

IRONMAN 70.3 World Championships. August 26-27 Lahti, Finland.

Race Report

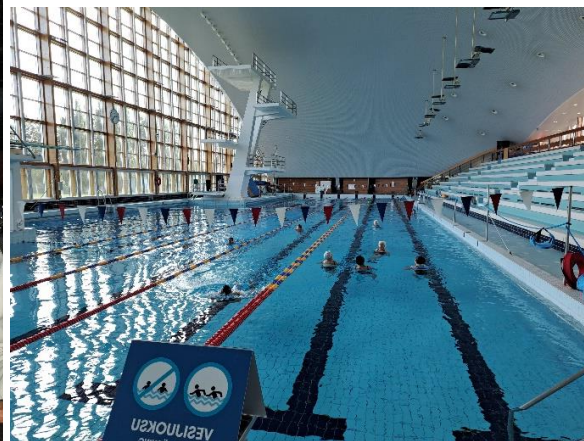
Donna and I arrive in Finland on **Tuesday**, August 22nd. Endurance Sports Travel (EST) provides our accommodations as they have numerous times at half and full IRONMAN World Championships. The hotel is near the Helsinki airport, more than an hour from the race in Lahti, but EST provides all the transportation back and forth.

Pre-race

Upon arrival, I do a short run to shake out the legs from the long trip. After dinner in the hotel restaurant, my first job is to unpack and reassemble my bike. It appears to have survived the trip without issue. Following a bus ride to Lahti **Wednesday** morning, I do a practice swim in the lake (about 67 deg – comfortable enough with a wetsuit) , register, and pick up my race stuff. To check out the bike **Thursday** morning, I ride 15 miles with an athlete from Australia - the bike seems fine. Late afternoon, another bus ride to Lahti joins us with Sylvia (who I coach) and family for the Welcome Banquet. A 10 minute jog **Friday** morning takes me to a beautiful 50m indoor pool where I swim 500m before jogging back. **Friday** is our day for a walking tour of downtown Helsinki -only a 20 minute train ride from our hotel. We stroll along the Esplanadi to the City Market at the harbor, take photos of the Uspenski and Helsinki cathedrals, and eat lunch in a British pub. We give up trying to find the National Museum (my fault as Google directions were set for an auto rather than walking) and head back to the train station. **Saturday** is the women's race. I watch the race start at breakfast – it's foggy and the start is delayed 30 minutes – before taking a train to Lahti along with my transition bags. (EST will bring my bike later). The weather is great – temperature in the 60's and mostly sunny. I join Sylvia's family to watch her finish the bike and set out on the run. After picking up my bike from the EST truck, I head to T1 at the swim finish to rack the bike and drop off the transition bag. I stop at the EST tent near the swim start to cheer Sylvia as she passes the 18 km marker (3 km left to go) and then hurry to the IRONMAN village to watch her finish. She has a great race and still looked strong at the finish. After dropping my remaining transition bag in T2, I catch an EST shuttle back to the hotel. We eat dinner at an Italian restaurant in the station mall, and after preparing everything I'll need tomorrow morning, I retire for the evening.



With Sylvia at Welcome Banquet



Pool Swim on Friday



Touring Helsinki on Friday



Bike in Transition Ready for Tomorrow



Taylor Knibb – Repeat Champion

Sylvia's Strong Finish!

Race-Day - Sunday

I'm up before my watch and phones alarms at 3:15 am. I do my pre-race fueling and hydration in the seating area by the hotel elevator to disturb Donna as little as possible before boarding the 5am EST bus. I arrive in T1 about 6:30 am. Only, a few minutes later, I've checked out the bike, pumped up the tires, and loaded nutrition / hydration. I greet Bruce Cook, an athlete in my age group and fellow coach whom I've known and raced against for many years has, and we walk together to the swim start where the pro men are preparing for their 7:30 am start. We compare weather forecasts on our phones – his says a chance of rain in afternoon; mine says rain all day. It's dry now with temperature in the low 50's. Water temperature is announced as 19 deg C (66 deg F). The announcer applauds a rainbow that has appeared over the lake as a positive omen. Being a realist, that means it's raining and to me, that's not a positive omen.

