

## **Whatever was I thinking?**

### **A Journal of Ironman Hawaii October 10, 2009 by Bob Morrison**

#### **Preface**

I was diagnosed with prostate cancer over the Christmas-New Year holidays, and had surgery in February. The pathology report indicated that I also needed radiation therapy as well as hormone therapy. I unexpectedly qualified for Ironman Hawaii at Eagleman 70.3 (half Ironman) in June, and took the slot. I thought I would be over the radiation therapy long before October 10, and that I would have at least a month to recover from the side effects. But the radiation start date kept getting pushed closer and closer to August. A week before I started radiation therapy a pinched nerve in my back became problematic and I was unable to run. As I was training for the Ironman while undergoing radiation therapy I wondered whatever in the world was I thinking when I took the Hawaii slot.

#### **Preparation**

Radiation therapy for prostate cancer was tiring, but I enjoyed and looked forward to the brief visits with the therapists every day. They were very caring.

Some days when I felt too tired to go for short bike rides or open-water swims in the late afternoon, if I actually went I felt better soon after starting the workout. The challenge of keeping up with the group on the bike overcame the feeling of tired. I think vigorous exercise for short lengths of time helps with the fatigue from radiation therapy, though not the long rides required in Ironman training.

The open water swims in Chocowinity Bay with Stephanie were more difficult, and I had to stop and rest often. As a result I shortchanged myself on the swim training. Coach Lance was helping me with workout schedules, but I couldn't run because of the pinched nerve in my back, and swimming was both fatiguing and irritated the pinched nerve. I did much of the swimming in the pool with a pull buoy, and a pull buoy and paddles because it was less irritating to the back.

I biked long distances with Mike, Chris, Mark, Russell, and others, and sometimes alone. I sometimes had to stop and pour cold water over my head in the heat when I was having a hot flash from the hormone therapy. One day I swam 4,150 yards in the pool in the morning before radiation therapy, and did a 110-mile bike ride afterwards. Even though it was a cool and misty day, the bike ride was very hard to do, but I knew that if I were going to Hawaii I had to do it. As Carl says, "You may get tired from training for Ironman Hawaii, but not tired of training."

I had my final radiation therapy session 10 days before Ironman. The doctor said that the fatigue should go away in 2-4 weeks. "But", I said, "I'm doing an Ironman race next week." She said that I evidently had kept my energy levels up, that most people stayed on the couch with the fatigue.

#### **Wetsuit or Not?**

Two weeks before I left for Hawaii I found out that sleeveless wetsuits were allowed for the 70+ age groups. You would get an official finish if you finished after using the wetsuit, but would be ineligible for an age group award. That was appealing to me because I wasn't planning to start the run anyway. I talked to Carl the night before I left and he said I would do just fine on the swim. (I had finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in my age group on the swim at Eagleman.) Coach Lance thought a sleeveless wetsuit would be okay since I was

still suffering from radiation fatigue, and I had felt much faster when wearing the wetsuit in the final bay swim. So I packed the wetsuit along with the newly purchased Blue Seventy speedsuit.

On the flight over I was thinking about whether to use the wetsuit or not. I decided just to leave the wetsuit packed in the bag and use the speedsuit. After all, this was Ironman Hawaii and you shouldn't make allowances for age. You were either capable of doing this race or not.

I went for a short 20-minute swim in the speedsuit on Wednesday, the morning after I arrived in Kona. The swim was fatiguing, probably due to the jet lag.

Shirley, Deb and 8-year-old granddaughter Dana arrived Wednesday night.

Thursday morning I went for a longer swim, taking two Bonine motion sickness pills before the swim. I set out for what I thought would be a 1-mile swim. There were swimmers everywhere, coming and going. Every other stroke I had to look up to make sure I didn't run into somebody, and many seemed not to be looking. After swimming 1/3 of a mile I turned around and swam back. I felt weak, and fatigued. I decided I wasn't strong enough to do a 2.4-mile swim in this speedsuit and I'd have to wear the wetsuit after all. I was belching some from motion sickness on the way back in. I was disappointed when I got out. I had trouble putting my clothes back on after the swim because of intense pain from the pinched nerve in my back. I didn't belong here. Then I talked to a woman going up in the elevator back at the hotel and she said she had a friend who was doing just the swim because of low back problems.

At breakfast with Shirley, Deb, and Dana I expressed my doubts about being able to complete the swim. Deb said, "Do what you can and write about it." I assured Shirley that if I stopped during the swim someone would be there to pick me up. She was worried that I'd go glug glug.

I took my bike to Bikeworks because it wasn't working right. I had put it back together wrong, and probably would have only made it about 10 miles before it disintegrated. They said I should get someone else to put it together next time.

