

IRONMAN RACING DURING THE PANDEMIC

November 12, 2020

Having just returned from Panama City Beach where I finished my 3rd IRONMAN Florida and 11th IRONMAN overall, it is an appropriate time to share my reflections on IRONMAN racing during the Pandemic. This isn't a race report; I've tried to confine commentary to what is the same, different, good, or bad from traditional 140.6 races. Included is more detail than many will appreciate; feel free to skip to the Key Takeaway's at end of the article. I've ordered the sections chronologically from pre-race to post-race, so you can just read the areas of most interest. All opinions are my own. While some of my comments may seem negative, in no way do they denigrate my sincere appreciation to all the organizers of this race and all they went through to provide us this great opportunity to race again.

Pre-race

IRONMAN Florida is the first full IRONMAN to be held in North America in 2020. While held on its originally scheduled date of Saturday, November 7th, the Gulf Coast 70.3 was delayed from its originally scheduled spring date and will be held simultaneously with the 140.6. WTC (World Triathlon Corporation) moved the IRONMAN Village, swim, and transition areas from their historical sites at the Boardwalk Resort to the larger space of Pier Point Park 6 miles to the west. IRONMAN Florida typically has close to 3000 athletes - this year only 1400 with an additional 400 racing the 70.3. The reduced numbers are apparently by design as the race has been sold out for months, and WTC offered free deferral to 2021 through October. The 70.3 race shares the same swim, bike, and run courses as the 140.6 but starts 5 hours later with the only significant overlap during the first lap of the run course.

Check-in - Thursday

Athlete Check-in is Wednesday and Thursday before the Saturday race, normal for an IRONMAN. (70.3 Check-in is Thursday and Friday). Only registered athletes are allowed to enter the Village with each athlete selecting a 30 minute check-in window before the race on Active.com. I'm signed up for the 10 am slot on Thursday. A large area with X's painted 6 feet apart on the ground is setup to manage the queue for village entry, but there is no line, and we duck under the ropes to reach the entry point where body temperature is checked, QR codes from Active.com scanned, and photo ID's checked. Masks are provided to any without. From the entry we advance to the registration tent where we encounter a 15 minute, socially distanced queue to wait for availability of a volunteer check-in station. At the stations, volunteers reverify identities, pull race packets, and attach athlete wrist bands. I'm asked whether I plan to accept a Kona slot if qualified (Yes). Prior contact and medical information is verified on an i-Pad which I ultimately sign with the soft side of the pen provided at Village entry. There is no need to sign the normal multitude of waivers as I had already done that on-line a week earlier. From there, I'm directed to stations where I pick up my transition bags, IRONMAN backpack (generic without IRONMAN Florida embroidery), a generic IRONMAN hat or visor, a ticket with a time window for bike check-in on Saturday, and finally my timing chip. Then out into the Village proper. The race packet contains the same run bib, bike, and bag stickers as usual; only missing are the tickets for the non-existent pre-race dinner and bike pickup after the race (athletes are required to pickup their own bike). Overall a very familiar but faster process than pre-pandemic; I expect many of the changes will become permanent.

Athlete Village - Thursday

With athletes' entries metered by check-in times and non-athletes not permitted, the Athlete Village is sparsely populated except for the line to the IRONMAN Store. The number of customers permitted inside the tent is limited, and a new customer enters only when another customer exits. My wait is about 20 minutes in the socially distanced queue. While initially surprised and disappointed that there is NO race specific gear – only generic IRONMAN attire and accessories, I quickly realize this is most understandable given all the cancellations and uncertainties around whether races will be held. Unable to purchase my usual beer glass and bike bottle, I exit quickly empty handed. Given the usual rhythm of store purchases, this is another major loss of revenue for WTC. A fair selection of race-specific swag is available on-line, and I do purchase an M dot shirt listing all participants. I'll have to wait until December for delivery, but that's not a problem.

The number of vendors in the Village seems reduced vs. prior years and other races, but more obvious is the lack of athletes and other visitors hovering around them. I do purchase a couple CO2 cylinders from one store since I had forgotten to bring extras from home. Tri-bike Transport was present; it looks like they have maybe 40 bikes in their racks, but it is the second day of check-ins.

All in all, the village seems pretty devoid of visitors; safe from a COVID standpoint but sad nonetheless.

