

Race Report

IRONMAN World Championship, Kailua-Kona, HI

October 8, 2016

On final approach to the Kona airport on the last day of September, my gaze follows the long slope of lava fields from Mauna Kea to the sea. It'd hard to believe that two years have elapsed since last departing this strip of earth. Like the reawakening of a dormant but benevolent virus, in many ways, it seems as if we had just left. Those

intervening months, however, included retirement, several coaching certifications, and the start of my small coaching business. Also a 10th Boston marathon and 5th IRONMAN, where I was fortunate to qualify for this return trip to Kona. Knowing what to expect this time around eases those anxieties caused by logistical uncertainties but instills a larger respect for what lies ahead. My first and foremost goal is to finish; finishing faster than 2014 is a secondary goal but as investment companies remind us in the fine print, "past performance is no guarantee of future success".



Donna and I are met in baggage claim by an Endurance Sports Travel (EST) driver. Owned and operated by Ken Glah, EST provides accommodations and race services at numerous IRONMAN races around the world. Ken, a top five Kona finisher in the 80's and a USAT Hall of Fame inductee, is this year doing his 33rd Kona in a row – a record likely to remain forever unbroken, as he still has to qualify each year as an age grouper. We contracted with EST in 2014 and were very satisfied. Our condo this year, about 1.5 miles out of town on Ali'i Drive, is a beautiful ocean front unit with a large, wrap around lanai overhanging the black rocks that substitute for a beach. If I lean out and gaze towards town, I can see the temporary buoy's marking the approximate turnaround of the swim.

Once settled, a 40 minute, easy run helps loosen my legs, tightened from 12 hours of economy seating. Ali'i Drive is crowded with runners, as it will be for the next 5 days, most all running faster than me. It's nearly impossible to discern Kona athletes from wannabes as all lack race wristbands which only become available after registration opens on Tuesday. Waiting for the 5:30 pm EST shuttle into town for dinner, we meet Barbara and Gene, parents of Amy who is doing the race along with husband, Dave. They have obtained their Kona slots through the IRONMAN legacy program (requiring a minimum of 12

prior IM races). They are still planning Arizona and Cozumel this year and have qualified outright for Kona 2017!

Saturday morning, a week before the race, marks the Ho'ala training swim – a 2.4 mile wet rehearsal with proceeds benefiting local charities. Fortunately, my training plan calls for only 2000 yards, so while waiting for the starting area to clear of swimmers, I soak in the sun and enjoy the iconic scenery of the swim start. It feels good to be back. Once clear, I swim a few buoy's down the course and back – my watch says 1000 yards. Uncomfortable swimming too far out alone on the course, my three swims this

week will all involve multiple out and backs. The water is crystal clear with marine life in full view, although underwater sightseeing is limited by the need to be constantly alert for other swimmers. The water is a little choppy but not particularly bad. Always my swim limiter, calf cramps have been particularly severe this year, occurring regularly in practice swims at distances as short as 1000 yards. Jumping out of the pool to stretch it out is not an option



in open water. At both the Raleigh 70.3 and the White Lake International several weeks ago, my left calf cramped hard, halting forward progress until the muscle released after what seemed more than a minute of agony. Having to drop out during the swim is my worst fear. I won't bore you with all the remedies I've tried to control cramping, but suffice it to say, my current plan is to mix in a fair amount of breast stroke (say 10 strokes breast stroke, 40 strokes free, and repeat for 4300 yards) which has provided good but not perfect prevention in long practice swims. Slower for sure, but finishing trumps speed. My 2014 Kona swim took 1:40; I'd gladly take a 1:50 or most anything short of the 2:20 cut off.

Following the swim, I meet up with Donna who has taken a later shuttle, and we cross the street to the daily EST buffet breakfast at Fish Hopper's – a restaurant located at the finish line. I meet the EST staff, including Ken, and several fellow athletes. On the return to the condo, the shuttle stops at a grocery store where we stock up on essentials including hydration standby's , Gatorade® and Kona beer. Bikes are scheduled to be available from Tri-Bike Transport at 3:00. Anticipating a line of athletes anxious for reunion with their trusty steeds, I arrive 30 minutes early, only to find no one waiting at all. I have time to run a couple of errands and upon return, am still the first to pick up my bike – the only "first" I'm likely to experience this week. The bike and gear bag contents have survived their 2+ week journey without issue, and it's a short ride back to the condo (short being relative as the ride parallels the swim course which is certainly not short).

