

Race Report : IRONMAN Louisville

October 15, 2017

Louisville, Kentucky

IRONMAN Louisville is my goal race for 2017 with the objective of qualifying for Kona 2018. As the third and final personal race objective of this year, it will be more difficult than qualifying for the Boston marathon or qualifying for the IRONMAN 70.3 World Championships and will require an age group win. Having taken the time to survey recent race experience of the other 24 men registered in my age group, I am most concerned with William Wren who set the age group record at Kona in 2013 with a sub 11 hour race! He returned to win the age group again in 2014 in a time more than an hour faster than mine in that race. He pretty much disappeared from the racing scene in 2015 and 2016, but returned this year as a 69 year old with some fast second place times at Eagleman 70.3 and Lake Placid. Two other registered athletes raced Kona last year in the 65-69 year age group, but they are a secondary concern as my time was faster, albeit in the 60-64 year age group. However, I know it's just as pointless worrying about my fellow competitors as worrying about the weather – my control over either is zero. But I am motivated to know that I'll need my "A" race, which for an IRONMAN entails performing to but not beyond the level of your training and making smart decisions as the race unfolds.

This event is also special in that I have five athletes competing – Bobbi and Robert Stanley doing their first IRONMAN along with David Arout, Julia Mulnick reprising her inaugural IM here last year, and Audrey Schipprack shooting for an age group podium spot in her 3rd Ironman.

Pre-race

Tony Bhe, who finished his first and only IRONMAN (so far) here last year, has adopted a Sherpa and spectator role this year, picks me up at my hotel at 5:30 am and drives Julia, David, and me to the transition area for final bike preparations. It's about 70 degrees, so very pleasant, but a cold front forecast to pass through early in the afternoon promises to make things interesting with high wind, scattered thunderstorms, and plummeting temperatures. Once I've loaded nutrition and Gatorade® on the bike and pumped up the tires, I take a walk through the mammoth transition area (2500 bikes) to check my athletes. Audrey had a fluke bike crash on our short practice ride Friday and while not seriously injured, is very sore and resigned to a spectator role today. Bobbi and Robert's bikes look to be good shape as is friend and training partner, Jeff Dyer's. I take the time to check William Wren's bike rack and note that it is vacant; he is one of many no-show's. I have mixed feelings as I've used his presumed presence to get me psyched up but pretty quickly put him out of mind, with the upcoming 2.4 mile swim to occupy my thoughts.

I join Julia and David for the crowded walk to the swim staging area. The tone is subdued – more reminiscent of a death march than a parade to the start of this long-awaited event.

Swim

The staging area is organized by estimated swim times; we secure a spot on the grass in the 2:00 to 2:10 area – which is wishful thinking on my part but realistic for David and Julia. Not long thereafter, it's time

to lineup for the swim start. This is a rolling start, requiring about 45 minutes to get all athletes in the water. The water temperature is 71 degrees, ideal for a wetsuit swim. The cannon fires at 7:20, signifying the start of the professional race, and while past the official sunrise time, it's still pretty dark. The fastest age groupers start at 7:30, and the line moves gradually but inexorably down to the river dock where our day begins.

I cross the starting mat and jump into the water at about 7:50 am. The swim begins upriver for about 1300 yards, the first half of that in a narrow channel between the shore and a small island before opening up into the wide Ohio. I swim parallel to Julia for the first couple of minutes and then quickly lose her in the mass of humanity. I navigate to the left and then right trying to steer clear of slower swimmers as I'm sure faster swimmers are doing around me. When we reach the eastern end of the island, I can see two buoy's ahead as well as swimmers to my distant left working their way back down river. The course angles out into the river before reaching the red turn buoy where we make the turn to the finish, some 3000 yards down river.

