

## IRONMAN Virginia Blue Ridge 6/6/2021 – Race Report

### Pre-Race

I arrive Friday afternoon in Roanoke for the Sunday race. Temperature is well into the 80's with low 90's possible in Sunday's forecast. After checking into my hotel, I do an easy one mile run down to the river to check out the race venue. Athlete check-in is in progress, but mine is scheduled for Saturday morning. I want to do a short bike ride early Saturday morning, and we need to leave our bikes during check-in for IRONMAN to transport them to Carvin's Cove Reservoir – the location of the swim and the first transition area (T1).

My bike checks out fine on Saturday's ride, although I discover that I have forgotten my aero bottle which also contains the mount for my bike computer. Not a major problem as the holder between the aerobars can accommodate a normal bike bottle and all the data I need is on my watch – heart rate, time, distance, and speed. However, I will need to buy a regular bike bottle in the IRONMAN village since the store-bought water and Gatorade bottles I've brought and will replenish at aid stations aren't secure in the horizontal position.

I check-in almost an hour before my scheduled 11 am time without difficulty. The no touch check-in on *i*-Pads is much simpler than on the old, written forms, and I expect this new process will outlive COVID. There are still multi-page waivers through which I have to scroll before scratching my signature on the screen (does anybody actually read these except lawyers?) Times for the mandatory bus ride from the Village to Carver's Cove range from 3:00 am to 5:15 am, based on forecast swim time. One of my athletes who checked in Friday has a 4:30 time, so I just ask for that which corresponds to around a 40-45 minute swim. They are less accommodating with my pre-paid parking reservation and assign me to the garage farthest from the Village – about a ½ mile away. Back at my car, I apply the race number stickers from my race packet to the bike and to the Transition 2 (T2) bag. I've remembered to bring scissors and Sharpies to fit the race numbers to my bike frame and to add my name and number to transition bags in case the stickers come off. I drop off the bike and watch them carefully load it into a rental truck. I find my spot in T2 and leave my Run bag now loaded with running shoes, race belt with bib number, 3 gel packets, and five Salt Stick tablets. I carefully note the path from the bike finish to my rack in Row E and to the transition exit for the run start. My spot is close to the exit meaning I'll have to push my bike diagonally through 95% of transition on the grass. I decide I'll remove my shoes as soon as I get off the bike to avoid the long, soft run on bike cleats.



Back at the hotel, I organize all my gear for Sunday. The hot weather has warmed the water temperature at Carvin's Cove from 72 or 73 degrees on Friday to 74 degrees Saturday morning. Whether it will stay at or below the magic wetsuit temperature of 76.1 degrees is anyone's guess - nothing I can do about it. After an early dinner, I join some friends for a light beer and am in bed by 9:00 with alarms set for 3:00 am.

## Race Morning

I sleep pretty soundly until a little after midnight, waking up frequently thereafter, and am up for good at 2:30 to begin race morning rituals. First a few light stretches to inform my body it's time to wake up. Then a small bottle of orange juice and a cup of caffeinated coffee made in the room. Breakfast is two bananas and two granola bars (normally I eat a toasted bagel with peanut butter in place of the granola bars when I have access to a toaster) washed down by another cup of coffee and about 12 ounces of water.

I climb on a school bus a minute or so after 4:30 am – masks are required for the first time this weekend. It's a 20 to 25 minute drive out to the very hilly, narrow access road to Carver's Cove. When I rode the course almost a year ago with a couple of my athletes, we wondered then how they were ever going to get 2000 athletes and their equipment out to the swim without major traffic issues. The mandatory athlete busses early on race morning and the earlier transport of the bikes are most of the answer. The final piece of the puzzle is revealed when we stop at a church about halfway up the access road and queue behind several other busses. We have parked there about 15 minutes when I count 12 busses go by on their return to Roanoke - the road is too narrow for 2-way bus traffic. Estimating that 12 busses can transport around 600 athletes, I recognize the careful planning that has gone into preparation for this event. I do wonder what would happen should a bus break down on the access road. I'm confident they have a contingency plan which to my knowledge they didn't have to execute.