The next few days are full of training, scheduled events, and planned rest. A few highlights:

- Saturday Tempo Run – I start my 80 minute run from the condo at 11 am. Hot and without cloud cover, my heart rate rises quickly into the 140's and 150's, forcing me to back off to an easier training pace. Not a good sign; my intent is to keep it in the 130's during the marathon – 120's if possible. A cold shower at the beach park where I turn around provides some relief as does a stop in town for Gatorade®.
- Sunday Bike - EST ferries 8 of us with bikes to Hapuna Beach Park - about 30 miles out the Queen K highway. Once there, we ride 22 miles farther to the bike turnaround in Hawi. The mix of heat, sun, and wildly variable winds is a stark reminder of the course difficulty, but the cross wind on the 7 mile climb to Hawi is a blessing compared to the vicious headwinds faced during the 2014 race. However, these same cross winds transform the return descent into a white knuckle adventure as gusts attempt to separate my bike from the road. With left arm on the aerobar and the right feathering the rear brake, my speed nears 40 miles per hour.



- Monday IRONMAN coaches luncheon - IRONMAN has organized a lunch for certified IRONMAN coaches to meet and talk with the Master Coaches - Mark Allen, Dave Scott, Paula Newby Frazier, Matt Dixon, and Lance Watson. You can't find a more famous, experienced, and knowledgeable group triathlon coaches on the planet. Surprisingly, only four coaches attend; two of whom are famous in their own right – Kurt Madden, two time Ultraman world champion and 7th in the 1980 Ironman and Cherie Grunfeld, time Kona finisher and frequent age group winner, now in her 70's, who is attending but not racing for the first time – she's feels great today but knows Saturday will be difficult. I am overwhelmed, but it is a great opportunity to chat one on one with the iconic names of the sport.



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- Tuesday Registration – After lunch on Tuesday, I sign the waivers and pick up my race numbers, gear bags, timing chip, and assorted swag. Extremely well organized and without a waiting line,

I'm in and out in several minutes. A yellow athlete wrist band joins my Race ID and EST band on my left wrist. Not much of a fashion statement, but I'm official.

- Tuesday Parade of Nations – The EST shuttle is delayed by traffic and drops us off at the athlete village, the parade terminus. The nations parade alphabetically, and we're able to see all the teams from Argentina to Turkey as we make our way to the staging area behind the King Kamehameaha (King Kam) hotel arriving just as the USA team begins to move – perfect timing. The EST Welcome dinner follows the parade.
- Wednesday HOTSHOT run with Craig Alexander – HOTSHOT, a new remedy for muscle cramps with a compelling basis in science (www.teamhotshot.com/), has not cured my swim cramps, but I am nonetheless a HOTSHOT Kona ambassador. After talking to other athletes, I am convinced that it is a good product – the same principle as pickle juice but with greater efficacy. It just doesn't work for everyone. Three time Kona winner, Craig Alexander, is their key triathlon spokesman. About 20 of us run 3 miles with Craig, taking turns at the front, and then have an opportunity to ask questions afterwards. I've seen him at previous races, and like most Aussies I've met, he is easily approachable and down-to-earth.
- Monday and Wednesday Bike Rides – these are easy, aerobic bike rides on Ali'i Drive and the Queen K. On Sunday's ride, I had noticed a slight rhythmic bumping from the back tire, but ignored it in a failed effort to keep up with faster cyclists. At the top of a hill on Wednesday, I finally decide to get off the bike to check it out and discover an inch and a half of tire that is not fully seated on the rim. Carbon rims require special care to assure the tire beads are fully seated, but I'm amazed the tire hasn't blown out. Has it been that way since I installed a new tire and tube several rides almost a month ago? Why did I wait until now to check it out? What if it had blown out on Sunday's high speed descent from Hawi? As a coach, I'm supposed to know better. I deflate and reseal the tire, then find severely leaking threads on my CO2 cartridge adaptor - requiring both my spares for sufficient reinflation. I count myself more than lucky to make these discoveries on a training ride and not experience a near repeat of 2014, when my front tire blew out on the Queen K early in the race requiring a wait for a replacement wheel (I blame that one on Michelin, and I've only raced Continentals since).