Navigation is simplified with the island to the left and the 3 bridges before the swim exit clearly visible in the distance. The current is clearly noticeable judging by the speed with which the island goes by, and we are soon beyond its western tip and sighting on the first bridge. I swim on the buoy line and rather than the space between swimmers opening up as typical in a race of this length, the course becomes more crowded, and I'm frequently jostled. Underwater visibility is near zero, so I find myself running into slower swimmers. My calf muscles are predictably tightening, so I start my regimen of five breast strokes for every 50 to 60 freestyle strokes to stretch them out. They "grab" momentarily a couple times, threatening to cramp, but otherwise aren't a problem. Past the three bridges – only 500 yards left. I keep correcting farther left to angle towards the swim exit - the current threatening to sweep us further downstream. As usual, I have lost all concept of time.

As volunteers help me climb the exit steps, I glance at my watch which is paused at 52 minutes. It was hit at some point in the swim, so I have no idea of my swim time. I know I could make an estimate by looking at the time of day and guessing when I entered the water, but my mental energy is better focused on the race; I don't learn my finish time until Donna tells me sometime after the race is over.

A volunteer quickly strips off my wetsuit and I'm off to the changing tent and then onto the bike.

Bike

Knowing of the approaching cold front, I pull on arm sleeves (actually socks with the toes cut out) up to my wrists in transition. I've actually practiced doing this quickly to avoid the time I wasted in Chattanooga performing this same simple task.

The bike course is what is known as a "lollipop" course. The stick is 20 miles in length, 10 flat miles along the river followed by 10 miles of rolling hills. Then a hilly, 35 mile loop which we'll ride twice that includes a short out and back turnaround presumably to generate the full length of 112 miles. The final 20 miles is the reverse of the first. A healthy tailwind makes for fast opening miles. The course is crowded and I spend most of the time in the passing lane with little opportunity to move back to the

right and just hoping I'm not called for blocking a faster athlete. I fail to see and avoid a pothole which launches my aero-bottle along with the attached bike GPS despite the duct tape securing it to its cage. I'm forced to make a cautious turnaround to retrieve and remount it. I've lost a few seconds, but I'm really lucky it didn't puncture the front tire.

My average speed is over 20 miles an hour when we begin the first of the two loops but drops by the time we reach the turn at 33 miles where Audrey crashed on Friday. A mile later and just before the first turnaround, I pass a slowly moving Julia. I'm worried, but she quickly catches up and tells me she is fine (she had turned wide of the antenna at the turnaround and was going back to make sure her bike was recorded at the checkpoint). There has been precious little flat road, and the hills get steeper. Overcast skies give way to sun, and temperature rises into the low 80's. The first pro athlete flies by us – a full loop of 35 miles ahead of us. We turn directly into the wind for the last 11 miles of the loop, dropping my average speed to 19.6 mph when we reach the half way point and begin the second loop. loop.

The density of riders on the course has thinned considerably, although Julia and I continue to pass each other occasionally. As typical in a race of this length, I begin to see the same riders repeatedly, some faster on up hills, others on down hills or flats, and we legally pass each other back and forth which helps keep our speed up as the miles go by. We pass through the town festival in La Grange for the second time, and I see Tony and Gayle Banic (a good friend of Julia, David, and the Stanley's) in the crowd and tell them Julia is just behind. I average just under 19 mph for the second loop, dropping my average to 19.4 mph. Nutrition and hydration have gone well; I've consumed all three Power Bars and am now working my way through the Cliff gels at the rate of one each half hour.

The temperature peaks for the day, and it clouds over again as the cold front approaches. I'm in the final 10 miles when the wind shifts to the north - strong and gusting off the river - and it begins to rain – drizzle at first then steady. Keeping the bike upright is now priority one, along with dodging the softball sized, orange oranges that have been blown from trees lining the course. Temperature has dropped into the 60's, but pulling up my arm sleeves seems an unneeded distraction as is transferring Gatorade® to my aero bottle. At least the gaps between riders have opened considerably; occasionally I can see no riders in front of me. These last eight miles go by painfully slowly – is this GPS stuck? Conditions have not allowed making up time on this flat section as I had hoped, and I roll into transition with a time of 5:45:22, an average of 19.3 mph.

