

Race Report: IRONMAN World Championships, Kailua Kona – October 2018

After a long flight from Denver, I'm anxiously awaiting my first view of the Big Island as we descend from 38,000 feet. Clouds obscure Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, but the Kohala coast finally comes into view as we round the north end of the island and turn south towards Kailua Kona. I can make out the road to Hawi which I'll be riding up in just a little over a week. This is our fourth trip to the Big Island, the last three for the IRONMAN, but the blast of hot air still staggers us as we descend the steps to the tarmac.

PRE-RACE

As in previous years, Donna and I have arrived eight days before the big race. With the hot summer we've had in North Carolina, acclimation isn't an issue, but I love to watch the race week transformation of Kona from a sleepy little town to the Mecca of endurance sport. We've booked an ocean front condo on Alii Drive about 1.6 miles from the pier through



Endurance Sports Travel (EST), Ken Glah's company. Ken, a world class triathlete in his younger years, is racing his 35th consecutive Kona! Here are a few of the highlights of the week leading up to race:

- **Swimming** – The swim course in Kailua Bay is crowded each morning with triathletes and other swimmers. I skip the 2.4 mile charity swim on Saturday, but do get in 4 training sessions during the week. Chop and swells vary day to day but are manageable.
- **Gents & Ladies Dinner** – Monday evening, Donna and I attend this dinner at the King Kamehameha hotel for athletes 60 and over. Envisioning a meal in a retirement home, I passed on this event in prior years, but am surprised to have a more than enjoyable time talking with other athletes. I find myself a bit of a newbie having completed only 8 IRONMAN's. Missy LeStrange who is sitting at our table thinks she's done 40; she is more certain of the 15 times she has won her age group at Kona (after this year, 16). A quick assessment of each table and then the entire room totals to 675 Ironmans. Doing the multiplication by \$600 to now \$1000 per race, this certainly should put a smile on IM CEO, Andrew Messick's face, but he and Mike Reilly, the "Voice" of IM, have already left after a short appearance.
- **Bike Ride to Hawi** – Tribike Transport has had my bike for most of the past month and a half (I had it for only 3 days after its return from IM Wisconsin), so I'm pleased to remake its acquaintance on Saturday afternoon in time for Sunday's EST ride from Hapuna Beach Park out to the bike course turnaround in Hawi and back – a total of 44 miles. There's a bit of a cross

wind on the 6 mile climb to Hawi but nothing compared to the conditions in 2014 where the 30 mile per hour headwind made for a running pace ascent and a harrowing descent. It feels good to get back in the saddle, although my legs verge on cramping during the return – my fault for not rehydrating sufficiently after my run earlier that morning.

- **Bike Problems** – no trip would be complete without issues. This year it is flat tires. On Monday, I go out for a 1.5 hour moderate bike ride out the Queen K highway in pouring rain. Stopping back in town, I notice the front tire has gone soft. I remount, and it goes fully flat. After changing out the tube with one of the two spares I'm carrying, I'm putting the wheel back on, when "bang" – it's a bad spare. I also discover that the rubber in my CO2 adaptor has degraded, releasing about a third of the CO2 before I can get the adaptor and cartridge fully mated. It's only Monday, and I've used both of the CO2 cartridges provided by EST. Wednesday's one hour ride is uneventful, but when preparing for a short Friday ride, I find the front tire nearly flat again. I'm somewhat relieved to find a very tiny piece of wire embedded in the tire corresponding to the tiny puncture in the tube. Another trip to the bike store for tubes and cartridges – this time procuring a spare tube and CO2 cartridge for my special needs bag that will be waiting for me in Hawi tomorrow should my flat tire woes persist.
- **AWA Breakfast** – Despite not having received an invite, I do want to attend the Tuesday breakfast for All World Gold Athletes at Splasher's restaurant. It's not that I need a free breakfast – the daily EST breakfast practically next door is included in our travel package, but this is my first year with Gold status (top 1% of the age group), and I'm determined to obtain some tangible benefit. I'm not on their list at the door, but the staffer cheerfully adds my name to the list and hands me a raffle ticket. It's a nice spread, and I sit with Dave Lundberg and Amy Hite, a couple who stayed in the same condos as us in 2016 and who I saw recently in Wisconsin. Over breakfast, we listen to remarks by Mark Allen, Dave Scott, and Paul Newby Fraser.
- **Coach Interview** – Following registration, I have a pre-scheduled meeting with the WTC person responsible for IM University (the coaching program) She turns out to be the same woman who let me into breakfast that morning, and we have a nice talk for about 30 minutes as I shared my view of the coaching program and ways to potentially enhance it.
- **New Arrivals** – Before IM Louisville last year, Julia Mulnick, who I've coached since 2015, told me that she would come watch me in Kona if I qualified. True to her word, she and David arrive in Kona from a Maui family vacation in time to attend Thursday's Welcome banquet. On Friday, they take advantage of the opportunity to swim in Kailua Bay and join us for a pre-race dinner in our condo. Our son, Brad, arrives from Florida during the banquet and is enjoying a beer on our lanai when we return. We haven't seen him since February; it's great to have him here for the 2nd time (he was here in 2016).
- **Bike Checkin** : Athletes must put their bikes in transition and drop off their transition bags on Friday. This is literally a red carpet event. An announcer stops pro athletes for short interviews as they wheel their bikes onto the pier. Age groupers have their personal escort to their bike spot and then to the bag racks by the change tents. My escort this year is a young woman from Germany who figured volunteering in Kona was a great way to cap off running the Chicago marathon last weekend. She finished her first 70.3 this summer and has already caught the Kona bug. The 2000+ bikes packed on the pier is always an amazing sight. My age and alphabetically advantaged surname have secured a low bib number (194) spot at the entry to the pier, only a few feet away from the pro area.