- Thursday Underpants Run – Now copied at numerous events, Kona is the original, run originally as a good-natured protest of European athletes parading around town in their Speedo's. I watched from the sidelines in 2014, but decide to join the HOTSLOT team this year – red skivvies have been provided for the men. Several publicity photos are posted on HOTSLOT's Facebook page, at least one of which makes its way to Triathlon.com. I can pick myself out, but I'm not obvious as the photographer was less concerned about facial recognition than the posterior facing HOTSLOT logos. And the shorts are considerably more modest than what I'm seeing at the pier each morning.



- Thursday OFFDAY - Other than the short Underpants Run (more a fast walk), today is a rest day. After breakfast, I get a 60 minute massage. The therapist quickly finds the trigger points in my glutes and comments on my extremely tight IT bands- no surprises. She suggests a short massage before Saturday, but I decline the opportunity. I have yet to cramp in practice swims since arrival. With only two days to go, I have reconciled myself to fate, and my swim anxiety has largely dissipated.
- Thursday Reunion – Mid-afternoon, we happily greet Brad, our son, who we haven't seen since March. Hurricane Matthew had forced evacuation of his town house in Cocoa Beach on Wednesday. After doing what he could to move hard to replace belongings to an upstairs central closet, he flew to LAX a day early to catch today's scheduled flight to Kona.
- Friday E Komo Mai Welcome Banquet – This is a not-to-miss part of the Kona experience. We're enlightened that this year's motto, Kūpa'a, meaning "Steadfast, Firm, and Immovable", not only describes our journey to reach Kona but what will be required to cross the finish line on Saturday. I'm proud to stand this year when Mike Reilly recognizes all Kona veterans, but those standing are quickly whittled down as he recognizes those who have raced 5 times, 10 times, Across the table, Ken receives a standing ovation as the last man standing.

Finally, Friday arrives with less than 24 hours to the start. Donna and Brad join me at the swim start before breakfast to watch my short swim. Back at the condo, Brad joins me for a 15 minute jog on Ali'i Drive. Lots of runners, but anyone running hard is sans wrist band. A 20 minute easy bike ride marks the end of my 19 week training plan – arguably a more difficult achievement than the race itself. Bike check-in on the pier is scheduled for Noon to 2:30 for race numbers 1 to 1000 (I'm 279). After a volunteer checks my wrist band against the bike number, I make my way down the long, carpeted chute to the pier. This is IRONMAN's equivalent of Oscar's red carpet, complete with a line of spectators behind the ropes and an announcer to stop and interview the professionals. Once on the pier, my

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“personal” volunteer leads me to my bike rack, reviews the traffic patterns for T1 and T2, and helps me find my numbered racks for the bike and run transition bags on either side of the changing tents. Taking only a few minutes, I soon meet up with Brad at the exit, and we take his car back to the condo, stopping at the grocery store to buy food for a pasta dinner. Not much left to do. I organize my remaining race stuff into 3 groups – hydration in the refrigerator, what I’ll wear, and everything else which will be carried in the clear, morning clothes bag. We eat a quiet dinner on the Lanai overlooking the Pacific then watch something forgettable on TV. I read a book until my eyes start to droop then climb in bed about 8:30.

RACE DAY

The Wait

I wake several times during the night – typical – and get out of bed at 3:15 am - minutes before the multiple alarms on my watch and the bedroom clock. After donning the timing chip on my left ankle, I walk out on the Lanai – no wind and the ocean seems more calm than previous mornings - good signs. My breakfast menu, finished by 4 am, is typical for race day – a toasted bagel w/ peanut butter and two bananas. Hydration (glass of OJ, 2 cups of coffee, and 24 oz. of Gatorade) is complete by 4:30 – I’ll only sip water between now and the start. Brad keeps me company during final preparations which include transferring two frozen Gatorade bottles to my Bike Special needs bag, I wake Donna to kiss her good

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bye and it's off. I join Dave and Amy waiting for a 4:45 EST shuttle, but instead we catch one of the special IRONMAN shuttles trolling for athletes along Ali'i Drive.