The swim venue is beautiful - mountains in the background and mirror like conditions on the lake. Every square inch of the paved parking area has been utilized for the transition area. I find my bike about halfway down the long row F; it has survived the transport unscathed. Water temperature is announced at 76.0 degrees so a wetsuit legal swim – Yeah! As advertised, there are pumps at either end of transition requiring walking my bike through the crowded aisle to inflate the tires to race pressure. Final preps include checking brakes, lubing the chain, loading hydration and nutrition on the bike, and laying out bike shoes, helmet, and sunglasses for the bike ride ahead. There are several long porta potty lines, and I pick the one that has the one that appears



to have the highest number of porta potties to line length ratio. The line moves quickly, and I soon complete final preparation in that respect.

Athletes have started lining up for the swim behind signs showing expected swim times. We stand quietly for the national anthem, the cannon fires, and the fastest swimmers are off at 6:30. By this time, I've pulled on my wetsuit up to my hips – sunscreen and chamois cream already applied. I eat one gel with about 12 oz of water and line up behind the 40-43 minute sign. This is the most organized swim start since the pandemic having experienced more chaotic queuing at IM Florida in November and Chattanooga 70.3 two weeks ago. All the race literature required masks and social distancing in transition and up the actual swim start, however there are very few athletes wearing masks and social distancing would be impossible. The line is moving quickly. The pre-race video showed two athletes starting every 5 seconds (that works out to 24 athletes per minute - about one hour and twenty minutes to start the field). As I get closer, I see that they are starting 6 athletes every five seconds. I'm ready to go, and that's good news. At 6:50 am, I open the Triathlon app on my watch, adjust my swim cap and goggles, and a minute later, jump off the dock into the warm water.

### **The Swim**

The course is an elongated rectangle swum clockwise. The first turn buoy is about 200 yards out. I've counted 8 buoys on the long leg to the second turn followed by a short swim to the final turn and 7 more buoy's back to the swim exit. My swim to the first turn goes smoothly as my heart rate stabilizes; visibility is good with the rising sun behind us. Swimming around the turn, I can easily see swimmers and buoys ahead. As we approach the next buoy, I'm pretty far left of the buoy line but still in heavy swim traffic – the downside of the faster start. The need to frequently pass other swimmers disrupts my desire to settle into a comfortable swim pace. Normally at this point, I would start being passed by the fastest swimmers in the wave behind me but instead are having to weave my way through slower traffic. It would be nice, but I don't believe I'm swimming any faster than expected; most triathletes are overly optimistic or just plain hopeful about their swim pace. I lose all sense of time swimming but note my progress by counting the buoys and feeling my watch vibrate at 500 yard intervals. Gradually, I work my way back to the buoy line where their color changes from yellow to orange signifying we are past the half way point – but still swimming away from the finish. Visibility drops markedly as we turn into the sun at the 8<sup>th</sup> buoy but soon improves as we make the turn towards home. My goggles are partially fogged, requiring some breast stroke at each buoy to verify my position and the shortest route ahead. This portion of the swim always seems to take forever, and I'm already dreading the longer swim at IM Maryland in September.

The swim exit is up a boat ramp with no way to get vertical until we are mere feet from the water's edge. I take a quick look at my watch; 39 minutes. I've been pretty accurate in my estimate. Shorter than my 42 minute, current aided but 0.2 mile longer swim at Chattanooga. I'm encouraged and always glad to have the swim over.

I have no problem navigating to my bike in row F, and the wetsuit peels off pretty easily (COVID has put wet suit strippers out of a job). More than half the bikes appear to still be in transition – a good sign. Wetsuit, goggles, and swim cap into the transition bag for transport back to the village. Bike shoes, helmet, and sunglasses on, and I'm off to the bike course.

Official swim time - 40:05; Average Heart Rate - 132 bpm; T-1 time - 4:40

## The Bike

The bike course begins up the half mile steep hill that the busses negotiated down a couple hours earlier, and accordingly, I've preset my bike in a low gear. I now see that IRONMAN has moved the mount line 100 yards or more up the hill to a slightly flatter spot. I regret not having carried my shoes to the mount – I hate running on bike cleats. We ride under I-81 past the church where we waited on the bus, then it's a fast downhill to the park entrance and the left-hand turn onto Route 11. The 20 miles to Buchanan on this highway parallel I-81 and are moderately fast - net downhill with one long but not steep uphill. Averaging about 20 mph in this section, I catch up on my hydration and start working on nutrition, eating 100 kcal of Cliff Bar every 25 minutes. The first aid station is around Mile 18. My purchased bike bottle on the aerobars is still full of Gatorade. I've emptied the Gatorade bottle on the downtube, and the bottle of water behind the saddle is gone – I presume jettisoned on a bump. Not wanting to carry unneeded weight up the climb, I just add a bottle of water to the downtube and leave the holders behind the seat empty. Despite some stomach queasiness, I try to get a little ahead on my nutrition / hydration knowing I won't be able to take in anything on the climb.