Friday I took one Bonine and went for another short swim. With only one Bonine I didn't feel the fatigue that I had felt the day before. Maybe two Bonines were too much, or maybe I was getting used to the time zone, or maybe the radiation therapy fatigue had disappeared as promised. When I got back to the beach there was a sea turtle swimming next to me. I could have reached out and touched it, but didn't. At "Dig Me" beach there was a bikini-clad girl holding a sign that said "Espresso 700 yards" with an arrow pointing out toward the swim course. I asked her where the espresso was, thinking she would give me an address on Ali'i. But she said it was in the boat that was several hundred yards out with a large flag on it. She said if you swam out to the boat you could get a free espresso. I then saw that many swimmers were doing just that.

My sister Jan arrived Friday afternoon.

They said that about 100,000 people worldwide compete for the 1800 slots in this race. I felt extremely lucky.

I decided not to wear the wetsuit. This is THE IRONMAN!!!

## **Swim**

On race morning Jan went with me at 5 am when I went to get marked and set up my bike. A volunteer held a flashlight while I pumped up my tires. Then we went back to

the room to wait until it was time to go to the start. I took one Bonine, had some ginger, and put on the speedsuit.

There was a U. S. Navy Destroyer anchored just off shore to honor the Navy people who were in the race and those who were parachuting in. One of the jumpers had jumped over 10,000 times.

At 6:45 the pros started. I got in the back of the line of the age-groupers entering the water so I could stay out of the fray when the cannon fired. I saw a woman with a gray swim cap and we started talking. Age-group swimmers wore colored swim caps, blue for male and pink for female, unless you were 70+, in which case you had a gray swim cap regardless of whether you were male or female. She was from Texas and had been in Hurricane Ike. She was 70 and I found out later her name was Bobbie. Finally we both got in the water and swam toward the starting line.

I looked around before the cannon fired and saw that nobody was behind me. Perfect! When the cannon fired I was swimming by myself with everyone else a few yards in front. The water was calm with only slight swells. There were divers on the bottom taking pictures. A guy with fins and a camera swam next to me and took my picture, which later appeared in the photo gallery of [universalsports.com](http://universalsports.com).

About a quarter of a mile into the swim a guy on a surfboard appeared next to me. I could tell he had been assigned to me for the rest of the swim. He sat up on his board and yelled "240", my number. After that he started calling me "Robert". I kept veering to the left. Sternly he said, "Robert make a hard right and stay in line with the buoys. Shave some time off." I was counting the buoys. At my first Hawaii Ironman 10 years ago there had been 7 buoys out and 7 back. But today at the 7<sup>th</sup> buoy there were still two more to go and then the turnaround boat. "Am I going to go around that boat?" I asked in disbelief. "Yes. You have plenty of time. You're doing great and you still have an hour and twenty minutes left." That alarmed me. I appeared to be more than 10 minutes away from the turnaround boat. I would have to swim faster the second half with a very tired body, than I swam the first half in order to make the 2:20 swim cut-off. I wasn't going to make it. If I couldn't make the swim cut-off today when the water was relatively calm, then this would be my last time at Kona. Going around the turnaround boat, "You're going wide. Swim next to the buoys. Shave some time off."

I expressed my concern about making the cut-off. He said he'd had the wrong time before and that I still had an hour and twenty minutes left at the turnaround. So we were back to trying to keep in line with the buoys. I kept veering wide and he kept saying, "Robert make a hard right. Shave some time off." Sometimes when I looked up all I could see was the next swell coming. Other times it looked like I was on top of the world and could see everything.

With a half a mile to go I could see the inflated Gatorade bottle that marked the start. The guy on the surfboard said, "You can see the Gatorade bottle. That's where you're going! You're almost there!" My arms were getting very tired and every once in a while I'd stop to look up and get my bearings with respect to the line of buoys and the Gatorade bottle. He'd say, "You're looking great and you have plenty of time. Stay motivated."

Finally we were at the Gatorade bottle and all I had to do was swim the length of the dock. The surfboarder was telling me to go right because I kept veering left into the lane markers that separated us from the dock. The surfboarder stood up on the sandy bottom about 10 yards from the shore and I did likewise. I thanked him and shook his hand, then

staggered toward the stairs. There was a very loud cheering crowd. The silky voice of Mike Reilly was announcing the finish of each of the swim finishers, “You just swam 2.4 miles! ...” With some assistance I went up the stairs to the transition area. Going up the stairs I kept looking for an official to come over to me and say that he was sorry to be the one to tell me that I didn’t make it. But none came. I looked at my watch and saw that I had finished the swim with 10 minutes to spare. WOOOHOOOO!!! I had made it! There wasn’t a happier person in Kona at that moment.

