guests, as I later run into IRONMAN legends Dave Scott and Mark Allen in the elevator and have a couple opportunities to chat with IRONMAN CEO, Andrew Messick.

Once settled, we walk to the IRONMAN village to complete race registration. Like a rat in a maze, we snake through the village to find the registration tent. Registration goes smoothly albeit slowly, as I sign my life away on a variety of waiver forms. After lunch, we join a van tour of the bike course, led by Endurance Sports Travel owner, Ken Glah. (Google IRONMAN legend Ken Klah if you don't know who he is or read my Kona report from last year.) This time, the van heads up the 1000 foot, 3.5 mile climb of Lookout Mountain. It's slow going, as a line of vehicles pass numerous athletes previewing the course on 2 wheels. (A long, steep climb a couple days before a major race is not something I'd prescribe for my athletes but to each his own). It's an impressive climb, even in the van – steeper in the first mile with a couple flat portions in the last couple miles. Instead of coming down the mountain, the course continues along a plateau for the next 14 miles. What looks like a plateau on the elevation chart of the Athlete Guide, in reality includes several short but steep climbs and descents before the steep 1200 foot descent. The remainder of the 56 mile course is comparatively flat, and I fight to stay awake in the van. For reasons I've never understood, driving these courses seems longer than riding them.

Thursday afternoon is the Parade of Nations followed by the Welcome Banquet. Rather than joining the start of the parade, I catch a beer at a brew pub to watch 90 nations go by in alphabetical order and join

the USA team when it passes by. The welcome dinner is at the Convention Center and is followed by the athlete briefing in English. Other languages have had earlier briefings.

Friday morning, I join hundreds of other athletes in a short river swim at the swim exit. Water temperature is 77 degrees, but has been dropping about a degree a day to approach the magical 76.1 degrees which signifies a wetsuit legal swim. Once in the water, I swim upstream into the sun towards the Market Street bridge. The current doesn't seem that strong until I turnaround, and it feels like I'm flying back to the swim exit. IRONMAN says they have an agreement with the TVA to significantly reduce the flow from the upstream hydroelectric dam on both race mornings. I just cross my fingers that the agreement isn't precluded by a peak electricity demand from fast swimmers all leaving their hair dryers on. Unlike the regular Chattanooga 70.3 or 140.6, this race includes an 860 meter upstream leg – a source of worry for me over the past couple months.

Saturday morning finds me sitting on the end of the crowded pier just upstream of the swim start awaiting the 7:30 start of the women's race. Looking down at the river, the current is definitely moving more slowly than Friday. Better yet, the water temperature has dropped to 76.1 degrees, and the race is wetsuit legal. Hallelujah! The professional women exit the swim in what appears to me as very fast times but are 2 minutes slower than most 70.3's. Apparently the current has negatively affected swim times. While I return to the hotel for a short pre-race run during the bike portion, I am back out on the race course to watch the bike finish and run. Daniella Ryf wins the pro race handily as she did last year in Kona. Sarah True, in her first year moving up from ITU Olympic distance racing, has a great race and is the first American finisher in 4<sup>th</sup> place. The sun is strong, and temperature has risen into the mid 80's – just hope the water temperature doesn't rise more than overnight cooling can offset.

Race morning, I'm up at 4:30 and head to the hotel lobby for coffee and to read the latest news – hurricane Irma has done a number on the Florida Keys and is now in the vicinity of Naples. After my normal pre-race breakfast of peanut butter on a toasted bagel and two bananas, I walk to the transition area to pump up my tires and load nutrition on the bike. The triathlon gods have smiled, and it's a wetsuit swim. I catch an hour's rest back at the hotel, before heading to the swim start.