In the town of Buchanan, we make a right-hand turn, soon passing under a sign indicating 4 miles to the Blue Ridge Parkway. An overhead banner announces the start of the climb, electronically recording our passage for those souls who want to compete for the fastest ascent. Having carefully studied my Training Peaks file from last June, I know this is a 4.6 mile climb, ascending almost 1700 feet. The only variability to the constant 7% gradient is in how tight we take the constant curves in the road. The road is full of athletes (no such thing as drafting here), so I pretty much just stay in the middle of the right lane. I work to maintain a steady pace - mostly sitting up but occasionally standing or down in the aerobars for variety - all in my lowest gear (36/28). My power meter is in a heavier wheel that I don't race, so I'm relying on perceived effort and heart rate to control intensity. Early in the climb, I'm passed frequently, but that reverses later as many athletes have obviously started too hard. I pass one woman only half-way up already walking her bike and see several athletes taking rest breaks on the side of the road. I begin hearing an occasional squealing noise seeming to come from the front fork. It sounds like when high pedal torque causes the back wheel to rub intermittently on the brake or chain stay. I'm going to have to stop at the top and check it out; I want to be very sure my brakes are functioning properly on the descent. Then just as mysteriously, the noise stops. I notice that the bike bottle on my aerobars is empty – it should be more than half full. Apparently, I didn't fully shut the valve the last time I drank before the climb. Gatorade leaking over the front brakes has somehow caused slight rubbing of the brakes against the wheel. Anyway, everything now checks out as normal.

My watch was at 23.2 miles starting the climb, and I've been constantly checking the slow progress towards 27.8 miles. The entrance to the Blue Ridge Parkway provides a slight and temporary reduction of incline with only 0.6 miles left to the crest on the Parkway. The climb has taken nearly 40 minutes averaging a little over 7 mph with an average heart rate of 144 bpm – OK. I never hear the winning time for the climb – probably around 20 minutes.

A few rollers follow the top of the climb then a one mile steady descent. I do note the incredible scenery on either side of the Parkway but can't divert my attention for full appreciation. The second aid station is on one of the rollers – I toss my recently purchased but empty bike bottle and grab both Gatorade and water bottles. This Gatorade tastes normal unlike the less sweet, expected Endurance version containing twice the amount of sodium. Normally, I take one salt capsule per hour on the bike, but now decide to increase my consumption - using all 5 capsules in my Salt Stick by the end of the ride.

This first descent isn't technical but sufficiently steep to merit my undivided attention to the road surface and other cyclists. However, the water bottle that I just grabbed is sliding around on the aerobars, and I'm forced to hold it in position with my wrists. This isn't going to work; I move it back behind the saddle at the next opportunity. Again, I admonish myself for forgetting my aero-bottle which fits securely in the holder. Not to blame anyone else, but my long established routine of carefully laying out all race equipment on our dining room table days before I leave for a major race was supplanted by my wife's occupation of the table with a jigsaw puzzle.

A two mile climb follows the one mile descent – not steep (maybe 400 feet vertical to the highest elevation on the course) but demoralizing to those not expecting it. I use it to catch up on my nutrition and hydration. All told, we ride up and down on the ridge for 8 miles before the descent begins in earnest. This descent isn't nearly as steep or uniform as the climb and is interrupted by several short uphill sections. But portions are sufficiently fast that I'm uncomfortable down in the aerobars, sitting up to feather the brakes and control speed or spacing to other riders. I am thankful that the Parkway is closed in both directions as some athletes zip down the left side of the road at much higher speed. I topped out at 42 mph, so they were probably approaching 60 mph. Five more miles of rollers remain on the Parkway after the descent, including the final aid station where I grab another Gatorade bottle.

After leaving the Parkway at mile 49, the last 7 miles include many turns and some uneven road entering Roanoke but go by quickly. As we pass by my hotel, I think how nice it would be to stop for a beer and just skip the run. We make the final turn onto Jefferson Street and the one mile left to the transition area.

