

Disclaimer: This was written as a means for Anne and me to remember our trip when we grow old and senile. I don't pretend to think anyone else would be interested enough to torture yourself through 8 pages of self-indulgent storytelling, so if you trash it after two pages, no offense taken.

Thanks to CC for convincing me to enter the Ironman lottery back in 1999. He wisely suggested that if I ever wanted to go, it made sense to play the odds and start early. It took thirteen years, but without that advice Anne and I would have missed out on one of the most memorable weeks of our lives!

It is surreal to go to a place where you have never been, and immediately start recognizing landmarks, one after another, for an entire week. That was the case for us before we even stepped off the airplane, and continued until our trip ended nine days later. I felt like had been in Kailua-Kona a hundred times before. We spotted the Energy Lab as we landed. I noticed the purple flowers on the Queen K Highway, where Lori Bowden got punched in the stomach while running, right after we left the airport. Shortly following were the warehouses on the hill where Tim DeBoom dropped out with kidney stones in 2003. Right after that we crested the top of Palani Hill. On my quick jog after arriving, I spotted the wall on Ali'i where Natascha Badman threw up, which happens to be pretty close to the spot Peter Reid started walking in 2001, etc., etc. The list literally goes on and on and on.

I am not “obsessed” with The Hawaiian Ironman, at least any more than the average triathlete who knows it is the Daytona 500 of triathlons (*analogy includes week leading up to race*). I do ride my indoor trainer a lot, however, and watching Ironmans is a great way to pass the time. I own practically every DVD from the early 90's to 2010, and Anne will vouch that I have watched each one no less than 20 times. This fact turned the week into an endless stream of déjà vu's, which made for one of the coolest parts of the trip.

We were well prepared from the advice we received from folks who had been before. CC, Carl Bonner, Charles Royal, George Worrell, Bob Hickner, and Dr. Bob all were great about giving practical advice, not only regarding what to expect from the race, but also from the “scene” that is undoubtedly like no other in triathlon.

That “scene” started to become apparent on the plane ride from Phoenix to Kona. We quickly found ourselves surrounded by gnarly, veiney, darkly-tanned triathletes, all either wearing the finisher t-shirt (and hat) (and shorts) (and socks) from their qualifying race or the apparel of their sponsor. One of the pro favorites (and winner of IM Lake Placid) TJ Tollakson was on the plane. He is hardly the type of guy that would stand out in a crowd, but considering the destination of this flight, was instantly granted rock-star status.

The “Vein Scene” lasted all week. Runners streamed up and down Ali’i, doing what looked like 1-minute intervals, and a never-ending line of bikers rolled up and down the Queen K. During this week Kona supposedly becomes “the fittest place on earth” and Anne and I saw nothing to the contrary. I was told by several folks that it can really intimidating being surrounded by such athletes, but I think that for the whole week, and right up to the point the gun went off, I felt much more like a spectator than a participant. I guess that’s why CC suggested the week would go by so fast, and it did. It also helped distract from the inevitable pre-race jitters.

On Tuesday Anne drove me to the beginning of the climb up to Hawi. In addition to watching the endless videos, I have also “ridden” the course several times on my Computrainer, which provides a real-time video of the course (with hills) as you ride it. Once again I was having major déjà vu as we rode the long, desolate trek through the lava fields to Kawaihae, which marks the end of the lava and the beginning of the trek up to Hawi. What the Computrainer did NOT prepare me for was the wind. As I hopped on my bike and began the climb, what started as a mild crosswind turned into a headwind, and I quickly digressed to what must have been a 6mph pace. The slow speed was not as much an issue, however, as keeping the bike upright. As I climbed, the scenery changed back and froth from barren to relatively wooded, so each time I hit a clearing a gust would sweep through causing some major swerving. “Hmmm”, I thought to myself, “what is that going to feel like on the way down?”

