

Ironman UK 70.3

Wimbleball Lake, Exmoor

20th June 2010

Prologue

I left my B&B in the village of Williton on the edge of the Exmoor National Park, shortly before 5am after leaving a bleary-eyed Paul Venus who was looking for the B&B owner as he hadn't paid his bill! It was already daylight with clear skies, suggesting it was going to be a scorcher of a day, though at the moment it was actually quite cold.

I expected a huge traffic jam to the event car park, but it wasn't too bad so got there comfortably before 5:30am, giving me plenty of time to sort out any last minute things in transition, just as filling my drinks bottle and wiping the morning dew off my bike seat!

Around 6am, I don my wetsuit, which actually gave the bonus of keeping me quite warm in the morning chill, though my bare feet were feeling the cold. In fact I end up using my swimming hat as a makeshift slipper as I waited!

Then around 6:40am, the entire field of athletes were walked down to the lake for the start. The sun was rising quite high now and the cold morning mist of earlier had pretty much gone and was now replaced by increasing warm sunshine.

After a short delay we are allowed in the water. Being a wimp, I gingerly step in to allow the cold water entering my wet suit to gradually warm up, before swimming out to join the masses. The British national anthem was played and many in the starting line where obviously on high spirits as they proudly sang along.

With 3 minutes left to the expected 7am start, I start my stopwatch. The plan here is I would have to worry about it when the race actually started. I'm not sure what time we actually started, but it was interesting to see that there were still quite a few swimmers who hadn't even entered the lake when the start gun did go off.

Swim

No sooner than we were off, that the chaos started. This was made worse by the fact that I seemed to be surrounded by people doing breaststroke! At these events they really should ban this stroke! This did annoy me a bit and I consequently hit back, in some cases quite literally to get past.

But it did mean I was now getting fired up and preceded towards the first yellow buoy with extra vigour. What I find strange at these swims, is people who are quite happy with freestyle to then switch to breaststroke in order to get around a buoy before returning to freestyle. I was now getting even more worked up with this swimming field and decided it was time to get dirty. So I literally pulled myself on to the top of the mêlée of swimmers and dragged myself over the other swimmers around the buoy. I probably became enemy number one with my 'fellow' swimmers as a result, but it did the job of getting me past the mêlée.

Having gained an advantage with less than dubious tactics, I decided to continue with this theme by blatantly drafting anyone I thought was going slightly quicker than me to the next buoy. I'm sure a few swimmers were probably quite hacked off having someone (i.e. me) regularly tapping their feet! At the next buoy I again dragged myself over the mêlée to then draft anyone I thought could help my cause. In fact these tactics would continue for pretty much the rest of the swim. Ok, so I'm not exactly proud of my tactics, but they did seem to work!

T1

Out of lake and now quite a run up to transition, helped though by David Hall cheering on from the sidelines. In transition, though I initially forget where I left my bike bag but after a brief panic find it and sit down to take off my wetsuit and put my socks, shoes and helmet on. One of the official helpers did come over to help but to be honest, despite their good intentions didn't really speed the process up much. I then collect my bike and head out of transition.

In fact, having done quite a few triathlons now and if given the choice between having everything in one spot (i.e. by your bike) and having separate bags for each discipline, I'll go for the one spot approach every time.

Bike

The mount area was an absolute nightmare, just short of carnage; a narrow road just full of cyclists trying to get on their bikes. In fact I couldn't get on my bike in the mount area and like many others had to go further to find space. But the problem didn't stop there. Once on my bike I couldn't really go anywhere as there were still people in front of me trying to get on their bikes. Add to this that this that there people coming off their bikes because they had lost their balance as they couldn't get up to speed. I found myself repeatedly shouting at the people in front to "don't stop!" and a few other cycling shouted in agreement and in a couple of cases more coarse with their choice of words!

I was glad to get past this chaos, though things weren't to get much better as the narrow road continued but went downhill. Here I was hoping to get past some people, but the sheer traffic of bikes prevented me from doing so. To make matters worse when we started to ascend uphill people were easily passing me. So in that respect I was getting the worse of both worlds and this theme continued for nearly 10 miles! If I was an official BTF draft buster, this was one race I wouldn't volunteer for!

I found this situation particularly frustrating as not being a 'king of the mountains' I was replying heavily on the fact I would be able to pass people on the flat downhill sections in order to make up for the uphill parts. Things did eventually improve, but for some reason I would never be able to instil enough self-motivation or vigour to make the most of the subsequent flat and downhill sections.

The exception was a long downhill section where you couldn't really see too far ahead. I hurtled down this bit taking my life into my hands a bit, but all the same with only one fellow cyclist in tow matching my bravado, I couldn't figure why everyone else was taking it easy. It soon became obvious though, for at the bottom of the hill was a sharp left turn. I slammed on my brakes hard, but even so the bike was taking time to slow down. So as you could imagine, I started to have one of those 'life flashes before your eyes' moments. Thankfully I just make the turn using all the opposite side of the road to do so and nearly taking out some cones that were there to stop cyclists using the other side of the road! As I count my blessing the other cyclist who had join me on this escapade looks at me and says "Wow, that was fun!". Yes quite! Sufficient to say, on the next lap, I took that hill with a little more caution and respect!