Race Day

I sleep surprisingly well and finish 2 cups of Kona coffee and my routine IM breakfast (2 bananas and a toasted bagel with peanut butter) by 4 am. I step out onto the lanai and can hardly hear the waves on the dark rocks below. A night of rain, like oil, has calmed the ocean – surely a good sign. I lay back down and relax until it's time to leave at 5 am to catch an EST shuttle into town. The queue of athletes at the back of the King K hotel moves quickly. Special needs bag drop, body marking, and weighing are all well organized, and we're soon on the pier preparing our bikes. The atmosphere is purposeful but subdued, everyone wondering what the day will bring. I look over my shoulder at the pro coral – same story there. My bike is soaking wet, but the tires have thankfully remained inflated. I borrow a pump to top them off to 95 psi, add some chain lube, and load nutrition and Gatorade®. After months of preparation, there's little left to do but move back to the area behind the King K to await the start. Dawm lightens the sky behind the volcanoes gradually – time to apply sunscreen, chamois butter, and pull on my speed suit. A cannon blast announces the pro men's start at 6:35 which is my cue to make my way to the pier and the back of 1500 men lining up to get in the water after the pro women's start at 6:40. In prior years, I could work my way along the pier for the 100 yards to the start line and hang off the truck tires until the race start at 7:05 am. This year, they're maintaining a clear lane along the pier, and I'm forced to tread water. But only for 5 minutes. I'm a few yards behind the start line on the far right side – about 15 yards from the pier. Why are so many athletes anxious to get in the bay only to have to tread water for 25 minutes? Rolling starts have replaced mass starts at nearly all the IRONMAN races for improved safety, but the mass Kona start is an icon that even the lawyers don't mess with. It's the one thing I miss when competing here; the view from 2 inches above sea level just doesn't afford much perspective.

SWIM : The cannon fires and we're off. My strategy, as in 2016, is to swim down the buoy line eventually settling into a routine of 50 strokes of freestyle followed by 5 to 10 strokes of breaststroke. The breast stroke kick stretches my calves and hopefully wards off decapitating calf cramps. I endure one glancing kick in the head, but as a well behind-the-pack swimmer in this race, it's pretty easy to stay in clear water. My toes and feet cramp occasionally, an unwelcome but not unusual occurrence which I'm able to ignore. I eventually reach the Royal



Kona Inn (about halfway and the farthest point of my practice swims), and I'm able to make out the Body Glove boat at the turnaround. When two to three buoys from the boat, prior experience has me brace for the fastest women to swim over top of me having made up for their later start. But that

doesn't happen until I'm at the boat – a good sign I guess. I have no idea of time as my watch was bumped and stopped many minutes earlier. I stay to the right of the course – balancing the pleas of the volunteers on surf boards to stay to the right while trying to stay clear of the highway of fast women swimming just to my left.