At the top I happened to run into Frank Fawcett from Charlotte. We decided to ride down together, taking turns at the lead. Initially the wind was behind/beside us, and I remember once going *uphill* at 20+mph....coasting. Within a mile or so, however, the crosswinds got scary. Frank moved ahead by about 50 yards, and I could easily tell each time got hit by a crosswind because he would suddenly lean at about a 45 degree angle and start swerving across the road. Watching him was disconcerting, but helpful, because it gave me a cue when the next gust was going to hit. Twice I felt my front wheel “skid” sideways from the effect of a sudden crosswind. Not fun.

Well we made it, and on the trek back in we were treated to seeing the Raelert brothers riding together, just beyond the airport. What a sight they were, dressed in perfectly matching kits, fighting to keep their BMC’s upright and rolling what looked like 24mph into that wind. Amazing. They even managed to smile as Anne hung out the window, snapping pictures, with me yelling from the driver’s seat.

The next day began with a swim. The bay fills with of hundreds of triathletes each morning shortly after sunrise. Coffees of Hawaii even stocked a sailboat about 500 yards off shore with shots of their brew. I stopped there on the way back to find out I had been swimming right beside Chris Lieto. He chatted with his buddies on the back (less crowded) side of the boat, and I managed to eavesdrop on their conversation as they discussed strategy for the race just like we all might be plotting for the next Lake Kristi Tri.

Later we drove out to the Energy Lab to do a run. As we were parking, Craig Alexander and Julie Diebens pulled up on their bikes, hopped out next to a minivan, and changed into their running gear. (Craig did a little more changing than Julie, stripping down and exposing his “bum” as the Aussies call it, right there beside the Queen K). I took off just ahead of them to get a slight lead, and sure enough shortly after that they both went cruising by, media van and photographers in tow.

The Underpants Run provided our primary entertainment on Thursday. This tradition came into existence several years ago when Roch Frey and Paul Huddle decided to poke fun at the athletes who walk around all day in their speedo's, (They still do.) and has grown into a fundraising event. Allegedly people fly to the Big Island now with their sole purpose being to participate in the UP Run. Reluctantly, but with my wife's encouragement, I jumped into the fun and joined the 2 mile jaunt around downtown Kona. (*Important: If you ever get the nerve to hop into an skibby shot w/Michael Lovato, remember to stand up straight and suck your stomach in for all its worth.*)

Friday was bike check-in, which included meeting a personal tour guide who walked me through every inch of the transition area. I can't remember a thing the kind lady said, and on race day still had no idea where to go after the swim nor the bike, but it was certainly cool to get the tour. After check-in, Anne and I noticed the swarm of photographers and media around the entrance, snapping pics of the pros and their bicycles as they entered, reminiscent of moviestars showing off their dresses on the red carpet in Hollywood. Every one patiently stopped and had no fewer than 30 shots of them + rigs. The camaramen were even getting within an inch of the components to be sure every inch was accounted for. We were lucky enough to get a table for lunch right over the event, and watched the whole process in amazement for well over an hour.

Race Day and Prep:

My goals for this race were:

- 1) To train really hard to adapt to the distance, which I have not covered in about 10 years.
- 2) Make the training fun by doing it in some different places.
- 3) Enjoy the day; as Carl Bonner said “playing in the Super Bowl”
- 4) Finish quickly enough that the day didn't become too long or drawn out. Too much “fun” can sometimes be a bad thing.

That's it. No time, no splits, no nothing. Just go as fast as I felt (*by virtue of hard training*) and have fun. Past experience told me that having an *<even unspoken>* time goal at that distance opens the door for a long, painful, disappointing day, and Hawaii did not feel like the place to have that happen.

I followed a cookie-cutter 12-week Joe Friel training plan which was pretty simple.....low intensity, consistent, and a ton of volume on the weekends. It worked well for me, considering my main challenge was to get my run volume up drastically

from where it had been in the last few years. If anyone wants to know more details, I will be glad to share them with you.

A big step in my prep was to invest in a 1-month nutritional evaluation and race day plan with Brian Shea at Personal Best Nutrition. My hope was to come up with a simple, precise plan that would get my big frame through the heat to the finish line and hopefully eliminate the guesswork from one of the biggest variables in an Ironman. Brian works with several top pros, and his plan 1) made things simple *during the race*; 2) provided ability to switch to plans B & C if needed; and 3) wisely utilized much of the on-course nutrition, eliminating the dependence on carrying too much “stuff”. I will be glad to provide more details on the plan and how to contact Brian if anyone is interested. It was one of the best decisions I made for the race.