The shuttle drops us near the IRONMAN village, and we join the procession of athletes for the short walk to the King Kam hotel. Conversation is muted as we privately contemplate the day ahead. After dropping our special needs bags, wrist bands are inspected prior to a short wait for body marking. Highly organized like all aspects of this race, my arms are swabbed with alcohol followed by a careful, unhurried application of tattoo's to each arm (I'll be back in North Carolina before I'm able to fully remove them). We're personally escorted to the athlete waiting area where we have access to the pier and our bikes. IRONMAN has provided pumps at the end of each row to reinflate tires. After loading hydration, nutrition, and salt tablets on the bike and resetting my bike Garmin, there's little left to do. I take a picture of Daniela Ryf – last year's (and this year's) winning women in the professional corral – only two rows away – and note that activity in this corral is no different from others. After a short wait for a Porta Potty, I make my way off the pier to lay down in the grass and await the start together with 2300 other athletes in various states of calm and anxiety. As before most races, I'm quite calm as acceptance of fate has displaced my earlier anxieties. I find myself sitting next to Bruce Cook who finished 2nd behind me in the age group at Florida – he's going to swim and bike but can't run due to injury.



My final preparations start with 35 minutes to go – sun screen, washing down a gel with 14 oz of water, a HOT SHOT (while it seemingly didn't help with cramps, it's also never hurt), and donning of my speed swim suit. I surrender my morning clothes bag and head back to the pier. A cannon short announces the start of the Pro men's race at 6:25 and the pro women 5 minutes later. This leaves 25 minutes to get 1600 age group men into the water out 50 meters to the line. While starting on the left side of the ultra-wide course (towards the shoreline) is arguably shorter, I can't imagine having to tread water for 20 minutes and repeat my 2014 strategy – entering the water about 10 minutes before the start and



stroking easily along the pier to one of several large truck tires that act as bumpers for docked ships. While not alone in this strategy, there is adequate space to hang onto a tire and save my legs for the swim. With a couple minutes to go, athletes begin to leave for a spot on the starting line proper, and I'm able to advance a couple tires down the pier. I'm mere feet from Mike Reilly and the starting cannon when it goes off.

The long day begins.

The Swim

My swim strategy is simple - swim down the buoy line. As most everyone who qualified for this event is a fast swimmer, crowding at the start is not a worry. I plan to swim out several buoy's and then start mixing in some breast stroke to extend my calf muscles and prevent or at least delay cramping. I'm following a number of swimmers, but by the second buoy, I realize they're sighting on the yellow buoy's on the return side of the course. I don't remember this from 2014 but adjust to the left to converge with the orange buoy's that mark the out bound course. Clear visibility of the ocean floor helps in maintaining a straight line with only occasional need to look up and check position of the next buoy. By the 3rd or 4th

buoy, I start mixing in 5 to 10 strokes of breast stroke between 40 – 50 strokes of freestyle. There are a lot of other swimmers around me – undoubtedly a small portion of the 1600 at the start, but a lot to the extent I'm not the last person in this race either.



My first milestone is the Royal Kona resort on Ali'i Drive, farther than I swam out on any of my practice swims and more than half way to the turn around. I can see it to the left each time I breath and when I'm past it, I can clearly see the "Body Glove" boat at the turnaround in the distance. My legs feel good, and I'm optimistic. As in 2014, I'm a buoy or two away from the "Body Glove" when the first women age groupers (who started at 7:10 am) begin to swim by and over me. By the time I make the right turn at the boat and make my way towards the second turn buoy, I'm in a washing machine of women swimmers. My left calf chooses this time to cramp, and I'm left like a bug tossed into a toilet, flailing my remaining limbs to keep my head above water. By calf cramp standards(of which I'm well calibrated), it's not terribly painful but neither does it release when stretched. While seemingly an eternity but more

likely 30 seconds of lame breast stroke, it finally releases, and I'm swimming again. Surprisingly, I remain calm and remind myself that I've gotten thorough 5000+ yard workouts following cramps at 2000 yards or less. I also know the buoy line will be well populated with life guards on surf boards where I can rest if necessary.

