

Ironman World Championships - tick!
by Andrew Compson – October 2017

Getting There:

I like numbers so I'll kick off with some stats that cover nearly 7 years between my first training session with Bayside Triathlon Club and Kona 2017:

- 956 swim sessions including a visit to 37 different pools (love swimming!)
- Over 800 hours on a wind trainer (enough to power the average house for 10 days apparently)
- Cycled/Run the equivalent of 2 times around the equator
- 43 days off exercise for rest/injury/travel (an average of 1 every 2 months)

So I walked a fine line between dedication and obsession in order to reach the Ironman World Champs at the 8th attempt. Below are my results over the years, though it has to be said I'm not a fan of making time comparisons in triathlon as each race is its own beast, even if on the same course. For example how can I compare my IM Canada '15 experience when the cold and rain made my legs shiver so much that I got this bruise from continually hitting the frame?! And my power numbers from the unforgiving course at IM UK '16 show that the bike performance was stronger than in Cairns despite it being nearly 40mins slower.



		Busso '11	Port Mac '12	Melb '13	Melb '14	UK '14	Canada '15	UK '16	Cairns '17	Kona '17
Time		10:32	10:24	9:17	9:42	10:24	10:58	10:20	9:30	10:18
Splits (AG pos after leg)	Swim	1:08 (59)	1:05 (96)	0:29* (122)	1:06 (134)	1:05 (35)	1:05 (21)	1:04 (22)	1:07 (40)	1:06 ^A (135)
	Bike	5:24 (59)	5:35 (79)	5:24 (119)	5:08 (92)	5:42 (9)	6:08 (23)	5:40 (16)	5:03 (21)	5:18 (134)
	Run	3:50 (41/192)	3:36 (47/218)	3:17 (52/305)	3:22 (50/312)	3:30 (7/268)	3:36 (14/130)	3:25 (8/318)	3:13 (7/164)	3:42 (89/252)
Kona spots in AG		4	4	14	14	6	3	5	10	/
Roll downs		0	0	4	3	0	0	0	2	/
Missed out by		1:15:24	1:00:59	30:36	28:08	23 secs	53:19	9:33	-13:49	/

* shortened swim

^A non-wetsuit

But it was Cairns that did the trick; a solid performance coupled with a number of spots that meant no roll down was required; and the haunting words of the chap who beat me by 23secs at the 2014 UK IM and took the last Kona spot could be put to bed.

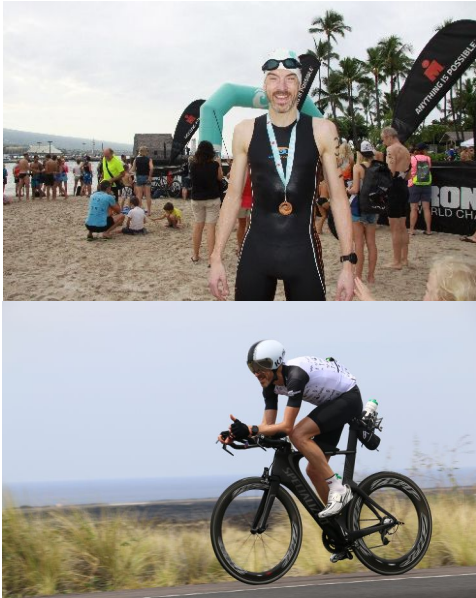
“He has to explain to people that he didn't get a slot. Over and over.

After all that training. All those early morning sessions. All that sacrifice. I've been in his shoes and it hurts”.

Race Week Experience:

On to Hawaii and an experience which blew my mind and exceeded all expectations. From the outset the Big Island doesn't pull any punches; the view from the plane window is of the stark lava field landscape that awaits you on the bike; the very same bike that you soon realise isn't on the same plane as you. Mine eventually turned up 8 hours later, delivered to the apartment by a smiling (or maybe grimacing?) Tri-Travel tour leader. Those little stresses aside, first impressions were that the town of Kailua-Kona is a very pleasant place. An evening meal out felt relaxed and tempted you towards full holiday mode. At this point we were still 8 days out from the race and I was told it would get hectic as time went on. Well, yes it did, but with a celebratory mood of having got there rather than the stressed out environment of so many races I've been to before. Maybe it helped that this was Ironman number 9 and I could now deal with the nerves a little better? If so, it makes you feel sorry for those that have suffered the hardship of qualifying at the 1st or 2nd attempt!





The week that followed was triathlon heaven. The first morning was an official training race over the swim course where the boredom of this silly discipline was washed away by the view of amazing fish all around. A run in the iconic Energy Lab and riding the climb to Hawi made you pinch yourself as well as acting as a reminder that the 14th October was going to be tough, but that's how it's meant to be. I had the discussion with a few people and all agreed we didn't want to go home having raced the 'easy' year!

The week's events also kept coming. An 'All World Athlete' breakfast with Dave Scott and Mark Allen (finally there was a benefit to this status other than the silly sticker IM keep sending me every year!), the Parade of Nations and the infamous Kona Underpants Run were all great fun. Geeks (like me) were placated by demonstrations of technology such as the Stryd running power meter (I see the benefit), the Halo Sport System (still don't get it) and the NormaTec recovery system (pure genius!).