The Swim

Following the pro's and physically challenged athletes, the massive 40-44 year age group, some 900 strong, start the swim with 6 athletes jumping into the lake every 10 seconds. Men 70+ are next, a few minutes after our slated time of 7:54 am. The swim course is straight forward with buoy's 100 meters apart – 5 buoy's turn left, 4 buoy's turn right, 5 buoy's turn right, and 5 buoy's to the swim exit. I'm to the 2nd turn buoy (nearly halfway) when the green swim caps of the M35-39 age group begin swimming by as if I'm standing still on the side of a highway as cars zip by me. This pretty much describes the rest of my race, including the bike and run, as I'm passed by a large fraction of the 4000+ athletes.

I'm out of the water in 44 minutes – not a great swim but any swim completed is a good one. I has begun to feel cold during the last 500 meters (maybe I should have worn my neoprene cap), and it feels cold in transition, so I take the time to pull on arm sleeves and a water proof run vest last worn in the rain at this year's Boston marathon.



Weather looked good before the swim

The Bike

The first several miles of the bike course are predominantly downhill; I try to keep to the far right of the course to stay out of the way of the athletes speeding by me. My bike computer incomprehensively has gone to sleep mode and wakes up only momentarily when I touch the display. My watch also has not connected to the power pedals although it worked fine on Thursday's practice ride. I need to concentrate on the course and can't afford to be preoccupied with electronics; I should have checked them out in transition before the race. However, I can see time and distance on my watch which tell me when to eat and how much farther to go – all I really need to know. The bike computer does track all the data while sleeping and despite the lack of real time data, I average 80% of FTP – about the right power level for a 70.3. We're not 5 miles into the race when it starts raining – sometimes moderately, occasionally heavy, and other times just light – but even when light, the rooster tails of passing athletes keep me well soaked. The terrain is rolling and the road surface smooth but with lots of patched, slick areas. About mid-way, an athlete passes me and then goes down hard on his left side - I guess losing his front wheel on a slick spot. He's up quickly pulling his bike off the road, but it's sobering and just adds to my caution. There are 3 no pass zones on the course – two through pedestrian tunnels and one very steep downhill just before the finish. I'm on the brakes and really careful in these sections and likely not in the good graces of the faster cyclists wanting to pass me. I get progressively colder as the miles go by. I was staying comfortably under my goal of a 3 hour bike, but I'm having to slow down as my core muscles tighten from light but frequent shivering. Staying in the aero position gets increasingly uncomfortable. I catch an abdominal cramp for a few minutes but am able to relax it. My hands haven't gone numb (with temperatures over 50, I didn't think I'd need the gloves that I had in the transition bag), but I do lose dexterity and have to stop momentarily with about 10 miles remaining to extract my last gel. I'm thankful for the long climb around mile 50 as I can sit up and the cold is less penetrating at the slower speed. Eventually, I reach the steep downhill, the bike finish, and T2. My bike split is 3:09, slower than I had hoped, but the wet cold has eliminated time as a concern and left just finishing as my main motivator.

T2 is inside a large building at the IRONMAN village. My bike is in Row G. I turn at the correct row but on the wrong side where I can't see my number on the racks. Eventually I find the right spot, leave the bike, pick up my transition bag, and sit down at the change benches. While it has stopped raining, I'm still very cold and have decided to keep on the vest and run sleeves. Just pulling the laces tight on my running shoes is a chore with cold hands. I see a whole area of seated athletes warming up in space blankets. While inviting, I pass up that opportunity and count on the run to get warm. As I exit transition to start the run, I see Sylvia and stop briefly to comment on the miserable bike ride.