My strategy for the second half is a repeat of the first – proceeding buoy to buoy on the long return to the pier. My recollection from 2014 is 11 buoy's to the final turn buoy at the end of the pier, but I quickly lose count. I occasionally look up to verify the King Kam hotel is getting closer but it's a long way off. Despite my best efforts to stay out of their way, I'm still getting swum over regularly by pink caps. The Royal Kona goes by on the right side followed pretty soon by the IRONMAN village. The large ROKA float near the start doesn't seem that far off, and I can see the return course, unlike 2014, heads straight in towards the swim exit vs taking a turn at the end of the pier (explaining the proximity of the yellow buoys at the start). My intermittent breast stroke regimen has done its job, and my calves remain surprisingly loose. A glance at my watch yields another pleasant surprise – 1:30 something – faster than I had expected. We must have had a helpful current on the return. 100 yards from the exit, I decide, for the benefit of the few spectators who haven't yet moved to the bike course, to pick up the pace and stay with free style. My right calf cramps in protest but releases immediately. So I finish with a leisurely breaststroke, befitting the 60th place finish in my age group (out of 70). Nonetheless, I am overjoyed to be out of the water in 1:37 with my worst fears overcome.



As I climb up the steps, I strip my speed suit down to my waist and take advantage of the fresh water showers. A volunteer has already pulled my transition bag and I'm into the change tent. Another volunteer takes the time to get things out of my bag as I need them – I'm sure they were too busy to supply this level of service 30 minutes ago, but I'm thankful for it now. More sunscreen, a jog around the pier perimeter interrupted briefly by a porta potty stop, across the mount line, and it's onto the bike.

The Bike

Amazingly, I see Donna among the spectators a half block from start, and she responds when I shout to her. Brad has been waiting to see me exit the water but somehow missed my green cap among all the pink ones. The first five miles of the bike course remain in town, with a mile long loop up to the Queen K and down the steep hill on Palani followed by a 3 mile out and back on the Kuakini Highway before

climbing back up Palani to the Queen K and the long ride out to Hawi. While I trail the large majority of athletes, bike density is sufficient to still require care to make legal passes and avoid drafting. Preparing for the turn and climb on Palani, I see both Donna and Brad this time. A thumbs up communicates that I'm feeling good, although the euphoria from the swim finish is starting to dissipate with the prospect of a long, hot ride ahead.

Job one at this point is rehydration – it's been almost two hours since my last drink. The sky is cloudless so the lava fields are going to be really hot. I'm aiming to drink at least 30 oz. of Gatorade® per hour, which should maintain my stomach on but not over the verge of discomfort. To prevent electrolyte depletion, I'll supplement sodium intake with 6 Salt Stick tablets over the course of the next 6 hours. At a half hour, I eat my first half Power Bar (about 100 calories). I'll repeat this every 30-40 minutes until the six stowed on the bike are consumed. Then, I'll shift to gel packets on the same frequency. My plan is to ride comfortably with my heart rate in the 120's and try not to exceed 130 on the hills. This won't set any speed records but should leave sufficient energy in the tank for a decent marathon.



The slight tail wind we enjoyed for the first 10 miles on the Queen K gradually shifts to a stiff headwind which persists out beyond Waikaloa and drops my speed below 16 mph. I recognize the downhill where my tire blew out in 2014, and I pass Chris – a fellow ESTer and elite rower in his prime, doing his first Kona at age 70. I make a pit stop at the aid station around 35 miles – this is the first race I've ever stopped on the bike, but today, the additional comfort is worth the 9 minutes that the three stops will cause. Around the 40 mile point, a string of 10 pro men fly by, enjoying the tail wind blowing them back to the pier. The head winds abate by the time I reach the turn onto route 270 and begin the 18 miles up to Hawi. Daniela Ryf, the lead woman, speeds by in the opposite direction with no apparent competitors in tow. The first 11 miles on 270 follow the coast, curving gradually towards the east over a series of moderate hills – more up than down in what feels like a moderate tail wind, promoting speed but adding to the heat load. As we turn slightly inland and start the 6 mile climb to Hawi, the wind shifts to a moderate cross wind from the right; nothing like the fierce headwinds we experienced in 2014. I'm climbing comfortably around 12-13 mph with my heart rate under 130. I'm passing athletes regularly, but we're sparsely spaced compared with the dense packs of riders speeding down the hill.