Pre-race Dinner

Normally held on Thursday evening but as expected, there is no mass pre-race dinner. I always look forward to the opportunity to socialize and talk with other athletes and do miss it. IRONMAN has provided a \$25 gift card to be used at local restaurants (or anywhere for that matter) which is a nice gesture but not the same.

Bike Check-in - Friday

I picked the 11 am check in window during Thursday's check-in. There is no line to enter transition. Masks, wrist bands, timing chips, the bike with appropriate stickers, run and bike transition bags, and temperature checks are all required for entry, but no one asks the 10 COVID exposure questions that we were told to expect. Bike spacing is about 3 to 4 feet – a welcome departure from the normal crowding in IRONMAN bike racks. This leaves plenty of room for the transition bags as well as the morning clothes bag which will also be left at the bike during the race. Spacing between racks, numbers of porta-potties, and entrance/exit signage all seem normal. Volunteers are helpful and informed around logistics and routing. I ask and am assured that I can bring a bike pump and leave it at my bike during the race. I had dutifully packed my Bike and Run gear bags with everything needed for tomorrow's transitions, although I will have full access race morning.

Athlete Briefings

The in-person briefing is replaced by a prerecorded video narrated by Mike Reilly. As everything covered was already in the Athlete Guide, I don't find it particularly additive. The opportunity to ask questions either of the announcer or other athletes was missing, and I'm not sure whether this gap was adequately filled by the Information Booth in the Village.

Race Morning - Saturday

Having converted to standard time the previous weekend, the race is starting an hour earlier (5:45 for pro's and 6:00 am for age groupers) than is typical when the time change occurs on race weekend.

Having booked a condo near the original swim start – now near the run turnaround, I need to drive to the race. But Pier Point Park is an outdoor mall with lots of parking obviating the need to bus athletes to transition at the old location.

Following a short walk to the transition area, temperatures are again checked again and masks provided for those without. Body marking is no longer available or required, although many athletes have purchased TATs or are self-marked with Sharpies. Preparing the bike, loading nutrition and hydration, and checking transition bags are no different from any IRONMAN race. Due to a narrow mount area, age groupers are not permitted to have shoes attached to the pedals and must be left in the T1 bag along with helmets. There is a queue for tire inflation, but I have brought my own pump and am happy to lend it to nearby athletes. With masks on, conversation with my transition neighbors is difficult, but we do discuss the need to stash wetsuits and swim gear in the T1 bag following the swim as ordained in the athlete guide. While not uniformly followed, I note later that the three of us have complied. I skip the long line at nearby porta-potties and take a short walk to the bike exit lane where there is little to no wait.

With the sky brightening at 5:30 am but the sun still below the horizon, Mike Reilly's voice on the PA begins calling athletes to the swim start. Staging is done in 10 minute increments of expected swim time beginning with times under an hour. I await the 1:20 to 1:30 call which comes more quickly than I expect, and I need to hurry to get my legs into my wetsuit. Transition is only a couple hundred yards from the beach with most of the walkway closed to the public. But as we approach Front Beach Road, I see "crowds" of spectators on both sides of the roped off walkway and the line of athletes backs up as forward progress halts. Athletes are all wearing masks, but most spectators that I can see are not. While the pandemic has significantly altered my perception of what constitutes a "crowd", this is the most "crowded" I've felt in many months or will experience the remainder of event. While well down my list of concerns as I near the swim start, I believe it could have been easily alleviated by more measured departures from the transition area. We turn left onto Front Beach Road for about 50 yards, now divided into 3 roped off, socially distanced columns. This line moves quickly and at its end, we spill onto the beach. The beach staging area, which appears to be no more than 25% full, consists of eight parallel, roped off lanes each about 30 yards in length with the lane closest to the ocean ending right at the swim start banner. The lanes are being emptied in sequence, and I pick a lane that has just emptied allowing myself a little time to collect myself mentally. With 3 swimmers starting every 5 seconds, I had figured to start around 6:30, but it is only a little after 6:15 when our lane begins to move. At the start banner, we divide into 3 positions, enter the starting chute where we dispose of masks, move to the start line, and await 5 seconds for the next electronic beep.

My first race of 2020 has begun!

The Swim

While certainly different from the mass start in 2011 (my first IRONMAN), the swim itself seems little different from the self-seeded, rolling start of 2015. While I do bump into any number of other

swimmers and experience some crowding tight around the turn buoys, I'm able to swim mostly by myself which is my preference.