The professional men go off at 7:30 followed by the physically challenged division, the massive 40-44 age group, and the much smaller 70+ group. Men 65-69 is the 5<sup>th</sup> and smallest swim wave- starting at 8:13. We advance corral by corral as each wave enters the water in sets of 8 athletes every 10 seconds. We're in the next to last corral when the lead professionals exit the water (swim time about 25 minutes) and head up the bank to transition. Finally, it's our turn. I'm lined up in the back half of the 50 to 60 athletes, but with the small wave, I'm soon in the water. I aim about 25 degrees to the right in my first attempt to judge the current which keeps me in a pretty straight line to the first two buoy's and the turn buoy about 300 meters from the start. From what I can see, I'm the only one swimming the buoy line as everyone I can see is 20 meters or more downstream. A volunteer on a surfboard tells me to stay left, but I'm where I want to be. I take the crowded, right hand turn and start upstream. The rising sun is directly in our eyes and it's impossible to see the next buoy. But the Market Street bridge is pretty visible as are the swimmers immediately in front of me, so it's pretty easy to stay on course and I pass close to the buoy's spaced 100 meters apart. The bridge gets closer, but slowly. I'm almost to the bridge when the fastest 35 – 39 year old athletes in the wave behind us start swimming over top of me. I can't

take a whole lot of this, so I move to the right where it's like standing on the side of a highway as the cars speed by you. Once under the Market Street bridge, it's on to the Walnut Street bridge (pedestrian bridge that we'll cross twice on the run in the hours to come). Watching the women's swim, it didn't seem to be that far from the Walnut Street bridge to the turn buoy, but this part of the swim seems to move at a snail's pace before I finally take the turn and head back across the river on a downstream diagonal. Finally, I seem to be moving and with the sun off to the left, I can see the buoy's clearly. Even here, I have to aim a little to left to stay on line to the turn buoy just upstream of the bridge - the current must be pretty strong. (My watch would later tell me I averaged about 2:10 per 100 yards on the upstream leg and 1:29 on the downstream legs.) Then it's a comparatively fast downstream swim to the swim exit. My watch says 44 minutes – slow for a wetsuit swim but well clear of the one hour cutoff.

After the wetsuit strippers do their job and I pick up my bike bag, we climb the ramp to the “change” area. Temperature is in the 50's, so I fight to pull arm sleeves over my wet arms, unnecessarily wasting nearly a minute in exchange for some creature comfort on the bike. It's a long run to the bike and the transition exit, so I carry my bike shoes and put them on near the bike exit where I find a volunteer to hold the bike upright. This wastes a little more time, but without a performance goal, I'm not concerned. I've been in transition more than six minutes when I get on the bike.

I wave to Donna as I pedal by our hotel, warming up the legs for the ride ahead. The first five miles are flat and I average over 20 miles an hour; heart rate is a conservative 120. Faster and younger athletes are speeding by me; a condition to which I'll be quite accustomed by the end of this race. At 4.8 miles, we make the turn up Lookout Mountain. Quickly shifting into my lowest gear (36 / 28), I pedal conservatively and begin to pass some of the 70+ age groupers who started in the first wave. The course weaves back and forth up the hill, no end in sight, and my only measure of progress is my bike GPS. One half mile goes by, then 1 mile – 2.5 more to the top is difficult to contemplate, but several flat spots in the road provide the legs and brain some temporary relief. My quads are burning, but my heart rate is staying under 150 and I'm not breathing hard. I even have a chance to unwrap and eat my first half power bar. Eventually, we reach the top to the loud cheers of a crowd of spectators.

A moderate downhill gives my leg's a rest, but several more up-hills follow over the next 5 miles until we reach our maximum altitude for the day, about 1300 feet above where we started the climb. My hope to complete the bike leg in 3 hours appears unlikely as it's taken an hour to do the first 15 miles. Oh well.

While still being passed regularly by younger athletes, I have also passed a number of athletes in my age group – a good sign. Unlike most triathlons, our age has not been marked on our calf but I can identify athletes in my age group by race number – which were assigned alphabetically within each age group. 22 miles into the race, we reach the big downhill, losing the 1300 feet of hard won elevation gain in less than 5 miles of frightening descent. Sitting up slightly to moderate my speed, a radar sign shows me as 15 mph over the 25 mph speed limit, while athletes pedaling in full aero position pass on my left. I try not to think about a crash at this speed.