The village of Hawi and the turnaround at 60 miles finally arrive. I do a quick physical inventory – it's hot (not as hot as 2014), but I'm well hydrated and my heart rate has stayed low – so far so good. The Gatorade on the course has been cold, so I see no reason to retrieve the now thawed, frozen ones in my

special needs bag. The cross winds going down the hill are not as bad as Sunday's training ride, but I keep my right hand on the base bar and brake for added stability. However, when we reach the rolling hills along the coast, sporadic yet fierce gusts cross the highway like Zeus throwing lightning bolts. At Kawaihae, we start the steep uphill to the Queen K- 30 miles to go. Approaching the Waikalua turnoff, stiff head winds make a renewed appearance, in the opposite direction of only a couple of hours earlier. This repeat of 2014 is no surprise, but I am envious of the race leaders who enjoyed a tailwind on this stretch of road.

Pedal, drink, eat – the miles go by. Eventually, the large hill between the Queen K and the ocean looms ahead, and I know, when reached, the control tower of the airport will be visible. The headwinds abate and become a slight tailwind when I reach the airport. It's hard not to be discouraged at the entrance to the Energy Lab where several runners are turning back onto the Queen K for the final 6 miles of the race. Many



more runners, having run 17 miles are headed down into the Energy Lab. I still have 6 miles to ride before starting my marathon. But those miles go quickly in the tail wind and I'm back at the pier where a volunteer is waiting to take my bike. My bike time was 6:30, about what I expected. My average heart rate was only 118 – lower than expected and indicative of a slower effort. That's of little current concern, as I focus on transition and getting out on the run. I remove my bike shoes for the long jog around the pier on rubbery legs as my quads adjust to their new task. Not much to do in the changing tent – on with my running shoes, additional gels and salt tablets in my pockets, more sunscreen, and I'm off with race belt and lucky Turtle hat in hand.

The Run

Leaving the pier, I scan the crowds lining the course for Donna and Brad in vain. More likely, they're at the condo where it will be harder to miss each other. As we turn onto Kuakini Highway, I note the mix of runners. The majority are headed in the opposite direction, at the 10 mile point and beginning the steep climb up Palani before rejoining the Queen K. Many, like myself, are on the first mile, but we are occasionally passed by a speedy runner with only a half mile remaining to the finish. That's too far ahead to even contemplate. Once on Ali'i Drive, I settle into a comfortable pace. While clouds now litter the sky, it's still very hot. As I approach our condo, I see Donna and Brad ahead. I don't stop for conversation but comment on the heat and try to flash a smile. Aid stations are spaced about a mile apart, and I try to

drink a cup of both Gatorade and water while dumping a third cup of water on my head or chest. Ice, when available, goes in my hat or tri shorts. My fueling plan is a gel and salt tablet about every 3 miles, but my stomach votes its strategic disagreement shortly after the 2 mile aid station. Not horrible discomfort, but more than I care to suffer for another 24 miles. Cutting back to half a gel and skipping the Gatorade at every other aid station seems to keep any discomfort in a tolerable range. By the second half of the run, this problem abates fully or is at least displaced by more demanding ones.

I need to urinate, but the porta potties at the aid stations have been occupied. At 4 miles, I see one being vacated, but as I step to the side of the road, a spectator steps into it, forcing me to cut left like a running back avoiding a defender (but in slow motion). My right ankle protests and buckles. Weakened from multiple sprains when I was younger, this occurs a few times each year, occasionally without warning. I follow my protocol of rolling down onto my right side to limit the amount of strain. A runner hitting the pavement generates a fair amount of spectator concern, but I spring back up and am back on my way. From prior experience, I know the ankle probably won't affect my run time, but I will feel it every step of the remaining 22 miles. Just one more thing.



