

What should you do if you're a poor swimmer, mediocre cyclist and average runner? How about an ironman - a 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike ride and 26.2 mile run as a non-stop race with a 17 hour time limit, and known as one of the hardest endurance events around.

I really am old enough to know better but nevertheless entered the Outlaw iron distance triathlon in Nottingham. It has a reputation of a well-organised event, and more importantly, the course looked to be reasonably flat. Lesson 1 in my ironman learnings log was that I really should have discussed this with my family first, as it transpired that we were booked on a short break to centreparks the same weekend with some friends. This meant withdrawal from the Outlaw and entering Ironman UK in Bolton the following weekend, 31st July. Whilst a week doesn't make a lot of difference, the course did. Ironman UK is known as one of the toughest courses because it features around 7,300 feet of climbing on the bike and an undulating run course. Even the swim felt up hill, but that has more to do with my swim technique than the terrain.

Finding time to train was my next challenge. The training programmes start at around 9 hours per week and tend to have a build phase of around 15 hours per week before tapering off. My training regularly featured 3 hours per week of swimming, 3 hours of running but not enough cycling. However, I did get to see the Dales in snow, rain, sleet, hail, light, darkness, fog, and, on one memorable occasion, sunshine.

The final 3 weeks before race day were taper time. Time to take it easy, pretend to be training, and to start building the mental aspects from gentle anxiety up to full blown panic just before the race started. 3 weeks before race day involved getting tonsillitis and antibiotics. 2 weeks before race day involved getting an infected toe and more antibiotics. One week before race day was our trip to centreparks, wrapped in cotton wool and bubble wrap to avoid injuries. However, I forgot about that when we went paint balling with friends, saw an opportunity to be a hero and storm the wooden castle, charged from my barricade, tripped and smacked my head against the castle wall. This led to mild concussion and a Gorbochov scar on my head. Not text-book preparation, but hey-ho.....

As race day got closer, so the quantity and quality of my sleep reduced. Trying to stay positive whilst wondering why oh why did I ever enter this. By this point, it was too late to withdraw or delegate my place to someone else. I'd made the mistake of telling far too many people that I'd entered, and was raising money for Cancer Research too. Lesson #2 of my ironman learnings log is to keep silent about it next time around, so I can withdraw quietly with no loss of face.

3 am on race day and it was time for my Weetabix, banana and energy drink before catching the coach from the Reebok Stadium in Bolton to the race start in Pennington Flash near Wigan. On with my lycra tri suit and neoprene wet suit (how many sports allow you to dress up like that?), and then off to the race start. Prior to getting into the water, we all applauded the guys who had been injured in Afghanistan and who were also tackling the same race. Seeing double amputees entering the same race brought things into perspective.

Into the water with 1,400 others from 34 different countries. The National Anthem was played, followed by the klaxon to start the race. My ambitions in the swim were fairly simple. Aim #1: survive. Aim # 2: stay out of trouble and don't get kicked, battered or bruised in the melee of the start. Aim #3: finish within the cut off time of 2 hours 20 minutes. Aim #4: Take it easy and don't use my legs too much as I'll need them later for the bike and the marathon. One hour 29 minutes later, having zig-zagged my way along the course doing mainly front crawl, with no obvious damage from the mass start, I clambered out of the water, over the timing mat and started jogging to transition to get into my bike gear. It was at this point that I first saw my wife and children who'd

got up at 4 am to come and watch the swim and support me. It raised my spirits no end. I took my time in transition, put on arm warmers, bike helmet, shoes, grabbed my gels and energy bars, and set off on the 112 mile bike.

This turned out to be the hardest part of the race. It featured 3 loops around the Lancashire countryside and lots of climbing, including an infamous local hill called Sheep House Lane, which was ridiculously steep and went on for 2.5 miles each lap. It was also the main spectator hot-spot, and spurred us all on to dig in up the hill before enjoying a long, fast descent.

I paid for not putting in enough hours in the saddle in training, I also found loneliness of the bike difficult. The no drafting rules meant that you couldn't cycle along with others and have a chat, share the pain and make the time go faster. I ended up singing a medley of songs at the top of my voice even though my singing is even worse than my swimming, and must have looked and sounded like I'd completely lost the plot. After a couple of hours on the bike, I was starting to tire and came across a sign telling me I'd done 32 miles and had another 80 to go before I could start the run. This was my low point. I was tempted to chuck my bike away, find a taxi and head home. However, the closed roads meant not only the pleasure of safe, quiet roads, but also a complete absence of taxis, buses or other forms of transport. I was stuck with my bike. A peanut butter sandwich, banana and energy gel perked me up and I trundled on for several more hours before making it to the second transition area to start my run, with a bike split of 7 hours 40. I again took my time in transition as I'd successfully made the combined swim/bike cut off time, giving me the right to continue on the marathon. By this point, hopes of victory were fading, especially as the winner had finished one hour before I had even started the run!

The marathon started with an 8 mile jog from Horwich into the centre of Bolton, and then 3 laps around the centre of Bolton. At the end of each lap, you could hear the loud speaker proclaiming the successful end to the ironman journey for others. My family were waiting in the centre, and I got to run past them lots of times and stop for a bit of a chat and a goss before bumbling off again, with my spirits raised and starting to believe that I could actually finish this thing.

The run was hot. It was made harder by running past lots of pubs with people sitting outside in the sunshine, cheering on the runners whilst sipping on a nice pint. The support was fantastic however, with lots of noise, encouragement and enthusiasm from locals, marshalls, volunteers and fellow competitors.

I am finally on my last lap. Six miles to go. 3 miles to the top of the hill, 3 miles back down and I'm back in the town centre. The music is blaring out. The lights are dazzling. The commentator is getting louder. Suddenly I'm in the finishing chute, on the big screen tv, high fiving loads of people I've never met, raising my arms and crossing the line to the words I've been training for months to hear: "Steve Newell, You are an Ironman". I did the marathon in 4 hours 20, giving me an overall time of 13 hours 51 minutes. I'm chuffed to bits.

My medal is still around my neck. My finisher's t-shirt will never be removed. My ironman tattoo is being planned. My challenge is over, never to be repeated. I've raised £1,200 for Cancer Research and other cancer charities, got fit, learned to swim and learned so much about myself. I couldn't have done it on the day or in training without fantastic support from my family. My mid-life crisis is now officially over. Challenge Barcelona looks appealing though.....