And in general the treatment of athletes was awesome with so many little touches. Free t-shirts and caps from exhibitors, aid stations set up on Ali'i Drive throughout the week and actual quality in the athlete goodie bags handed out at registration initiated by the blowing of the Hawaiian Conch Shell. Then best of all, at bike check-in where it all seems very real and your nerves threaten to boil over, you get the VIP treatment of an escort to your racking position along with a personal description of the transition routes.

I received so many personal messages before the race and one that really resonated held back from wishing me luck, saying that it was hard work that had got me there and hard work that would get me through the race. That said, it was important not to be unlucky like those reporting broken collar bones from training rides in the cross winds, a re-occurrence of malaria 2 days out from the race and then the awful story of Matt Russell, the American pro who went through the side window of a car during the bike leg (photos of the stitches at this link if you aren't squeamish <https://www.instagram.com/p/BatqRcvj4Y5>). I guess there are liability issues for Ironman, but the way in which the story was muted was shameful with Patrick Lange the only person to wish Matt a quick recovery at the celebration banquet.

So to race day itself and after a 4.15am alarm interrupted a surprisingly good night's sleep, I woke to find the previous night's heavy rain had given way to a beautiful morning. Normally on a holiday island this would be celebrated, though today it meant two things – heat and humidity; but at least it made for a nice walk down to race start!

The Swim – 3.8km 1:06:02:



Anyone that knows me will agree I am a runner pretending to be a cyclist and failing miserably to be a swimmer, therefore to face a non-wetsuit swim amongst the best triathletes on the planet was a little daunting. The days of the true mass-start are gone, with the number of athletes allowed into the race increasing

year on year making this impossible. That said, all male age groupers still go on the same cannon which meant being in a cross between a washing machine and a cage fight with over 1700 of my closest friends! After talking tactics with many people, I placed myself midway along the line of starters which turned out to be a good call. Those on the right were destined to tear each other apart in the search for sub-1hr times, whereas I was only mildly assaulted (my race number tattoos were even grappled from my arms) and benefited from the draft of people slightly above my capability. My time of 1:06 actually beat three of my previous wetsuit Ironman swims so it was a good start to the day.



The Bike – 180km 5:18:49:



I'd had 8 days to acclimatise and built a solid familiarity with the bike course, but I was still unsure if my usual power targets were achievable in the wind, heat and humidity. The ride ended up being split into four very distinct phases with the first 50km mainly comprising a fast ride out of town, then all of a sudden... cross/headwind! The pro-males had a great day, starting 30mins ahead of us they actually enjoyed a tailwind for the majority of the ride, culminating in Cameron Wurf's bike course record of 4:12. At that 50km mark however, we started to endure a wind that didn't

help preparation for the climb to Hawi. I race to power on the bike and pretty much ignore speed which helped keep things in check, though I was still more than glad to see the turnaround at 100km and gain the benefit of a largely downhill 30km section to Kawaihae. At this point the reality of where we were struck home, with heat radiating from the road and surrounding lava fields accompanied by a headwind that would last until the end of the bike. The flimsy shop-style water bottles from aid stations were gratefully consumed and poured over myself to try and keep core temperature down, but as my forearms will attest after staring up into the unforgiving sun for over 5hrs, it wasn't enough; they finally stopped peeling 3 weeks after the race! In summary, even with my power starting to fall away slightly during the final hour of the ride, 5:18 was more than respectable. And whilst it is true that I wanted nothing more than to curl up in the corner of a fridge, I had at least managed to eat all I planned which would hopefully allow me to perform on the run.



The Run – 42.2km 3:42:50:

Coming into the race I set a minimum target of enjoying the experience and making sure, beyond all else, to avoid a DNF. Realistically I thought a time of around 10:30 was achievable, which allowed an extra hour on top of my time from Cairns for the non-wetsuit swim and the challenging weather. That didn't stop me doing the quick calculation at the start of the run which determined a 4:50/km average pace would take me under 10hrs which for 10km seemed achievable. The usual relief of getting off the bike and using a different set of muscles was there, but that was accompanied by a nagging feeling around how much fluid I'd already lost. And sure enough, at that 10km mark a stitch in my ribs reduced me to a walk. I upped the dose of magnesium phosphate tablets and encouraged by passing Em and the girls I managed to get going again; I even jogged up the steep and vindictive Palani Road at 17km, but in truth I had entered survival mode.

This has happened more than once in Ironman races so I knew what to expect, though as a runner by background it is still slightly surreal; pushing as hard as you can, but moving at a pace that you could normally crawl at! Every aid station volunteer was greeted like a long lost friend as I stuffed sponges emanating from icy water unceremoniously inside my tri-suit. This gave 30 seconds of relief before they quickly reached the same temperature as the scorching sun. The never ending Queen K Highway out to the Energy Lab seemed to deliver a constant uphill gradient which somehow reversed and offered the same again heading back to town. The daily afternoon cloud cover never materialised and my usual nutrition plan through the final stages of the run came into force - consume anything that keeps you putting one foot in front of the other. Gatorade, gels and coke all delivering sugar and caffeine hits that ensured my usual 2 hours of sleep after an Ironman would be repeated again. Then finally the end was in sight and the biggest tactical victory of my entire triathlon career came into play; judging a pace that would allow my own space in the finish chute and photos uninterrupted by other athletes! 3:42 certainly won't go down as the greatest run of my life, but given the circumstances and an overall race time of 10:18 pushing me towards the top third of my age group, I am more than chuffed.

My finish line photo is one I dreamed of, but thought may never happen. Now I need another lifelong goal, but first it's some downtime with my beautiful and supportive family.

