

California Dreamin' – An Ironman's tale

Me being me I like to have a busy life and rarely give myself the chance to rest. It was during one of these rare occasions when I had an hour to think, that I grabbed my phone and looked at a future Ironman event. Turning 50 in 2022 and combining this milestone with an Ironman seemed at the time a great idea.

So that was it, half hour later I've signed up to Ironman California, 3.8km swim, 180km bike and 42km run, let the fun begin!

Anybody who knows me understands the way I approach events, i.e., turn up and '*wing it*', and that's what I thought I'd do. At this point, I had nearly 12 months until I stepped on the pontoon at 6am ready to dive into the near freezing, murky American River in Sacramento.

Fast forward to January 2022. Christmas is out the way; all thoughts are on events and training through the 2022 calendar. My race date was October 2022, so I thought ummm, perhaps I could have a very loosely planned approach through the next 10 months and actually be in some sort of shape for race day.

Swim.... OK, so my strongest discipline is swimming. I train with a local swimming club (Southwold Swimming Club), which I've been involved with for over 40 years. I put in a hard set with them twice a week (Friday and Sunday evenings). Usually complete around 2,500-meter sets. My plan for the swim preparation was to continue this, but add some slower long-distance swims building up to 4,000 meters nearer to race day.

Bike.... Now this is a problem. Unfortunately, my job means I'm always working when my bike friends are training. Basically, I'm working from dawn to dusk and any bike training on the road would be done in darkness. After a 14 hour a day and then going out on the bike for 3 – 4 hours is a. ridiculous and b. dangerous. This meant I was going to do all my training on a turbo trainer. Not ideal but

proven to work for me. To make the training more interesting I use Zwift! For anybody that doesn't know what Zwift is, it's basically a simulator that interacts with your turbo trainer increasing and decreasing resistance as you go up and down hills. You can also meet up with friends and race/cycle together around many different cities and even compete against pro-cyclists on Tour de France segments.

Run.... This is where you lot helped immensely! Now I'm not just saying this but it has to be said Hogweed running club has been by far the most welcoming and friendly club I've ever belonged to (and I've trained with quite a few).

Out of all the 3 disciplines, running with the Hogweeds is the one that I enjoy the most. This definitely helps as running does definitely not come naturally to me. My plan here was to stick to the Wednesday and Sunday runs, add a Saturday morning Parkrun and find a few half marathons leading up to race day.

Now I'm not going to waffle on about nutrition. Race day was planning to be around 13 hours hard work. I do 13 hours hard work everyday and survive on a pot of porridge at 7am, a couple of Greggs sausage rolls around midday and then a couple of sandwiches that Marsha has made for me in the afternoon.

A 1½ litre bottle of water for the day and that's it! When I run a marathon I only drink water and don't bother with Gels or anything like that.

I didn't quite realise how busy my year was going to be, being my 50th I decided to treat myself to a couple of holidays that I normally wouldn't. This meant I had to find hotels with decent gyms, places I could go running and pools to swim.

Also meant no alcohol! For someone that was going to 'wing it', it's all starting to get a bit serious. It felt like every day I would start calculating race times in my head. If I went out with the Hogweeds on say a 10-mile run I would ask myself "Could I maintain that for a

marathon and if so could I do it after 112 miles on the bike?"

Before I knew it, I was committing myself to a sub-12-hour Ironman and the training stepped up a gear.

Several half marathons done, hours and hours of pedalling, grunting, and swearing coming from the garden shed on the turbo and thousands of lengths following the black line up and down the local swimming pool.

Right fast forward to race week!

Wednesday.... Packed and off to Heathrow! Landed in LA Wednesday evening.

Thursday.... Hire car and drive for 8 hours to Sacramento. Find Ironman village and register.

Friday.... Bit of sightseeing around San Francisco to keep my mind off the race and calm my nerves.

Saturday.... Attend the race briefing. Build bike and take to the transition area.





Sunday.... Alarm set for 4am. I've hardly slept, the nerves are getting the better of me. I'm doubting myself but unsure why?

The hotel we are staying in is full of Ironman athletes all looking equally as apprehensive as we sat down to have a special laid on breakfast.

4.30am in car, on my way to the transition area which was in the city's baseball stadium.

4.45am car parked and we are all making our way, in the darkness to our bike's that we had left the day before.

A quick check over the bike and a dry run in my head of the transition from swim to bike to make sure that all kit was there waiting for me. Said goodbye to the bike and off to the line of coaches waiting to take us 3 miles up the river to the start. The atmosphere in the coach was a mixture of over enthusiasm and apprehension.