I also spent some time studying and took a lot of guidance about what to wear, with the goal being to stay as cool as possible. I pulled out all the stops with armcoolers (thanks Bruce), ultralight singlet, shorts, etc., all of which seemed to have paid off during a pretty hot day.

Swim:

I had planned all along to line up on the far, far left, to avoid the crowd as much as possible. Doubts of the sanity of that strategy came to light a couple of days before the race when swimming on that side I got caught by a couple of huge sets of waves, perfectly designed for surfers but not-so-great for triathlete swimmers. I was forced to “dive down” about four times to avoid getting caught in the 8-foot breakers. Anne was swimming with me (further out) and got concerned I had become a permanent fixture on the coral reef below. The swells, which lasted about a week and reportedly came from New Zealand, even had the folks on the coffee boat scrambling to keep stuff from falling overboard.

Luckily the water was flat on Saturday, with some small chop on the surface. I hopped in the water and did my “warm-up” swimming across the bay to the left side, passing the usual Ford SUV floating in the middle of the bay. When I got to what looked like a good spot, I saw Frank Fawcett up at the front, with a new acquaintance Steve Johnson (The Dark Horse) working his way through the crowd, poaching for the right spot to start his quest to podium in the 35-39 age group (a lofty goal indeed, which he did with a 9:03). It was nice seeing familiar faces amongst the crazy, loud, *crazy* Hawaiian drums playing in the background, the thousands of spectators on the wall surrounding the bay, and the TWO helicopters hovering overhead. As we treaded water for what seemed like (and I think was) fifteen minutes, nobody around us seemed to know exactly when the cannon was going to sound. We got a pretty good hint, though, when those helicopters left their perch over the pros (who started 30 minutes earlier) and returned to the start line, hovering almost directly overhead.

The cannon sounded and I spent the next 1:04:14 fighting for water. It was kind of fun, but certainly not the kind of swim one can prepare for without doing lots of mass start races with hundreds of people who can swim at least as fast as you (which I have never done). There was no rhythm, no synchronicity, no yielding of space. The jostling intensified as we approached the turn buoy (a sailboat full of spectators). On the way back I picked up the pace just a little, trying to get around the folks who still appeared to be zigzagging. Within sight of the pier, I actually saw a guy yell at another as he breathed in the direction “move over!” he yelled to another, which must have taken a lot of energy to not break his stroke rhythm.

Surprisingly the transition was rougher than the swim. As I eased into the changing tent, contemplating slapping a few high-fives, a couple of guys who obviously had stricter agendas than I practically ran me over. While in the tent, we each were assigned our own personal volunteer who helped us put our singlets on, apply sunscreen, and physically sort through the stuff in our transition bags, which I don't recall ever even touching. I finally got my fanny in gear and got out of there, in what seemed like 15 minutes.

Bike:

CC told me the bike would go by in a flash, and it did. Not that was easy by any stretch of the imagination. It was just fun to be out there watching the race and soaking in a little bit of history. The climb up to a turn-around on the Kuakini Highway lasted a good portion of the first 5 miles before a turn-around that descended back through town. On the climb, Cid Cardoso passed me, hauling a** and getting down to business like he usually does. On the way back down the hill, I stayed as far right as possible, avoiding the people who were there to race all 112 miles (and there were a lot of them) and reminded myself to shift into the small chainring at the bottom of Palani. Climbing back up Palani and turning left onto the Queen K finally allowed the opportunity to settle into a rhythm. Based on my long rides, I knew if the heat was tolerable, I might hold about 200-205 watts for the duration of the ride, ideally with a slightly higher average from the turnaround in Hawi (mile 60) back to town. I noticed from all of the climbing early on, however, I had already pegged 210w, so I eased off a bit, enjoyed a nice tailwind for the next several miles, allowing my heart rate recover and average wattage drop back to around 200.