My mentality is to swim buoy to buoy (there are about 15). The sight of the King K hotel is useful directionally but too distant to offer even the illusion of progress. I get a couple “soft” calf cramps that release immediately; at other times my legs feel fine. The Royal Kona resort goes by, and the buildings in town start to appear to my right. Just as I'm beginning to contemplate the finish with some confidence, my left calf seizes and won't release. Probably punishment for daring to think ahead. Nothing to do but tread water, grit my teeth, and wait it out. I hang on to a volunteer's surfboard for what seems an eternity but likely less than a minute. Finally, the cramp releases. What remains of the swim is blessedly uneventful.

Despite the knot in my calf, I feel good climbing the steps at the exit. My speed suit (Ha! Ha!) peels off quickly, and the stop in the changing tent to pull on socks, sunglasses, and helmet is short. I carry my shoes on the long run around the pier to the bike. Most of the 2500 bikes that crowded the pier only an hour ago are gone. I ask a volunteer the time of day and from his response, figure my swim was about 1:40 – faster than 2014, slower than 2016, but I'm OK with that.



BIKE : I climb on the bike and immediately see Julia and David to my left and Brad and Donna to the right. The first 5 miles are a tour of the town with trips up and down Palani hill and the Kuakini Highway and three passes through the hot corner. Excepting the finish, this is my favorite part of the race - crowds, fresh legs, and the swim behind me. But soon I'm on the Queen K and the reality of the long day ahead begins to set in. Executing my nutrition and hydration plan is the first order of the day – half a power bar every 30 minutes and at least one bottle of Gatorade® each hour. Aid stations are frequent so there is no need to restock at each one. I do grab an occasional water bottle to pour over my head and shoulders for cooling. I break the outgoing course into segments - the 30+ mile section to Route 270 and the end of the Queen K, the short downhill into Kawaihae, and the 20 miles to the turnaround in Hawi. Past Waikaloa while still on the Queen K, a steady stream of male professionals speed by in the opposite direction. In past years, I've faced a steady head wind here; this year it is strangely calm. As I approach the turn onto 270, the lead woman – I can't make out her number, but I'm guessing super swimmer Lucy



Charles - passes by with a huge lead. I'm amazed to later learn that Daniela Ryf caught and passed her when almost back to town.

After negotiating the steep downhill into Kawaihae, age groupers begin to pass by in the opposite direction, eventually becoming a steady stream separated by no more and in many cases less than the legal 6 bike length spacing. Mentally, this is the toughest part of the bike race – it's hot, hilly, I've been riding more than 50 miles, and I'm still headed away from the finish. The final, six mile climb into Hawi begins; Madame Pele has provided a wonder of a day – no wind. The 30 mph headwind of 2014 and the bent over palms framing the road are indelibly etched in my brain. The climb goes faster than Sunday's training ride, and I make the turnaround at 60 miles. Happy to abandon the extra tube and CO2 cartridge at special needs, I accelerate and start down the long hill. Where the descent is a white knuckle adventure in strong cross or tail winds, today it is just a fast but comfortable ride.

Four hours on the bike have exhausted my nutrition stores, so I make a quick stop at an aid station to restock with gel and use the opportunity to load a couple more tablets into my now empty Salt Stick, saving me having to manipulate a zip lock bag at 20+ miles per hour. I feel great on the ride back, and my average speed creeps up to 18.3 mph (there must be a slight tail wind). The positive milestone of passing the airport with 8 miles to go is followed almost immediately by the



downer of runners crossing the Queen K to head down into the Energy Lab. They're more than halfway through the run. The final few miles always seem long – knowing that I'll be running back here in another hour or so doesn't help. Finally the pier. Handing my bike off to a volunteer, I hit my watch. My split is a little over six hours – by far my best time here. Thank you Madame Pele. The legs feel a little unsteady but loosen up on the jog to the end of the pier and back to the change tent.