It's now around 6am and we have just been told race starts at 7am. It's still pitch black and around me are a thousand competitors wandering around in wetsuits trying to keep warm. At this point I'm really starting to question my sanity. What am I doing?

Do I need to do this? What am I getting out of this? Did I actually pay to do this? I'm an idiot!!

The next hour seems to take for ever!
Eventually 3 nervous weeks later and the hooter sounds meaning 5 minutes to the off. Now, with my qualifying swim time I should be in the elite wave but decided to go in the second wave, the reason being it's mentally rewarding to be passing swimmers early on in the race.



We were put into funnels and ushered down to the start line with 3 starting every 5 seconds. I'm slowly moving down the hill to my start trying desperately to keep calm by chatting and joking with the athletes around me, it's not working, I'm still nervous as hell!

Oh well, it's my go, I look across at Marsha, wave at her and shout out "*see you tonight!*". Wipe my goggles, take a deep breath and prepare myself for the shock of the icy cold water!

I'm off and instantly my nervousness has gone. It's hard to explain but it genuinely feels like I've done this my whole life. No wait... I HAVE! Stretching out with the strokes and breathing every 4, this is beautiful, I could do this all day.

Every now and then I would lift my head up rather than breathing to the side to sight my next buoy then head down and power towards it. My plan had worked and I'm overtaking swimmers with ease.

51 minutes later, 3.8km completed and I'm out running up the slipway towards the stadium to get my bike, knowing a Mars bar was waiting for me when I got there.

The swim had gone very well finishing in the top 10%. Pleased with that!

After a long run to transition (one mile), in a wetsuit and icy cold feet I finally found my bike and Mars bar. Shoes on, jersey on, helmet on, quick check round and go go go!

The bike course was out and back twice on a ultra-flat, smooth tarmac road. Sounds like heaven! But this soon proved not to be the case.

The local and national TV stations had been forecasting strong damaging winds for race day and for once the weatherman was correct. 26 miles out, amazing tail wind 150 watts 23 mile an hour. 26 miles back 250 watts 12 miles an hour.

The wind was so strong that the feed stations were getting blown away and I was unable to shout over the wind noise to the cyclist

that I'm rubbing shoulders with. A bloody nightmare! 56 miles in (halfway), I had the chance to grab my emergency bag that I filled with goodies and handed in on Saturday.

I grabbed 2 sachets of energy powder which I put in my drinks bottle and off I went to do it all again. Hoping and praying that the wind would ease off.

Well, my prayers weren't answered, the winds got stronger and stronger. I witnessed on 2 different occasions people actually being blown off the road. For a while there was talk of the race being stopped and to be honest with you, I wouldn't have minded.

Coming into the stadium to rack my bike after the gruelling 112 miles, should have been a welcoming sight but knowing that I've used far too much energy to finish the bike, because of the weather conditions, meant that I now have to run a marathon in under 4 hours, this was going to be unachievable for me.

I was told that you should always have at least 2 goals when planning to do an Ironman, goal A. is your pb and goal B. is just to finish.

Just to finish an Ironman is a major achievement and as people were dropping like flies, I decided to go for goal B.

Goal B into action. I slip on my running shoes, have a packet of cheddars, say goodbye to the bike and tell it I never want to see it again and I'm off! Just a mere marathon to end my day!

As I start running, I get severe pain in my lower back, I've never experience pain there before and instantly realise this is probably through lack of brick training.

For those that don't know, brick training is for triathletes to condition themselves by putting 2 disciplines together, e.g., do a 20mile bike followed by a 5-mile run straight of the back or a one km swim and 20km bike.

As I've done none of this in my preparation, I could only assume that the cause of the pain is down to my badly conditioned body.

Anyway, I gave myself a good telling off, straightened my back up, grit my teeth and ran the first 10km.

After 10km there is food stations every 5km, remembering I'm now on goal B and the thought that I could do myself some permanent damage by continuing to run, I decided to ease off the gas and run 4km and walk 1km at each food station.

It's now getting dark and they are handing out head torches, I said it was going to be a long day and I wasn't joking when I said to Marsha "*I'll see you tonight*".

It was a very very lonely run until the last 5km when we came back into the city. The atmosphere was fantastic.

I couldn't bring myself to not run the last 5km at a decent pace as everybody was shouting with encouragement to me.

As I approach the finish line to hear the commentator shout "***Kev Rawlins from the UK – YOU ARE AN IRONMAN***", weirdly enough made the whole day worthwhile.

For the following week if you asked me would I do it again, my response was "*no bloody way*" but then again if you asked me that the week after my first Ironman in Tallinn my response would have been the same. So, would I do another Ironman, not on my own but if anybody fancies a go, give me a shout, could be persuaded!