For the next 30 miles, I watched in amazement as so many bikers flew by. I had been clearly warned by *everyone* who had raced Hawaii that this was going to happen. The quality of the racers, along with so many overzealous starters, would make me feel like I was getting smoked out on the Queen K. The power meter came in handy along this stretch, undoubtedly keeping me out of trouble later on in the race. Following the drafting rule is pretty easy when everybody is speeding by you.

Halfway between the left-turn in Kawaihae and the climb to Hawi (maybe mile 47), the entourage of helicopters, race cars, mopeds, and motorcycles that signaled the leader emerged. As did everyone, I expected to see Lieto in the lead, which I did. What I didn't expect to see was the frustrated look on his face and the large pack of riders almost right

behind him. It seemed to contain everybody.....Raelert, Alexander, Dirk Bockel, Van Hoemaker, etc, etc. Apparently a close race was in progress, and unfolding right in front of us! As I started to climb, I tried to ease the pain by speaking to other athletes as they passed by. "Hey, that looked like a close one?!?!?" I got nothing in response.....from no one. Maybe they were in "the zone". Maybe (likely, based on the names on their race numbers) none of them spoke English. All I know is even the guy with the teddy bear strapped to his saddle blew me off.

The good news was the passing by other bikers seemed to have slowed down quite a bit, and, importantly, the wind, while noticeable, was not nearly as bad as on that same stretch a few days earlier. I made it up to the turn-around, and the crowd in Hawi, right around 3 hours, happy to grab my special needs bag and start the long descent down the same road I had just climbed.

At miles 77-80 there is another steeper, shorter climb out of Kawaihae and on to the Queen K once again. This begins the 25-mile stretch back to the airport, best known for the constant headwind, and the part I had most prepared for mentally. The wind was blowing steadily, but not as bad as anticipated, so I decided to push the stretch from 80-112 a little harder. Finally, I was passing people! As I passed the airport and approached the Energy Lab, the big (men's) helicopter appeared again. It was filming Alexander as he turned into the lab, somewhere around mile 16 of his run. Lucky! I then saw a stream of pros in pursuit, all of whom looked like they were running 5k's.

Back into town I saw Anne, who happens to be a great triathlon spectator. She positioned herself in a perfect spot for her to see me and me to see her, and man, she was a sight for sore eyes! I rolled into T2, stood up, and my bike disappeared. One of the volunteers grabbed and racked it for me, which was only a problem because I suddenly felt like I could have used it for balance. I had completed lots of 100-120 mile rides this summer, stopping for breaks, etc., but that's the hardest I had ridden for that period of time without stopping once, and I felt a little wobbly as a result.

Bike time 5:37:20
Power 1st 60 miles – 200w (np)
Power last 52 miles – 209w (np)
Calories consumed – 2780 (495/hr)

T2 was obviously less congested, so I spent most of that time taking every precaution to minimize the inevitable blisters that coincide with a marathon run in 85 degree heat.

Run:

I wish I could say the run was fun, but it wasn't. It was tough. Memorable? Definitely.

The course is simple. Starting with an 11-mile out-and-back on a spectator covered Alii drive, you return to town, turn right and run<ha> up Palani hill, and onto the much-less-densely-populated-by-spectators Queen K highway for a 10k. Hang a left and do about

3.5 miles in the Energy Lab, then re-run the 10k on Queen K before dropping back down Palani and over to the end of Ali'i, aka- "The Promised Land."

Everyone suggested the out-and-back section on Ali'i would be easy, and the stretch on Queen K/Energy Lab tough, mainly because of the crowds on Ali'i, and lack thereof on Queen K. This was not the case for me. I just remember getting three miles down Ali'i and realizing "damn I have to do this all over again". A 5.5 mile-out-and-5.5-mile-back seems short in the scheme of a marathon, but when doing it, it seems painfully long.