I remove my shoes entering transition and run on the soft grass to my bike spot in Row E. Bike shoes and helmet off, running shoes on, grab my hat and race belt, and I'm off.

Bike Time – 3:12; Average Speed – 17.5 mph; Average HR – 126 bpm; T2 Time – 3:11

## **The Run**

The run course comprises two loops - mostly along the south side of the river with a 2+ mile out and back to the east and a 4 mile out and back to the west crossing over the river before that turnaround. It is hot! And humid! Probably high 80's. It feels even hotter than two weeks ago in Chattanooga -probably not a reliable comparison as my memory of that race is already fading. The cups of water that I dump over my head leaving transition are warm and of little cooling value.

I quickly settle into a pace that feels sustainable – definitely faster than at Chattanooga. I was late clicking my watch which shows only 0.8 miles as I go by the one mile marker. When it reaches one mile, my watch announces an average pace of 8:33 – probably too fast for conditions. The first aid station is at 1.5 miles; I walk briskly through drinking a cup of water and one of Gatorade. This water is cold so I dump another cup on my chest while a cup of ice goes down my tri shorts against the femoral arteries. There is occasional shade on the course, and I note a slight breeze in our face at spots but not enough of either. My heart rate has climbed into the high 140's by 2.5 miles so I back off some on the pace. I continue to walk through each aid station but a bit faster than in Chattanooga. The run becomes a mental game. The miles go by slowly, but they do go by – thankfully without signs of cramping. Over the course of the run, I eat gels at miles 3, 6, and 9, consume 5 more Salt Stick capsules, and drink enough water and Gatorade to keep my stomach on the verge of being unsettled.

Fast runners on their second lap zoom by me on my first lap (that's the one thing I don't like about two lap courses), but on the second lap, I'm continuously passing other athletes, many or most of whom are walking. My heart rate is in the mid 150's, but smelling the finish, I pick up the pace to 8:30 then to 8:20 in the final two miles (including aid station walks). Slightly misjudging the proximity of the finish when the 0.2 mile offset between my watch and the course somehow evaporates, I'm fully spent with my heart rate well up in the 160's as I cross the pedestrian bridge with 100 yards left. Too spent to sprint as in Chattanooga, but a strong finish nonetheless.

Run Time - 1:58:46; Average Pace – 9:03 per mile; Average Heart Rate – 148 bpm

Total Time – 5:58:56 3<sup>rd</sup> Place M65-69 315<sup>th</sup> Overall

### Summary

I'm satisfied with the overall result. This fourth consecutive 3<sup>rd</sup> place finish in a 70.3 (excluding 2019 Worlds) is a little disappointing competitively. I haven't had a win in an IRONMAN event in several years; the 65 to 69 deterioration, particularly running, has been significant. I do get a new age group next year, but interestingly (maybe sadly), I would have also finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in that age group as two prominent, national/world class age groupers a year or two older than me toed the start line. Just goes to show that regardless of how fast or slow we are, there are always athletes who are faster and slower. Our finish place in any race depends as much on who shows up as our own performance. Of course, we can only control the latter.

This race had 220 slots for the 70.3 World Championships in St. George, Utah this September. 30 to 40 slots is typical, but the Pandemic has hugely disrupted the qualification process for both the 70.3 event and Kona. Recent US races have had huge increases in the number of qualifiers to fill up the Championship events. Blue Ridge had 3 slots in my age group (2 more than I've ever seen before). M40-44, typically one of the most populated age groups had 23. 70.3 World Championships are the same weekend as IRONMAN Maryland, so I had previously declined the qualification opportunity.

Overall, this was a great event with unmatched community support. I had the opportunity to talk with several locals and a couple police officers before and after the event and came away most impressed with their interest and enthusiasm (vs. complaining about the traffic, closed roads, etc.) The Good Luck messages in each race packet, hand drawn by elementary schoolers, were a true inspiration. Hats are off to the superb race organization especially for an inaugural event with complex logistics. Yes, it's a tough bike course and June can be very hot, but that just makes the finish that much more rewarding. Put this one on your TO DO list. I would be going back in 2022, except I have already signed up for IRONMAN Tulsa scheduled only two weeks before Blue Ridge.



**JHA 6/9/2021**