The Ali'i Drive turnaround arrives at 5 miles. The mild head wind on the return to town feels good despite the high humidity and near 90 temperature – helped by some shaded portions of the course and occasional obscuration of the sun by cloud cover. While not concerned with time, I've been running miles between 9 and 9:30 and keeping my heart rate in the 120's despite the heat. I'm passing a lot of athletes, including a surprising number that are walking, while being passed occasionally by faster women (this hasn't changed from the swim). The return trip on Ali'i passes quickly, and passing the condo, I tell Donna and Brad that I'm OK, a third of the way through the run, and will see them at the finish. The blend of runners on Kuakini has shifted with more headed to the finish line, including Natascha Badmann, the original "Swiss Miss" and six time winner of this race who is finishing her last Kona as a professional athlete at age 47. I turn right, jog up the steep incline of Palani keeping my heart rate in the 130's and take the left hand turn onto the Queen K.

It's a seven and a half mile trek in the lava fields to the turnaround at the Energy Lab. In the darkness of the return in 2014, I lost track of where I was on the course, so this time I've decided to count the number of aid stations on the way out and count them back down on the return. While I have a GPS watch which lets me know exactly where I am, in an aid station by aid station mentality, the number of aid stations remaining is an essential piece of information. I start walking through aid stations to assure

adequate hydration and cooling, contributing to a slowed pace now over 10 minutes per mile. This slowdown was unplanned but without a time goal, I can't summon any motivation to pick up the pace and in fact take longer walks at the aid stations as the race progresses. I make a quick stop at the HOT SHOT tent at 14 and accept a HOT SHOT from Kathleen, who looks lonely. (Later, I see a picture of Craig Alexander performing this duty, but he has left long before I get there). When we reach the entrance to the Energy Lab, I have counted six aid stations on the Queen K. Mentally logging this statistic, I begin the long downhill to the turnaround at 18 miles. Finally, we are headed in the right direction – towards the finish line for the last time. I make a final pit stop at an aid station and then the left turn back up the hill to the Queen K. This is the toughest portion of the course for faster athletes, as the afternoon tailwind off the ocean reduces convective cooling to near zero. However, the sun has nearly set and overheating is no longer my problem. I'm passing a fair number of athletes walking, but my recollections are suspect as I've mentally retreated into a private space at this point of the race. I take a glow stick at the aid station just prior to turning on the Queen K for the final six miles. I'm a couple miles ahead of where I was in 2014 when the sun dipped below the horizon, but once again, when set, the near total darkness is striking. Making out the traffic cones separating runners headed in opposite directions is a challenge. We're well separated from the sparse vehicular traffic, but headlights still blind us occasionally. When not obstructed by an intervening hill, each subsequent aid station appears as a shining oasis in the distance. One by one, they slowly go by as I count down from six. Despite the slow pace, I'm very tired and my shoes feel leaden, but nothing has deteriorated drastically. Slow but steady doesn't win the race, but it will get me to the finish.

Eventually, the Target store bull's eye arises from the darkness, marking the last intersection and aid station before Palani. I pray this isn't a mirage, as I've only counted four aid stations (not five). It isn't, and the turn and descent of Palani follow in due course. I don't bother to stop at the mid-hill aid station and 25 mile marker. While my quads object in no small terms, I am able to pick up the pace to about 9 minutes per mile. I take the left hand turn onto Kuakini – this time there are no runners leaving transition which has been long closed but I'm again surprised by the number headed in the opposite direction still with 16 miles to run. Now, the right hand turn on Hualalai and the short run down to Ali'i Drive.

As before, the first stretch on Ali'i is strangely subdued as I weave through pedestrians in comparative silence. But once around the curve, bright lights, music, and cheering attack the senses as spectators crowd the sides of the finish chute. I've remembered to zip up my tri top (displaying the IOS Tri Club logo in place of the



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heart rate monitor strap in the 2014 finisher photo). I even take the time for a couple high fives. Halfway down the chute, Donna and Brad are shouting my name, but I don't see them. I do hear my name announced by Mike Reilly who can't help adding "64 years young". In my concentration to not trip or collapse on the ramp up to the line, I forget to pump my arms, but I do manage a satisfying smile of accomplishment.

Run Time : 4:23

Total Race Time : 12:42

36th of 70 in the 60-64 Age Group

1769 of 2316 Overall



Post Race

I'm immediately flanked by volunteers who walk me out of the finishing chute across the base of the pier to the athlete finishing area. While the temperature has dropped with the sun into the low 80's, the relative humidity has risen, and I accept some cold water poured over my head. My escorts treat me like a triage patient until their evaluation protocol determines a trip to the Medical Tent is unnecessary, and I'm directed to where I can pick up my morning clothes bag and collect my finisher's medal, hat, and shirt. Fatigue sets in bigtime when I find a vacant spot of grass and stop moving. Uncontrolled shivering follows, and my hands fumble through the simple task of undoing the knot on the strings of the clothes

bag. I eventually manage to free a shirt and my phone. Donna has texted that they are waiting at the bike exit; I text back that I'm going to rest for a few minutes but will see her soon.