Florida is two lap swim course, exiting the water at the end of the first lap for a 50 yard walk (run if you prefer) along the beach and under the pier back to the swim start. By the time I begin the second lap, the start line is clear as I expect it had been when even fastest age groupers reentered the water. Finishing the second and final lap, we run, walk, or stagger off the beach, cross Front Beach Road to the cheering of spectators on either side, and backtrack to the transition area along the same path we had taken earlier on the way to the swim.

I had read that masks were required in transition but apparently not during the race. Just as well as we are more than socially distanced at this point. With no changing tents, T1 is the same as most triathlons, except I dutifully stuff my swim gear into the T1 bag. If athletes wanted to change clothes, we were asked to either discretely coverup at our bike spot or use the porta-potties.

The Bike

Nothing seems physically different about the bike leg. Drafting rules already create social distances between riders. The volunteers still handoff Gatorade and water bottles and several varieties of nutrition, albeit wearing masks. However, I have probably underestimated the mental impact of not having raced for a year. Once physically prepared, races become predominantly mental challenges with prior races providing much of the mental training. Riding the first 45 miles of this race into the wind hasn't helped, but I find it much more difficult to stay mentally in the moment and not think about how much further we still have to go. (This applies on the run as well). Once past the 100 mile marker when I'm typically looking forward to getting off the bike and onto the run, I'm instead dreading having to run 26.2 miles and would gladly stay on the bike for those miles.

Note to others: If your goal is a competitive IRONMAN, mental training should play a bigger role in everyday training as you can't rely on recent race experience to be mentally race-ready.

Without changing tents, T2, again, is the same as most triathlons.

The Run

Florida is a two lap course run along public roads. There are many spectators cheering athletes around the course, many or most without masks as is typical of this section of Florida. I'm sure spectator density is less than normal years, but more precise comparisons are not foremost in my mind at this point of the race. Spectators are most dense around the 13 mile turnaround (the same area that was crowded at the swim start), but the course is wide there and easy to keep our distance.

If my aim had been to stay distanced from other runners, this is not a good race. Comprising at most one traffic cone delineated lane and sometimes less of Front Beach Road which is open to two way vehicular traffic, it is a relatively narrow course. The two lap format not only increases runner density but also the broad range of running / walking speeds requiring near constant shoulder to shoulder passing of runners in the same and opposite directions. In short, it is a "busy" and narrow run course typical of running along an open and major commercial thoroughfare. It is certainly busier than the original run course which was displaced 6 miles to the east where advantage was taken of residential roads and several

miles in a state park. Honestly, none of this mattered to me Saturday afternoon when I was just focused on finishing.

The biggest difference from a pre-pandemic IRONMAN run was the aid stations:

- Aid stations are spaced further apart. The Athlete Guide said about every 2 miles, but on average, they occur more frequently. COVID IRONMAN principles preach self-reliance, and fuel belts or camelbacks are encouraged. While I didn't count them, I think Florida has only 4 or perhaps 5 stations with all but one shared between runners in both directions. That would work out to 16 to 20 aid stations on the run.
- Cups of Gatorade, water, Coke, or Red Bull are available as normal but self-served with volunteers replenishing cups as well as gels, blocks, and other nutritional products. With the greater distance between stations, it is important not to miss any hydration, so where I would normally grab cups on the go early in the race, I walk through each aid station carefully picking up the cups I need and drinking them fully.

At the end of the second lap we turn into the same alley by which we had left the swim many hours ago but instead of entering transition, we circumnavigate the 70.3 transition and IRONMAN equipment areas and run onto a short stretch of West Park Drive which is barricaded off from a sidewalk that is populated by a few spectators and athletes returning to the transition area to get their bikes. Once past the Athlete Village entrance, we are directed left into the 140.6 finish chute.

The Finish

There is nothing as electric as the finish line of an IRONMAN, more so as the final cutoff time is approaches around the midnight hour. Despite the bright lights, the music, and Mike Reilly's famous voice, the finish line is eerily empty and quiet. Mike is unseen and somewhere off to the side, the "catchers" are missing, and a single volunteer points me to the left or right where another volunteer hands me a face mask and bottle of water, watches me remove my timing chip (thank goodness I didn't secure it with a safety pin), and points me to a table where I pick up a "medium" size package which includes my finisher's shirt and medal. Both are IRONMAN Florida specific although notably absent is the year 2020. I guess the generic IRONMAN hat or visor at check-in substitutes for a Finisher's hat. Next is the food line (although there is no line) where I pickup a boxed meal. Then out into an open and sparsely populated recovery area where I sit down in the grass for a few minutes.