Contemplating starting the run

The Run

I merge with runners already completing their first or second laps – the latter quickly turning right to the finish line (which I try not to think about). My legs are working pretty well, but I'm being passed by a seemingly never-ending stream of faster runners. A right turn takes us into the Lahti stadium and a lap around the 400 meter track to the cheer of spectators watching from the seats. The big video board shows runners crossing the finish line, which I again try to ignore. Exiting the stadium, we start up a mile long, 300 foot hill. The following 1.5 miles are on more or less flat terrain before a 1.5 mile section of downhill to the lake. Finally, a couple flat miles along the lake shore to a turnaround near the swim start and back to the village to complete lap one. I've described the course in miles, but of course, it is marked in kilometers. It's nice that the markers go by more quickly providing an illusion of greater speed, but there are more of them. Warming up quickly on the run, I had earlier rolled down my arm sleeves and now take the time to remove and stow my running vest in the back pocket of my tri-suit. As we re-enter the village, about half the runners peel off to the finish line. With the rest, I run another lap around the stadium and tackle the long hill for the second and last time. On the flat at the top, my left knee registers a protest, but it seems to stay happy as long as I'm careful to plant my foot under the knee. This does require more care and slower speed on the downhill but that's hardly a significant concern – just get me to the finish. I've been alternating water and Gatorade at the aid stations, eaten two gels, and taken two salt tablets but after reaching the 17km marker, I should be fine for the duration. The sun dares to rear its head – where were you when we needed you? I'm actually passing more runners than those passing me (I guess most have already gone by) as I've unconsciously picked up the pace having "smelled" the finish line. Finally, the right hand turn I had ignored twice earlier, 50 meters of carpet, and across the the line to the sound of my name being announced. So happy to be done!

Run time of 2:04 and total time of 6:14. Both well off of what I had hoped, but it has been a long and difficult day. Finishing is enough. Later, I'm surprised to learn that I was 10th in the age group out of 35 finishers, 15 DNF's, and 7 DNS's. Not an easy day for us old guys. It's also my third World Championship event in the past year – all with top ten finishes.



Finally the finish!!

Overall Thoughts

Negatives

- With 7000 athletes, this was probably the largest event IRONMAN had ever produced. Accommodations in Lahti were scarce early on so thousands of athletes stayed in Helsinki (120 km from the race site) or smaller towns requiring frequent transport to Lahti. While the race organizers did a great job managing logistics (eg. special trains from Helsinki and buses from other locales), it still meant a lot of time on buses or trains (I made 4 trips to Lahti) and detracted from the event atmosphere. The Welcome Banquet had the biggest crowd that I've ever seen in ten IM World Championship events, but I suspect the Awards dinner was more sparsely attended with almost no time to get back to the hotel and then back to the dinner for those not staying in Lahti.
- Apparently, the Helsinki airport wasn't prepared for 7000 athletes – most with bikes – to all depart within a one to two day period. Judging by Facebook posts, not many bikes made it onto their scheduled flights. As I write this, I'm still waiting for mine to get to Copenhagen before we leave for the States. This was also a big problem after the huge event at Kona last year (my bike made it that time). Tri-bike Transport is one solution for USA athletes but the cost is high - comparable to IRONMAN's race entry fee. Rentals are another option but were limited. I don't know the solution, but it seems there should be sufficient demand and willingness to pay to find one – maybe a deal with DHL to transport bikes to and from the airport or race venue?

Positives:

- The race was extremely well organized. The volunteers and local citizens were great – friendly, patient, and helpful. It was the most complete Athlete Guide I've ever seen working to anticipate problems athletes may have.
- The race courses were beautiful, challenging, and well-marked.
- It was a beautiful venue for athletes and spectators alike – especially the area of the Race Village with large indoor areas for the banquets and T2 adjacent to the stadium, Olympic size pool, and ski jumps. I'm only sorry I didn't have any opportunity to explore Lahti.
- What I appreciate most at these major races and this one didn't disappoint is the opportunity to meet and interact with other athletes and their families. All are serious athletes whether competing for podium spots or just to finish and each with their own story. The time to meet, learn from, and interact with people – new acquaintances and others who I've seen repeatedly for years – has and hopefully will keep me training, racing, and qualifying.