Regaining my feet, the shivering abates as I shuffle back to the pier. Enroute to the transition bags, we're cruelly forced to circumnavigate the pier for a 3rd time today. Lines of athletes string out like tentacles from the pier exit as volunteers carefully check bag and bike numbers against wrist bands. Fortunately, my bike spot is already near the front of the line, and soon I'm walking my bike off the pier – following the same route taken after the swim in what seems a lifetime ago. I spot Donna and Brad before they see me, and we are quickly reunited with hugs and congratulations. Brad pushes the bike through the crowds as we head back to the Tri Bike Transport area in the IRONMAN village. After dropping the bike, we cross the street for refreshments and rest at the pool area of the Uncle Billy Hotel, which EST has conveniently rented for the day. Dave and Amy are there, having finished some time earlier. Ken comes in having finished his 33rd consecutive Kona – his undertraining for the run evidenced by a 6:02 - longer than his bike time. Finishing only 22 athletes behind me, I must have passed him in the dark. A change of clothes, a slice of pizza, and a little rest revive me for the walk to the EST shuttle and a chance to cheer athletes on their final ½ mile. Back at the condo, we celebrate with a beer and a nice cabernet purchased for the occasion. Opening up the webcast, I manage to stay awake until the last finisher makes the 17 hour cutoff with only seconds to spare. There's only an hour to the IM Louisville start when Julia and Tony will begin their 140.6 mile journey, but sleep beckons. It's been a long but satisfying day.

Sunday is another busy day. After verifying that Julia and Tony finished the swim (Julia in an amazing 1:10) and are making good progress on the bike, I head down to breakfast around 7:45. Deconstruction of the finish line and transition area is well underway. I'm amazed again at the number of swimmers – many with Kona tatoos on their arms. Personally, I'm looking forward to a prolonged swimming break. Breakfast is an opportunity to exchange stories with other athletes and followed by a quick visit to the IRONMAN store for a finisher's jacket and bike jersey. Then a final visit to Tri Bike Transport to deposit my bike bag, stuffed with race and training gear for its return to North Carolina.

Brad left early for the 2.5 hour drive to Volcanos National Park. Donna and I share a frozen pizza while I check on progress in Louisville. As soon as I get the webcast up, I see Tom Lehr finish in an outstanding time of 10:28. Not surprisingly, the athlete tracker lags behind, but I hear and watch Tony finish in a great debut time under 12 hours, and Julia follows about 30 minutes later. Now, I can finally relax!

Brad returns in time for the CHAMPIONS Banquet, another not to miss event. 95% of the starters have finished, more than last year which was higher than 2014, confirming my sense that this year was easier – “easy” certainly being a relative term. Fittingly, first time Kona finishers get to stand this time and are applauded by the “veterans”. The banquet ends with the traditional race video and bittersweet feelings by all. I'm already thinking about opportunities to return; 24 hours ago, I was questioning whether I should have come this time.

I have so many people to thank – no one gets to Kona alone much less finishes it. First and foremost, my family – Donna who has now put up with 27 years of endurance racing and supported me through all the ups and downs. I owe her a lot of vacations that don't include a race number. Next, Jennifer and

Brad who have travelled the world to watch me race – Brad who was in Kona this time and Jennifer who stayed up late in Delaware posting Brad's photo's on Facebook. I promise I will try to attend as many of your running races as I can. Next, the athletes I've had the privilege to coach over the past couple of years – Julia, Tony, Sean, Dave, Susan, Meg, and the Granite Falls Tri & Run Club – your enthusiasm reawakened my passion for this sport. And to all my training partners who have made the training bearable, even enjoyable, while still challenging. I've been so blessed with health and friends that enabled me to participate in this Kona experience. It is as great as it's made out to be, and I wish all readers similar opportunity in the future.

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