Run

The run course is two loops – flat and fast (if you can call any 26.2 mile run after six hours on the bike “fast”). As I set out from transition, I pass Julia coming in and then wave to Audrey on the sideline who shouts something to me about “15 minutes”. It's worth stopping momentarily for clarification; I'm 15 minutes ahead of the second place athlete in my age group. This really good news re-energizes me for the run.

Now it's a matter of settling into my running pace and executing my nutrition and hydration plan. My goal is to keep the mile splits under 9 minutes - yielding a run time under 3:56. I plan to eat a gel and take a salt tablet every 3 to 4 miles and alternate between water and Gatorade® at the water stations which are spaced about a mile apart. The first couple miles are at a little over 8:30 pace. Too fast? My heart rate is in the high 120's; I expect most of the run to be in the 130's, so I'm fine. The rain has stopped, and we seem to be mostly sheltered from the wind. It's quite chilly, so I finally pull up the arm sleeves which have been adorning my wrists for the better part of 7 hours. I make a pit stop at a porta potty in the third mile, resulting in a 9:15 split, but my pace returns to 8:45 to 8:50 as we pass through the University of Louisville campus and then by Churchill Downs off to the right side. The first turnaround comes at 7.5 miles and we head back towards the start. I see and wave to Julia running in the opposite direction about a mile behind me. I keep looking for David and Jeff throughout the run, but never see them. I do see Tony several times who is on a bike and covering a fair amount of the course to cheer us on. The short out and back in front of Churchill Downs is another milestone checked off. I feel good and am passing runners continuously and being passed only occasionally by speedsters finishing up their second lap. Fourteen miles into the race with the finish line a mere block away, we take a right turn in front of our hotel to begin the second lap. I see and wave to Donna who informs me that I'm leading the age group.



I've been maintaining 8:45 to 8:50 miles. While my heart rate has drifted into the mid-130's, as long as I can keep it under 140 through 20 miles, I should be fine. In the 17th mile, I opt for another pit stop and lose another 30 seconds. I probably would have foregone this stop if I hadn't known I was leading the age group and could afford the creature comfort. As I approach the turnaround and mile 20, I shift to a mile by mile mentality, trying not to think about the far off finish line. The outside of my right knee starts to hurt, similar but not as bad as at Lake Placid in 2014. From that experience, I'm confident it will hold up, but also know that if I walk just a bit, I'll be able to run for several minutes without pain. So not wanting to take any chances, I take three short walking breaks in the final two miles – maybe 15 to 20 seconds each, slowing my pace to 9:25 per mile. I am able to pick up the pace in the last half mile. A final wave to Donna as I pass our hotel in the waning daylight and then into the finish chute and the announcer's proclamation – "You are an IRONMAN".



I feel remarkably good and get a big hug from Donna as we leave the finish area. The cold air hits me quickly as I retrieve my morning clothes bag, and, I'm shivering violently by the time I find a hot bowl of stew and a chair in front of the heater in the food tent.

Run Time: 3:53:17

Total Time: 11:01:51

My previous best was 11:18:25 at IRONMAN Arizona in 2012 followed closely by 11:18:46 at Florida in 2015. Had I known I was that close to 11 hours, I probably would have foregone the second pit stop and pushed the last two miles despite the knee. But I'm more than satisfied with the age group win; second place was more than 45 minutes behind.

Post Race

I barely have time to get back to the hotel to pull warm clothes over my tri-suit before heading back to the finish to watch Julia finish- accomplishing her sub-12 hour goal in a time of 11:52. I do have time to shower and change before David finishes in 13:09. And time for a hamburger and beer before watching Rob finish in 14:04. I'm back out with the loud and energetic post-midnight crowd to watch Bobbi finish officially in 16:24, besting her cutoff time by 6 minutes. All in all, a great day.

Following the awards Monday morning, I accept the Kona slot for the age group and pay the now four figure registration fee. Expensive but as American Express would put it – "Priceless".

