

Ironman Hawaii 2006
Bob Morrison

I arrived Tuesday evening and on Wednesday morning I went for a short swim. The waves were crashing over the lava-rock seawall and spilling across the sidewalk onto Ali'i Drive. This was very intimidating! Usually the water is crystal clear and you can see the many tropical fish swimming below. But today it was cloudy and you couldn't see the bottom near the shore. I swam to the far buoy in the string of cylindrical buoys, about 250 yards out. I appeared to be going slower going back toward shore than I had been going out. I got out of the water after the short 15-minute swim, feeling some nausea. The ocean looked a little rougher than in 1999 when I had previously done this race. For the first time I was worried about whether I could finish the swim. Would these waves be too difficult for me? I called Deb and told her I needed some ginger and Dramamine-Less Drowsy. I also called Jan. She said she would get me some sea-bands, like I had worn in 1999.

Thursday morning I took 2 tablets of Dramamine-Less Drowsy that I had purchased locally, and went for another swim. The water was still cloudy and bouncing over the seawall. I overheard another swimmer say the water was clearer than it had been, but it still looked cloudy to me. I again swam to the far buoy and back. Again it seemed to take longer getting back than going out. Then I went for a short bike ride. I didn't feel any negative effects from the Dramamine-Less Drowsy, so I would take it before the race on Saturday.



Dana having fun at Waikiki.

Jan arrived Thursday afternoon, but Shirley, Deb, and Dana had their flight out of Kinston cancelled and they had to take another flight out of Raleigh-Durham, eventually

spending the night in Honolulu and playing at Waikiki Beach Friday morning. They arrived in Kona on Friday afternoon.

Shirley, Deb, Dana, and Jan decided to go to a luau Friday night while I went for an early dinner.

Shirley and Jan at the luau.

Friday at dinner I overheard a young guy who I assumed was a surfer talking to the waitress, saying that currents were stronger than he had ever seen them and he thought it should make for an interesting time for the Ironman race. I wondered to myself where the currents were and how strong.

Saturday morning after taking Dramamine-Less Drowsy and ginger capsules, I went to the transition with Jan. My line for body-marking included people over 60 and NBC athletes. (NBC has slots for several athletes who have special human-interest stories for their broadcast.) I was in line behind the Hoyts. This was a big thrill for me because they are two of my heroes. Dick Hoyt is 66 and in my age-group. His son Rick is in his early 40's, and has cerebral palsy. Dick pulls Rick in an inflatable raft for the 2.4-mile swim, then puts him in a specially-made seat on the bike for the 112-mile bike ride, and pushes him in a jogger racing chair for the 26.2-mile run. I've run the Marine-Corps marathon ten times, but none as fast as team Hoyt. I talked to them briefly. After the body-marking I pumped up my bike tires, then went back to the room to rest until a few minutes before race time.



Deb and her dad before the start of the race.

At 6:45 the starting cannon for the pro's went off. After putting the sea-bands on my wrists I entered the water at 6:55 and at 7:00 the starting cannon sounded. The start of the swim was easy. I was taking long easy strokes. Jim McGehee had advised to take it easy on the swim. You could gain only a few minutes with a hard swim that might cost you much more time later in the race. The first half mile went by fairly quickly, and the ocean seemed relatively smooth, not choppy as I had expected from the Wednesday and Thursday swims. (They reported that the winds were in the east making the swim smoother than it had been. This also made for very fast bike times since the usually strong winds near Hawi were diminished.) I was gaining confidence and thought I might have a fairly fast swim. But then I started feeling the ocean swells. The ocean swells were hitting me at an angle and causing me to turn off course, and volunteers on surf boards kept steering me back onto the course.

I started getting seasick, and the sailboat that marked the turnaround point looked very far away. I noticed that a guy swimming next to me had a gray swim cap. The males wore green swim caps and the females wore orange swim caps. I assumed that gray must have been used to identify NBC athletes.

After I passed the last buoy before the sailboat marking the turnaround, an official in a yellow kayak approached me and said.

"This guy on the surfboard is going to escort you the rest of the way."

He gestured toward a guy on a surfboard who had just pulled up next to me.

"Stick with him and he'll take you in a straight line. Keep eye contact with him. And focus on your stroke mechanics. Don't just swim."

I was pretty seasick and I guess the diminished power in my stroke was showing. I needed to get some ginger from a plastic bag in my Speedo.

"Can I hang onto your boat while I get some ginger? I'm really seasick."

"Yes, take as long as you need you have plenty of time."