We were now on a nice steady rolling section that for me was over far too soon as another left turn then presented us with long drag uphill that included a particularly nasty short steep section. It is times like this you wish you had the third front gear ring on your bike for those even lower gears. Sadly, with only two rings, I really struggled on this, being passed by everyone including someone who was walking, how humiliating!

Things did flatten out eventually but after some more undulations, another hill that proved equally as punishing greeted us and this despite drafting a horsebox up it! Yes, the roads were generally quiet but not entirely closed to general traffic. Eventually though, things did get better with 'normal' undulations, though not exactly easy were far less humbling.

And that was just the first lap, I then had to do it all over again, though I felt a bit better on the second lap, partly because I suppose I knew what to expect and thus was a bit more mentally prepared for it.

At the end of the second lap I would return to the Lake on the same narrow road that I had left early for the first lap. This time though do worries of traffic so was able to take full advantage of the downhill sections.

However, despite my own nightmare on the bike, others would fair worse. I saw quite a few cyclists on the roadside repairing punctures and at the finish I would see someone carrying road scars where they obviously came off big time at some point, I wonder if it was at the bottom of that hill?

T2

As I entered transition, a helper was on stand to take my bike off me, allowing me to go and collect my run gear. This time though I had remember where I had left it, so no drama there and also no helpers around to 'help' me. Also, unlike many athletes, for long distances I prefer traditional lace-ups to quick ties as I find the latter don't keep my shoes tight enough around my feet. I know I lose valuable seconds here but I rather be more confident in my run as a result.

Unlike The Beaver triathlon, I had no problems with my feet going numb, so was able to get into a comfortable rhythm straight away. A quick glance at the stopwatch confirmed my fear that this race wasn't going to be a fast one, so I decided not to push too hard. In fact, compared to the bike I actually quite enjoyed the run.

Run

No sooner had I start the run that I hear from the race tannoy that the 7th elite athlete was just finishing!

The run route was generally undulating and mainly off road. The only tough bit was at the first mile, which although was on asphalt road, so it should have suited me was however quite a steep uphill. However this was followed by a steep downhill section before going flat along a dam across the Lake, retracing your steps across the dam, before going back off-road.

The off-road section for a change I quite enjoyed. Although undulating, a lot of it was under tree cover, thus providing shelter from the sun, there was also a nice cool breeze and being adjacent to the Lake offered some spectacular views.

We then passed what was the swim start and finish area to do an out and back loop before finishing the first lap.

For the first lap, there were quite a few strong runners passing me. On some sections of the run this was a bit problematic as there weren't a lot of room to allow people to pass and I did sympathise with some runners who were a little agitated in being unintentionally held up by us slower runners.

On the second lap, it would seem most of the faster runners had finished and so passing wasn't quite an issue, but on the third and final lap, passing started to become an issue for me as I passed slower runners. Thankfully, it wasn't too much of an issue as by now there seemed to be fewer runners around to contend with. If anything the situation actually lifted my spirits since this was probably the first time in the entire race that I was passing far more people than they were passing me! In fact in the closing stages no-one was passing me.

Add to this support from first David Hall and then Paul Wills, I pushed on and in doing so managed to pass a couple of runner on the last turn towards the Ironman 70.3 red carpet.

I didn't look back; well it would be rude to turn your back on the Ironman 70.3 gantry, especially as it had been waiting patiently for me for so long!

I cross the line, collect my medal and finisher shirt and then headed for shade. My mother, who came to Wimbleball Lake with me and who I had also seen cheering me on from the sidelines on the run was at the finish to provide me with her seat that she had brought along for me to fall in to!

Stats and Postscript

After a well earned rest I return to transition for some food provide by the organisers, which consisted mainly of sandwiches, sausage rolls and pork pies. On collecting my gear I bump into Paul Wills, Tony and Jason and we compared our experiences of the day. I then head for home. I went via the old and scenic A30 via Yeovil, Shaftsbury and Salisbury as I didn't fancy my changes on the A303 at Stonehenge. Being the day before the summer solstice and the possibility of Londoners returning from the West Country after a sunny weekend, didn't make the A303 route home look particularly appealing.

So to those times; the swim was 38:15 showing that playing dirty does pay! T1 was 5:53. The bike was 3:38:39, so a time I rather forget. T2 was far better at 2:31, even with traditional laces and the run a respectable 2:09:13. Overall time was 6:34:28 netting me 611th of the 1081 who finished. A further 95 athletes didn't finish.

My final note, it would seem at the moment that my traditionally weakest discipline; swimming is currently my strongest and my traditionally strongest discipline; cycling is now my weakest. Such are the trials and tribulations of triathlons I guess!