RUN

As I exit the pier, I'm happy to be off the bike but try hard not to think about the 26.2 miles ahead. I know the Pro men have already finished, and at the finish line, only a few yards to my right, Mike Reilly is announcing that Daniela Ryf is approaching the finish. I don't see Donna, Brad, Dave, or Julia on the short section of Palani up to the hot corner; maybe they're waiting for me back at the condo. The strength I felt on the bike has evaporated; I'm feeling tired and hot as I turn onto Kuakini highway. Hopefully just a bad patch. What a mix of runners on this section of the course – a steady stream headed north now 8 miles into the run, a less steady stream (including me) just started and headed south, and an occasional pro-athlete moving like a Lamborghini thru traffic also headed south but with only a half mile to go. As I make the turn onto Alii Drive, I can see and hear Julia shouting at me. I try to manage a smile and a wave. My first mile split is about 9:00; a little slow-the first couple miles are usually the fastest. The initial aid station appears, and I make an almost unconscious decision to walk

though it (as I will every aid station the rest of the race) – taking fluid, cold sponges, and dumping a cup of ice down my shorts. The turnaround on Alii has been moved up nearly a mile due to the new entrance to the Energy Lab later in the race and comes even sooner than I expect. My mile splits have deteriorated due to walking the aid stations, but I am feeling cooler and better. As I run back past our condo, I briefly entertain the notion of making a quick stop for a cold beer but force that image out of my mind.

As I approach the turn off Alii Drive onto Hualalai Road, I stop briefly to say a few words to Donna and Julia who exhort me to keep running which I do (as if I have a choice). I extend my walk through the aid station halfway up Palani hill realizing my running pace uphill is little different than walking. After the left turn onto the Queen K, it's a little over six miles to the turn into the Energy lab with aid stations about a mile apart. My focus narrows to getting to the next aid station. I try to ignore all the runners headed back into town and the finish. While normally not taking pleasure in others' misery, I do take some perverse comfort in the occasional athlete on the other side of the highway still working to finish the bike. More than a few athletes are walking – more headed out of town than back in. I pass the halfway point, and eventually reach the turn into the Energy Lab. The new entrance loops 180 degrees back to the old entrance road at the top of the hill where the next aid station awaits. In past years I've been able to pick up the pace on the downhill, but it doesn't seem that way this year. Somewhere in the past mile, I've started walking 30 seconds every half mile – roughly one walk between aid stations. This was the modus operandi that got me through the final 6 miles of Wisconsin only 5 weeks ago. I suspect the 30 seconds of walking isn't really that beneficial physiologically, but it does focus my effort into manageable chunks. Would eating and enjoying a jelly bean every ½ mile serve the same purpose without the slowing of average pace? Something to try next year, maybe not.



At the bottom of the hill, I turn right and turn towards the airport. While this flat segment is less than a mile, it seems further, but I finally pass under the Red Bull banner and make the turn back towards the finish. The sun is low in the sky, but the nearly full daylight tells me I'm still ahead of where I was in previous years. The uphill run out of the Energy Lab seems shorter than the downhill. Turning away from the finish towards the new entrance is a bit depressing, but then I pass the 19 mile marker and am soon back on the Queen K. I haven't seen a single digit mile split for ages; some are coming in over 12 minutes. By now, daylight has evaporated. It's difficult to read my watch, so I need to find a new walk /

run protocol – skipping the walks doesn't seem a reasonable solution. Evenly spaced, orange traffic cones separate the outgoing runners from those headed back, so I start running for 5 traffic cones and walking for one except for the aid stations. I have no idea how I came up with the number 5; why not 6, 7, or even 10? Later analysis of the Training Peaks chart reveals I walked 35 times from the Energy Lab back to Palani Road averaging 12:04 per mile. That's about 1.1 miles walking of the 6.3 back.

The Target sign appears out of the darkness, signaling the final uphill, 1 km in length, best known for where Mark Allen dropped Dave Scott in 1989's "Ironwar" for his first of six IRONMAN World Championships. Finally, the right turn down Palani and the final aid station. I had hoped to run this final mile, but the steep downhill aggravates my right knee which has acted up with increasing frequency the last few miles. So it's walk / jog down to the hot corner and a couple more walk / runs up the Kuakini highway to the right turn at Hualalai, where I do commit to running the rest of the way. Nothing in endurance sport compares to the final run through town along Alii Drive, although Boylston Street is a close second. Nearly five hours since the winners ran through here, the street is not crowded; pedestrians make their way purposely between the restaurants and bars or back to their cars. Providing a minute of almost quiet contemplation and satisfaction of a goal accomplished. Then the final turn, where I'm assaulted by the lights, the noise, and the crowds lining the finish chute. I remember to zip up my tri suit for the finishing photos, not to stumble on the small ramp up to the finish line, and raise my arms in celebration as I hear Mike Reilly announce my name for the second time in five weeks, this time adding that I'm an IRONMAN coach, and the famous four words - "You are an IRONMAN".