As I went to change, my legs were cramping. They had started cramping the last quarter mile of the swim. One of the volunteers, who had done the race before, insisted that I take 4 salt tablets, and keep popping them the first part of the bike. So I took 4 salt tablets out of my fanny pack and downed them along with 3 cups of Gatorade. I drank a Boost from my gear bag. I was very dehydrated. My lower back was very irritated from the long swim and I was having difficulty changing. Someone went to get a medical person to massage my back. But when he arrived I was ready to go and said I’d stretch it out on the bike.

As I started the bike I saw Shirley, Deb, Dana, and Jan waving and cheering in red Tricredibles shirts. What a neat sight. And they were so easy to spot. I kept thinking about being on THE bike course at THE Ironman. Excitement ran through my body.

### **Bike**

What a thrill it was to be starting the bike leg at Ironman Hawaii. I was still feeling the fatigue from the swim, but assumed that would go away after a few miles of biking. I went up to hot corner, turned left off of Palani Road to make the short loop that brought us back down Palani Road to hot corner and then went up the Kuakini highway for several miles before turning around and coming back to hot corner again. There were Shirley, Deb, Dana, and Jan again cheering in their red Tricredibles shirts as I gave thumbs up. Then I went up Palani and out onto the Queen Ka’ahumanu highway. During the first 10 miles I drank all 3 bottles of the water Carbopro1200 mixture that I had stored on my bike. I was very thirsty after getting so dehydrated on the swim. At 20 miles I started feeling bloated and had nausea. So I guess I had already screwed up the nutrition and fluid intake, beginning in transition. At 40 miles I was still feeling nausea, but the bloated feeling had subsided. Even though I was feeling some discomfort, the excitement of the day never left me.

The heat was overwhelming. I learned later that my niece Juli was watching the race live online and they remarked about the very high heat index. I was taking two bottles of water at each aid station, one for mixing with Carbopro1200, and the other to pour over my head. I had been sticking to the fluid and salt replacement with the Carbopro1200 mixture and salt tablets that I had worked out with Coach Lance. But I ran out of Carbopro1200 at about 40 miles because I had drunk so much during the first 10 miles. So I started drinking Gatorade. I was having trouble getting my shoe out of the pedal, and thought my cleat must be coming loose.

On the long climb up to Hawi I saw a woman walking her bike as tech support stopped beside her and offered help. When she waved them off, I yelled, “I need tech support.” I stopped and fell over when I couldn’t get my foot out of the pedal. As I sat up, “I think my cleats need tightening.” I pulled off my shoe and gave it to them. I leaned back on my hands to rest, but the pavement was too hot to touch. “Your cleats and pedals look okay.” I got up and got back on the bike. He gave me a shove and I took

off. But it seemed like there was a brake rubbing from the fall so I stopped to check. Nothing was wrong, just the steep hill. The tech support guy gave me another shove, and I slowly took off again. At Hawi after the turnaround I got more Carbopro1200, a Boost, and a Clif bar out of the special needs bag. I enjoyed coasting back down the long hill. But I was still feeling nausea. I passed, and offered encouragement to a guy in my age group who didn't look like he would make it.

By mile 85 I was exhausted and still feeling some nausea. I had lost my focus and was forgetting to drink. I felt like I was losing it mentally. I thought about Florida in 2000 when I had been able to lie along the side of the road, and then after a few minutes got up and completed the race. I stopped in some shade and rested my head on the handlebars. I looked for a place to lie down beside the road, but there was only the harsh lava that had absorbed so much of the sun's rays and reemitted them as heat all day. After about 5 minutes I continued down the road. I knew I wasn't going to make the cutoff, but I wanted to get as far as I could before 5:30. I passed a rest stop at mile 90. All they had left was water and 1 Gu. I took a couple of bottles of water.

I was at mile 98 at the cutoff time of 5:30. I stopped at a nearby aid station and said I was dropping out. It would be dark before I made it back to Kona, and I didn't want to ride in the dark. Even as I was dropping out I was excited about what I'd done that day. The officer there contacted the MED vehicle up the road, but they wouldn't pick me up unless I was injured. I leaned my bike up against some chairs under a tent. They said a crew would come by and pick everybody up. I sat down and drank some of the Gatorade they had given me. My mouth was dry and the Gatorade tasted good. Someone brought a bike from another guy in my age group. I guessed that a MED vehicle had picked him up and taken him back to the medical tent. There had been a couple of MED vehicles lurking among the stragglers during the last 10 miles or so. They didn't offer help, just watched.