The rest of the bike goes well. Despite a slight headwind, I maintain 21 to 22 mph and pass a few younger athletes who either went too hard on the hill or were fortunate (or unfortunate) to have their

world slot rolled down deep into the age group. I shout to Donna as I pass our hotel, dismount at the line, and hand my bike off to a volunteer. Bike time is 2:59 averaging 21 mph on the second half.

I'm out on the run after a 3 minute transition and get another chance to wave to Donna on a short out and back before we run down to the river and by the swim start to skirt the finish line area where the professionals are already starting to finish. Then it's up the long hill to the 1.5 mile point where we join runners headed out on their second of the two laps. Another mile of mostly downhill reaches the turnaround where we head back to town on the shaded River Walk. It's pretty warm – probably mid to high 70's – but dumping water on my chest at the aid stations keeps me comfortable, and my heart rate is staying in the 140's as planned. The uphill before Veteran's bridge is steep but short, and we are soon across the river and headed up the long hill on Barton Avenue. The ensuing downhill is longer than I remember from driving the course on Friday and unwelcome, knowing I'll have to run back up. The first lap of a two lap course is always mentally difficult, watching the mile markers for the second lap and knowing you're going to have to do it again as well as being passed by runners on their final lap. But all things considered, I feel pretty good - I'm drinking Gatorade® and water at the aid stations, eating a gel every 4 miles, and popping a salt table about every 30 minutes. I'm passing more athletes now -mostly younger and some walking. The constant hills make it impossible to settle in at any pace, and my mile splits vary from 7:20 to 9 minutes. I opt for a pit stop at a porta potty at Mile 5 – I guess I could have held it and saved 30 seconds but I'm not in that mindset. On the downhill back into town, Ken Glah races by me – also on his first lap, although his 50-54 wave started well after mine. I follow him into the North Shore area, across the Walnut Street pedestrian bridge, and to beginning of the second lap. He accelerates as we approach the Endurance Sports Travel tent where his wife is cheering. With his long blond hair and red tri suit, he's been easy to see and following him has helped me maintain pace, but as he crests the hill and starts on the long downhill, he pulls too far ahead and I'm left to manage the last 5 miles alone (well not alone, I'm surrounded by runners). But the last lap almost always feels easier, and I can afford to push the hills a little harder. My normal mile by mile mentality at this point in a race has been replaced by a hill to hill mentality – up, down, repeat. The 12 mile marker goes by and we're back on the Walnut Street bridge. I push my pace on the upslope to its center where I zip up my jersey for the Finisher Picture (which I don't order). Now, it's just down the back side of the bridge and around the loop to River Street for the fast downhill finish.

I haven't been paying much attention to total time, but see I'm going to finish the run in about 1:45, almost 15 minutes faster than expected and with a total time about 5:40 - well ahead of my 6 hour goal. Some athletes are near collapse at the finish line, but I feel fine – probably better than I've felt at the finish of any half Ironman in memory. I guess there are two ways to look at that : 1) I could have raced harder and perhaps closed the 7 minute gap to one of the top 5 awards, or 2) accept my a 10<sup>th</sup> place finish at Worlds as a positive omen for Ironman Louisville in 5 weeks. I choose the latter. If I made a miscalculation, it was that I didn't really expect to be competitive at this level of competition and didn't set a competitive goal. There is a significant drop off in performance between 60-64 and 65-69, and I would have placed only 34th in the younger age group. Of the athletes ahead of me, I have finished ahead of at least two in prior races as well as finishing a close second to the age group winner in a couple of races. I am happy with the run, which was second fastest in the age group.

Next up : IRONMAN Louisville on October 15, 2017