About three miles into the run, I met up with Mike Beamon. We jogged/chatted for a while and did a detailed comparison of our mutual bloating stomach pains. Mike dropped his electrolyte-laden bottle 1 mile into the bike ride, and as he turned around to pick it up, a gal ran over it, crushing the bottle and crashing herself. He was feeling the ill effects of the electrolyte shortage, hoping to get caught up as he ran. Mike's mom passed away just a few weeks before the race, so it was nice to know he was able to make it after such a loss.

Finally finishing Ali'i, I hung a right for the venture up Palani. I had noticed from checking prior years' race splits the stretch from mile 11 to mile 18 seemed to be the slowest for almost everybody. My suspicion was confirmed when immediately hanging the right, I crossed the timing mat at the bottom of the hill, meaning the first half mile of that split included the long slog up Palani, followed by the predominately uphill 5+ mile stretch to the Energy Lab. That stretch went by better than expected, and other than walking a little too long through some aid stations and being startled by how terrible even the fast guys/gals looked as they headed in the opposite direction, it was uneventful.

The Natural Energy Lab provided the most memorable (painless) portion of the run, as I was able to see a few of the people I knew doing the race, and managed to distract myself for a mile or so by the helicopter, which had finished its duties following the pros and now hovered closely overhead shooting footage of the "normal" folks.

The remainder of the race evolved into a simple battle between walking and running, as I knew it would. My quads were feeling the effect of the slight overexertion of the final 30 miles of the bike, and kept hinting they might lock up at any time. Heading down Palani, I had the joy of seeing my wife once again, and as I did the final zigzag through downtown onto Ali'i, I just focused my efforts on gathering myself to not do a faceplant on the finisher's ramp.

People say the last stretch is a blur, and it is, mainly because of the many lights beaming down from every direction. Crossing the line gave me the privilege of getting TWO escorts to walk me to the finisher's area, where my primary goal was to find Anne, thankfully doing so in short order.

She and I hung out to the bitter end, having some beers and watching in amazement as Chrissie Wellington (and her beau, who is a nice guy and finished 11th in his first attempt) greeted finishers at the line, one after another, for hours on end. She is amazing

to have tortured herself to the extent she did, and yet take such enjoyment being there, clearly not because of some sponsor obligation, but because she just enjoyed it. The only disappointment of the day came when we watched Nancy, a nice lady with whom we sat at the welcome dinner on Thursday night, cross the finish line in 17:00:04 (4 seconds after the cut-off). She made it known at dinner that it would be close for her, but what a bummer to make it so far and not be “official”. Obviously she was still an Ironman in everyone’s book.

Our trip rounded out with a snorkeling trip and awards banquet Sunday, followed on Monday with a flight around the island with our good buddy Dale, who was kind enough to veer from his usual route and fly us over every inch of the bike course. It sure seemed flatter, cooler, and shorter from up there. Tuesday and Wednesday primarily involved packing and enduring the colossal flight that marked the end of a very memorable trip.

I have a lot of people to thank, but none so much as Anne. She means everything to me, and there is no way I could have made this journey without her. Ironman is an inherently self-indulgent, even selfish, endeavor, and it is impossible to list all of the sacrifices she has made since April 15th. She is my best friend and soulmate, and I can’t imagine life without her.

Thanks also to my support crew and sponsors:

George Worrell: White John Cobb Saddle and multiple 100 + mile bike rides, including: to and from Wrightsville Beach (in less than 24 hours), to Emerald Isle, Tarboro, a couple others around ENC, not to mention a well-mapped 113-mile grand tour through the Triangle/Chapel Hill (including straight down Franklin Street) followed by playing support staff/water boy (*on two separate occasions*) during 18-mile runs in Umstead Park. (Way, way above the call of duty.)

CC Wilkins: Zipp 404’s, a sidekick for the end of The K-Loop (plus bday party), and more Big Island & Hawaii Ironman touring advice than one could put in a book.

Bruce and Angie Richter: Craft arm coolers (now with mojo), phone recharger, support during last long run, and a sweet send-off party complete with life-size poster.

Carl, Pam, and Missy: Covering me for the week and-a-half vacation and maybe one or two early afternoon bike rides. Y’all are an awesome team and I am privileged to work with you.