I grabbed the bow of the kayak and got out the ginger. Jan had brought some raw ginger that I had cut into about a dozen pieces for use during the swim. Claudia with whom I had trained before the 1999 Ironman said she used ginger to combat seasickness and thought that it helped. I couldn't taste the ginger in my mouth. Just salt. I checked the race time. 57 minutes. I was still 4-5 minutes from the sailboat so that would put me at about 1:02 or so at the turnaround. That would put me a little over the 2 hours I had predicted for my swim time, but at least that gave me 1:18 for the swim back to the finish. When I let go of the kayak I felt very weak and lethargic from the seasickness. The escort on the surfboard told me to maintain eye contact. Every time I looked over he was watching.

I was really seasick.

"GET OVER IT!"

is what my sister Cathy would say when you were feeling down or feeling sorry for yourself. Cathy died of lung cancer three weeks ago. She had been an outstanding runner and triathlete, even doing a sprint triathlon a year and a half after being diagnosed with

lung cancer. I could get over this feeling of seasickness. I didn't have lung cancer. She also had another saying.

"Why do, when you can overdo?"

I could see the bottom of the ocean, but looking at it seemed to make me dizzy. My arms had no power and I asked the surfboard guy if I could hang onto the surfboard a minute.

"Yes. Take as long as you need. You have plenty of time."

It was quite a relief to make the turn at the sailboat and head back toward the finish. I took another break before the first buoy back. When I would grab the surfboard the surfer would stop paddling and sit up so I wouldn't make forward progress. (I didn't realize that there was a fairly strong current pushing us back out to sea, so every time I stopped to rest we ended up going backwards. This was the strong current the guy had referred to the night before. And it was the current that had made it harder to get back to the beach on the Wednesday and Thursday swims.) My stomach was hot and gurgling and I felt I was belching up the ginger. But taking the break seemed to help. For a brief time after the break I felt stronger. So I went through the cycle of swimming, taking a break, then swimming, then taking a break.

The surfboard guy said,

"We have about 2/3 of a mile to go."

I looked at my watch. The race time was 1:33. I wondered whether the surfboard might be a distraction, and whether I had made it an unnecessary crutch. I leaned over the surfboard, belching. I wanted to lay down on the surfboard and go to sleep. I wanted the time-limit to pass so someone would pick me up out of the water and take me to shore.

"Are you okay?"

I looked over and saw a woman surfer in a thong bikini escorting the guy in the gray swim cap.

"Yeah, I'm just seasick."

She said, "It's pretty bumpy out here."

I looked around and saw a number of surfboarders escorting the stragglers.

At one of the breaks the surfboard guy pointed to a white triangular buoy just up ahead a hundred yards or so.

"That buoy marks a half mile to go."

I started counting strokes, counting with each right-hand entry. And started counting in sets of 10. I reasoned that in a pool 10 right-hand strokes would get me 20 yards. So 10 sets of 10 would be 200 yards. I swam, counting, past the 1/2 mile buoy and took a final break.

"30 minutes to go. You've still got plenty of time."

The counting got me into a good rhythm, and the swells weren't quite as upsetting as they had been out near the turnaround point.

"15 minutes to go."

The guy on the surfboard was monitoring the time.

I was feeling pretty good. I could feel power surging through my arms, and my stroke was in a good rhythm. 1, 2, 3, 4, ...10, etc.

“9 minutes to go.”

It still looked like quite a ways back to the finish. The swimming was feeling good, and I was doing a final push to the finish. I could hear the announcer announcing the finishers.

“4 minutes to go”, came from the guy on the surfboard.

I was still beyond the pier so I'd better hurry. I maintained a good pace up to the beach. The surfboard guy disappeared before I could thank him. I stood up. The crowd was cheering. I had made it!

I felt unusually good after a difficult swim and was ready for the rest of the race.

“Robert Morrison from Greenville, North Carolina. 68 years old. Way to go Robert.”

On the way up the steps to the transition area an official leaned over to me.

“I hate to be the one to tell you but you didn't make the cutoff time.”

I was stunned! I looked at my watch. It was 2:28. The cutoff was 2:20. A volunteer removed the timing chip from my leg. Another led me to pick up my bike-gear bag.

“Does this mean I'm done?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

There was an old geezer in the change-tent just sitting stoically on a bench.

“I didn't make the cutoff time either.” he said.

I put my gear bag on a bench and went outside.

“Can I continue on the bike unofficially?”

“Ask that guy over there with the cap on.”

I went over.

“Can I continue on the bike unofficially?”

“I don't see why not, but let me ask the head guy.”

When he came back,

“I'm sorry but you'll not be able to continue.”

“That's okay.”

I went back to the change tent and sat across from where the stoic guy was still sitting. I put my head in my hands, dejected, disappointed, and emotionally drained. The last three weeks had been really rough emotionally. I got up and walked out with the stoic guy still sitting there. I got my other gear bag and some Gatorade and walked toward the exit.