A guy came by and started loading up chairs onto a trailer and started taking down the tent I was sitting under. Then a pickup truck pulling a trailer came by with another bike belonging to another 70+ competitor. They loaded the two bikes sitting by me, which included mine. Then someone brought the woman, Bobbie, who I was talking with at the swim start. She had been the woman who had been walking her bike up the hill. We started talking and she was telling me about an old guy who fell off his bike going up to Hawi. "That was me!" She said she had made it to about 90 miles. This was her 7<sup>th</sup> trip to Kona. Our ride came, and took us back to the King Kamehameha Hotel.

As I was walking up to the Kona Seaside Hotel where we were staying, there were Shirley, Deb, Dana, and Jan cheering from Jan's hotel-room balcony. I went up and we exchanged stories about the race. They had a pint of ale for me, and a long story, with video shown later, about how they got it. I was excited about the day, and about being here. I told them about Bobbie who started and ended the day with me. Her husband was a rocket scientist.

I was only slightly disappointed that I didn't make the bike cutoff. Even though the swim was quite difficult, and I had some discomfort on the bike, overall I had a blast. And I would do it again in an instant.

### **The day after and touring, etc.**

The next day after breakfast we saw an old guy wearing an Ironman cap. "Did you do the race?" I asked. "No, my son did it." He said his son was about 2 hours slower than

expected because of the heat. He also said that if his son did another Ironman his wife would divorce him. He said his son guessed he would miss her a lot.

We rented a Ford Explorer, appropriate since this is the Ford Ironman World Championship, and went touring. We visited the Kona Fruit Cooperative (KFC). They say you can eat 5 Hawaiian fruits a day for a month and not eat the same fruit twice. We saw a banana tree that could have been out of the 'Little Shop of Horrors'. Next we went 20 miles down a one-lane road to visit a historic village. Then Deb and Dana swam with some turtles at a small beach.

At the awards banquet they were talking about Henry Forrest, one of the original Ironman finishers who had recently died. He had said about Ironman, "It's not about the time, it's the experience..." I understood.

Monday we drove to the south end of the island to visit the Kilauea caldron near the bottom of Mauna Loa. There was a lot of steam coming out of the vents. Some of the roads around the rim were closed because of high sulfur dioxide concentrations in the air. We walked through a lava tube and visited a rain forest where it was raining. Then we went to Hilo to see a waterfall. We drove back to Kona by going around the north part of the island. So we drove all the way around the island, except for the part that's inaccessible in the north where there are no roads.

Tuesday Deb and I were in the hotel elevator going from the 5<sup>th</sup> floor to the 3<sup>rd</sup> when someone got on at the 4<sup>th</sup> floor with his bike. He offered to take the next elevator, but we encouraged him to squeeze his bike in with us. "How did you do in the race?" I asked. "Very well." he said smiling, with an Australian accent. Deb and I got off. Then we realized that it must be Craig Alexander, the winner of the race. I went down to the lobby with a program to get his autograph, but he was already gone. Only his bike was there. Then Dana went down with a program and asked whose bike that was, and was Craig Alexander staying at the hotel. They said they couldn't release any information.

Shirley, Deb, and Dana went home. Jan and I stayed for one more day. Shirley asked how come I was staying. I said because I'm retired and I'm 71. Jan and I had dinner at the Kona Brewery.

Wednesday morning Jan and I went for a short swim and observed the large number of species of fish swimming below us. Jan swam with a turtle.

Later we were talking to a guy at the hotel and Jan realized it was the son of the old guy we had talked to the day after the race. Jan said, "Did your wife say she would divorce you if you did another Ironman? And did you say you'd miss her a lot?" He looked surprised, until we told him we had talked to his father the day after the race. He said his wife now agreed that he could do another one. I think she liked Hawaii. His name was Roy and they were from Zimbabwe and Botswana and currently living in Dubai. He was 41 and this was his 4<sup>th</sup> triathlon. He had done two sprint distance triathlons and one other Ironman before this, and had gotten in through the lottery. Before doing triathlons he had played rugby.

Jan and I drove to the end of the road past Hawi at the north end of the island. We looked down at a black sandy beach far below us. We could hear the braying of wild donkeys. A number of roads on the Island warn of donkey crossings. Next we went to Kapa'au where there's a statue of King Kamehameha.

Then we drove back to the airport for the long trip home. I upgraded to first class on a 767 where the seats lay down into beds. I slept most of the way from Kona back to L.A.

Jan's flight on U.S. Airways out of Honolulu was cancelled and she had to change airlines. She had two flat tires on her car when she got back to Omaha, so she's going to get a new car.

There was only one USA guy who finished in the top 5 in my age group. He was 4<sup>th</sup>. He had set the course record for 60-64 at Lake Placid in 2002, the year I did it. And there were only 3 USA guys in the top 10. Surprisingly nobody in my age group finished in under 14 hours. There were 5 guys in my age group who finished the swim but not the bike, including me.

**“Why just do when you can overdo?”** Cathy Day (1944-2006)