The walk back to the transition area to reclaim bike and bags is slow but mercifully short. The athlete with an adjacent bike spot is also gathering his gear, and with him, I have the first and only extended conversation with another athlete all weekend. He is 65 years old from Florida. As I expected, he confirms that he has won our age group, and I offer my congratulations. I knew I was more than 15 minutes behind when I had last stopped to talk to my wife in front of our condo around mile 19. It isn't until Sunday morning that I discover I had closed to gap to a mere 17 seconds. Oh the many places I could have made up that time!

Post-Race

There really is no Post Race. Awards will be mailed. Kona slots will be awarded and rolled down, if necessary, via email. Finding a restaurant along the run course to enjoy a burger and a couple beers and chat with other athletes about our day is not to be. But I'm happy to be back at the condo with my wife

and the boxed meal. The beer is cold, and I'm content to watch the finish line on IRONMAN Live and conk out before the second beer is finished.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

After several days of reflection, here are my key takeaways.

What hasn't changed:

- Great volunteers! I can't say enough about the volunteers and the organizers who recruited them in this crazy time. Most memorable was Lisa who introduced herself as I hung onto her kayak waiting for a calf cramp to release.
- Swimming, biking, and running. The 140.6 miles of moving forward was little if any different. It's an IRONMAN, and it's hard – perhaps made more so by the lack of previous, recent racing.
- Sense of accomplishment – whether your first or 100th IRONMAN, crossing the finish line is personally gratifying and a conspicuous reminder of all those without whom lining up at the swim start hours earlier would have been impossible. If possible, this year's finish makes me even more appreciative of what I have and am able to do when so many are struggling.

Positives:

- From having attended many IRONMAN coaches calls this year, I have an idea of how hard WTC has worked to make this race happen. Meeting the fluctuating and often uncertain requirements of multiple local and state organizations while providing the best experience possible for athletes was a herculean and endless task, and my hats are off to WTC to having pulled it off.
- More than 90% of the touch points among athletes and volunteers were eliminated. Some of the streamlined processes, most notably the check-in, were improvements over the traditional ones. Those during the race – e.g. the aid stations, absence of the changing tents – were just different and not all a race detractor.

Concerns:

- IRONMAN's rules for facemasks and social distancing could only apply to the areas they controlled – e.g. the Village, Transition areas, Start and Finish lines. Florida is under no COVID restrictions, and the use of masks and social distancing practices are much relaxed compared to what I encounter at home in Wake Forest, NC. But by confining ourselves to outdoor dining and cutting a wide path buying groceries at Walmart, we were really only uncomfortable at two restaurants where the wait staff didn't wear masks and a couple times on our condo elevator where we could have waited for the next one. IRONMAN offered free deferrals to 2021 and based on only 1400 athletes competing, many took them up on the offer – how many due to virus concerns and how many due to lack of training, I have no idea.
- IRONMAN will undoubtedly learn from this experience and implement improvements in future races. Some will be venue specific, but many will apply to all future races in the pandemic era. Hopefully they can generate the data to convince officials in other cities that large races can be held safely and secure operating permits months before the actual races. I doubt if having only 1400 athletes at these major events is a sustainable economic model – the ability to attract sponsors and gain concessions from local government all depend on the number of athletes

they can attract. While I'm sure they've reduced costs in many areas, they will lose athletes if those reductions impair their ability to provide superior race experiences to athletes (which was not the case at Florida to the extent they could control).

- Being totally "virtualed" out (I finished VR1 thru VR29), I greatly appreciated the opportunity to get back to real racing. But honestly, the near total lack of social interaction with other athletes is a huge negative that no number of Zoom sessions can supplant. In this regard of course, the pandemic IRONMAN race is just a microcosm of what we as human beings face each day. Had I been 18 seconds faster over the nearly 12 hours of racing, I would have accepted the Kona slot, but I don't think I would have made the trip to Hawaii if racing by then still excludes the social component. Having thoroughly enjoyed the Kona celebration four times, it would be too sad to go back without the interactions and traditions that have made it my favorite spot on the planet. Let's pray for many reasons that the vaccines nearing approval are safe, effective, and available.

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