My time for the day is 12:40:53. This is 1 minute and 55 seconds faster than 2016 and 27 minutes faster than 2014, accomplishing a secondary goal of my fastest Kona, thanks mostly to the calm sea and windless day. My run time was 4:41, and while I'm more than content with the finish, the slow run – some 35 minutes slower than 2014 – will increasingly irk in the days to come with the realization that I missed my chance to go under 12 hours at Kona – an unvoiced goal in the back of mind. I feel better about my 12th place finish in an age group of 52; one of the four DNF's was Gordon Haller – the overall

winner of the inaugural IRONMAN in 1978 who had been prominently featured at the Welcome banquet. Surprisingly, my run was the 6th fastest – providing a modicum of solace.

Post Race

My catchers walk me away from the finish line to the back of the King K Hotel to collect my finisher's medal, tee shirt, hat, and morning clothes bag. In contrast to 13 hours ago when athletes waited quietly for the start, the area is crowded with tired but noisy athletes recounting the day's adventures. I find a vacant chair and take a few minutes to don my morning sweats, find my phone, and let Brad know I'll join them soon. The pizza served in the nearby tent doesn't appeal to me; I could go with some ice cream, but it's a longer walk to that tent, so my unsteady legs carry me back to the pier to collect my transition bags and bike. Volunteers carefully compare the bike and bag numbers to my wrist band, and I'm soon embracing Donna and accepting congratulations from Brad, Julia, and Dave. Brad takes my bike, and we make our way along Alii, back past the finish line to the IRONMAN village where I surrender my bike to TriBike Transport for the next few weeks.

Back at the condo, we celebrate my finish with a bottle of champagne which Brad bought after my finish— to buy any earlier would have risked the spite of the triathlon gods. I stay up until midnight watching the webcast to see Hiromu Inada finish six minutes ahead of the 17 hour cutoff. At 86, he claims the record of the oldest finisher ever at Kona! Talk about perseverance – he missed the bike cutoff in 2017 and finished in 2016 just outside the 17 hours. Can't wait to see him next year.

We stay on the island for the next six days moving on Monday with Brad to the Waikaloa resort some 35 miles north of Kailua – one of the key milestones among the lava fields on the Queen K. Here are a few of the highlights:

- Sunday morning, at Big Island Running Company, Julia and I get our picture taken with Mirinda Carfrae, Julia's idol and 3 time Kona winner (5th place this year). Dave wins the big door prize of a yet to be released Polar sports watch which features power measurement on the run. Somehow, I think I'm going to have to figure out how to optimize its training utility.
- The Champion's Banquet on Sunday evening ends with the race video which leaves everyone wanting to return despite what they may have told themselves 24 hours earlier.
- Relaxation by a pool with a book and a beer without having to think about when and how far I have to swim, bike, or run. I repeat this activity several times to verify its therapeutic benefit.
- Enjoying Kona coffee in Hawi while Brad hikes the trail down into the Pololu valley.
- Swimming in a pool without counting laps.



- The sky and stars when we stop at 9000 feet on Brad's and my tour up Mauna Kea. Our guide points out the various constellations and how the island's original inhabitants used them to navigate their way across the Pacific. Watching the sun rise over the clouds at the 13,800 foot summit in 30 degree temperatures.



Brad departs Thursday evening, and Friday, we make our final drive through the lava fields back to the airport. Once you get Kona in your bloodstream, it's sad to leave, but after two weeks, we're ready to be back home. While nothing can be taken for granted, I fully expect to be back in 2019 with the most difficult obstacle, that of qualification, already overcome. I am so lucky to have the family, friends, health, and means to be doing this race year after year. Never did I dream in 1989, when I resolved to run consistently for six weeks in a row, that I would have the kind of opportunities that I have had to meet great people, race competitively, participate in the most iconic races, and coach other athletes to meet their goals and dreams. I am truly blessed.

Thank you for reading.