As I was passing the swim exit there were the Hoyts coming up the steps. They didn't make the swim time-limit either. Rick Hoyt was still in the raft as it was being carried up the steps. Mike Reilly, the announcer and voice of Ironman, came to interview Dick Hoyt. Dick said that the current was too strong for them. This was the Hoyts' last Ironman race. They would continue to do half-ironman races, but they were retiring from Ironman. Mike expressed appreciation for all the Hoyts had done for Ironman racing and that they were an inspiration for many people. (Shirley said later she could see their raft going back and forth as Dick Hoyt pulled it against the current.)

I walked out of the transition area off the race course. I was very thirsty. The swim had really dehydrated me and it took several hours, and beers, before I felt I was eventually re-hydrated. As I walked out of the transition area there were Shirley, Deb,

Jan, and Dana. They gave me hugs and kisses and told me they were proud of me. Shirley said she was really glad when they finally announced my name. Dana said I could practice swimming in the hotel pool.

I had told family and friends before the race that the swim would be difficult, but that I was going to do everything in my power to finish the swim. Then I would enjoy the rest of the day. Well I did finish the 2.4 mile swim, but now I would enjoy the rest of the day in a different way than I had anticipated. I wouldn't be biking or running.

The balcony of our room overlooked "hot corner" at the intersection of Palani Road and Kuakini highway where the bikers passed 4 times and the runners 3 times. After a shower and an early lunch I went to hot corner, the 10-mile point of the run, and sat on the lava-rock wall to wait for the runners. I had a great time watching the pro's at hot corner and then later at the finish line. I had previously talked about coming to an Ironman race sometime to just watch and serve as a volunteer. So I was now having fun as a spectator.

After watching the pro's finish I went back to the balcony to watch hot corner and read my book. Soon Shirley came to the door and motioned me into the hall. There was Rick Hoyt in a wheelchair being pushed by his personal care aide. I looked Rick in the eye and said,

"You are my hero!"

He looked pleased. He seemed enamored with Dana who was trying out different facial expressions on him. I told Rick that Deb and I gave talks on Ironman racing to civic clubs, and we always showed pictures and talked about Team Hoyt doing Ironman. He seemed to enjoy that.

We heard the announcer at hot corner announce that "Cowman" Shirk was approaching on the bike. He is one of the original eccentrics of Ironman who has been doing this race since the early 1980's. He has become an integral part of the Ironman mystique. They would often kick him off the course before the finish line because he'd refuse to pay the entry fee and he wouldn't register. But this year he was registered. I went out to the street on Palani Road to cheer him on.. A few minutes later here came "Cowman" wearing his characteristic helmet with horns.

"Go Cowman",

I cheered as he went by. He missed the bike cutoff time by about 10 minutes.

Shirley's knee was acting up, so at 7 p.m. Jan, Dana, and I went to get a takeout pizza. While we were waiting for the pizza it started raining so hard that parts of Ali'i Drive were flooded and runners coming in had to step on the curb to avoid the water in the street. We heard later that kids swam in knee-deep water in the street.

At 9 p.m. Deb, Jan, and I went back to the finish line to watch the last 3 hours of Ironman. Shirley was resting her knee, so she stayed in the room with sleeping Dana. We were part of a huge crowd that was very noisy when finishers came in. I saw a lot of finishers in my age group, and above. The crowd grew larger during the last hour as the

midnight hour approached. We were all waiting for Sister Madonna Buder, the oldest female to ever complete Ironman. She is 76. At 11:47 they announced she was making the turn to come down Palani Road. That was a little over a mile away, so she would be cutting it close if she were to make the midnight deadline. At 11:51 Dick Hoyt's brother finished. With 5 minutes to go the announcer Mike Reilly ran out onto the course in the dark to find Sister Madonna. A couple of minutes later he came back. He hadn't seen her. Then at 11:58 he saw her in the distance approaching the finish chute. He ran out to encourage her. The cheering from our huge crowd was deafening. She came in and crossed the finish line with 57 seconds to spare. Her time was 16:59:03.

On Sunday the trade winds from the north kicked back in. I went for a 45-minute run on the Queen K highway, then rode my bike on the Queen K highway out to the airport and back, just because...

We rented a car and drove to a beach.



Jan and Dana playing in the surf.

Monday they went to a beach that had some black sand.

Jan and I went for swims on Monday and Tuesday mornings and were able to observe the beautiful tropical fish in the clear ocean. We saw a school of about a 1000 fish that seemed to extend from the bottom up to the surface. We did not see any humuhumu-nukunuku-a-pua'a, the state fish. I think I need to come out here 3 weeks early next time to get used to swimming in this ocean.



On Monday Deb saw Team Hoyt on Ali'i Drive and they posed with her for a picture.

On Tuesday at the airport I was in line behind the Ironman photographers. They said that the week before, the race officials had considered changing the swim course because of the swells when you were headed to the finish. But they decided not to change it.

I've thought for the last couple of years that I needed a new bike. Now I'm wondering whether I need a bike at all.