



Those last 500 meters are something I will never forget- running down the chute of people- seeing my family beaming with pleasure, high fiving spectators and competitors- the Australian flag on my back and cheers of 'Aussie Aussie Aussie' ringing in my ears. As I approached the line the commentator announced to the world that 'David Venour you are an Ironman'- I raised the flag in jubilation and the overwhelming sense of achievement that I had not only achieved my goal of completing the Ironman World Championships in Kona- but I had completed the most gruelling and challenging race of my life. Even the continuous cramps, throwing up repeatedly and spending 2 hours in the medical tent (including what has become a customary IV drip) couldn't dampen my spirits!

In December 2014, fed up with chronic hip and hamstring issues from running, I started riding a bike to keep fit, and joined a Pilates class with House, Slips and Smurf. It was after one of these classes that Smurf and I started talking about doing an Ironman. I had done triathlons 20 years earlier- culminating in a half-ironman, but not really done any riding or swimming since- but really enjoyed the challenge of other endurance events such as Oxfam- so the seed was set (Smurf subsequently pulled out with some minor issue of hip surgery).

With Smurf I had set a goal to get under 10 hours- a number chosen without any real understanding of my ability. My first serious ride gave me a wakeup call- an exhausting 40km at an average speed of 29km/hr! My first swim- where I settled for 500meters before needing a rest was similarly demoralising. From this point on I put my head down and started clocking up the k's. After a few months I was clocking up 350k's on the bike, 60k's running and 8k's in the pool each week. This was a pretty draining schedule- requiring very early starts to minimise the impact on my family life. I can only offer my sincere apologies to family and friends who endured what were no doubt pretty dull conversations during this time as I became more than a tad obsessive!

By the start of 2016 I was seeing the rewards of my training- I qualified for the World Champs in the half IM (passing up the slot to concentrate on the full), and looked set for a big race in Cairns. This race was wrecked by a spectacular (and expensive) bike crash, but I continued the training and did a pretty fair race in Busselton – getting under the 10 hour target (9:36) but missing a Kona place by 2 minutes (\$#!^%)...So the training continued... with the only break being hospitalisation for septicaemia (which probably should have hinted that I was overdoing things). I again competed in the As Pac champs in Cairns in June this year, and ran what I thought was a good race (9:38), only to finish 9th. The previous year the top 8 qualified for Kona- so I went to the roll down ceremony hoping that someone ahead of me had already qualified or didn't want the slot. The announcer started with the female slots, and one by one announced each of the qualifiers, before starting at the oldest male age group and working his way down. By this stage I had worked myself into a nervous wreck- and when he announced there were 10 slots in the 45-49 age group I let out a massive whoop! I had made it! I would have jumped for joy if not for the fact I was barely able to walk.

It's fair to say my prep for Kona lacked the intensity of my previous training. Basically I was over training, and my goal for Kona was to simply enjoy the race as much as possible. I continued to get the k's in to maintain my endurance- but couldn't really get up the enthusiasm to do anything hard. Two weeks out from Kona, our family went on a holiday around the US- I managed to get a couple of rides and a few runs in, but basically just enjoyed time with my family (with the exception of hiding in our hotel room while some lunatic in the hotel next door went on a shooting spree in Las Vegas).

I arrived at Kona on the Wednesday evening (the race was on the Saturday) and was immediately struck by the heat. I lived in Oahu for a year- where for a couple of days the temperature rose only a couple of degrees, but the humidity and hot wind caused the locals to hide in their houses out of the heat. They called this 'Kona weather'- and now I knew why! Generally speaking heat is my downfall. I can run up hills, over rough ground- but the heat seems to drain me of all energy. Leading up to the race I was getting quite nervous about the run- not eased by having to wring out my top after a 15 minute training jog. However, the vibe of Kona, and the excitement of being there overwhelmed any fears and as race morning arrived I was pretty fired up and excited about what was to come.

The start of the swim at Kona is a simple out and back course that starts with a deep water start between buoys about 100 meters out from shore. After the pro's had gone, they invited all the age group males into the water. I hung back until about 10 minutes to gun time and then breaststroked to the back of the pack. My main objective with the swim was to stay out of trouble- I had spent a portion of my Busselton race throwing up from taking in sea water, so I was determined not to let that happen this time- so when the gun fired I loitered a little before picking a less travelled line, and heading off. The swim was more or less painless (with the exception of some dickhead who decided to hit my toes every stroke)- and I came into shore in about 72 minutes- pretty slow but feeling good- so far going to plan.

Heading out on the bike was brilliant- riding through the crowded streets with people enthusiastically cheering you on was a real buzz. After about 5km's I went past my family who were jumping up and down and screaming at me- I probably rode the next 5k's too fast, but the adrenalin was at an all-time high! After about 50k's the wind started to pick up- and as I rounded different corners I would be faced with various degrees of headwind. As usual I found myself passing everyone up hills and into the wind, only to be passed by the same people on the flats and downs- but overall I felt I was making my way steadily through the field. Typically I don't notice the heat when riding, due to the wind, but grabbing a drink after about 60k's I was struck by how good the cold felt- and throwing some cold water over my back gave me relief I didn't realise I needed. Heading up to the turnaround the wind started picking up- and there were sections where the combination of wind and hill had some riders almost at a standstill! The way back started much easier, but the wind appeared to change, and instead of a stiff tail wind (which I think I deserved), the wind seemed to go more across me. The last 15k's of the bike became a bit tortuous- the heat radiating off the road, and my now burnt to a crisp back/ shoulder and arms (I was to discover later that sleeves would have been a good idea) were starting to sap my energy (how much so I was soon to discover). I was starting to get a little cramping in my quads, so dropped the gears down and 'spun' home. My time of 5:19 was pretty much exactly as planned- so still to plan- but god I would kill to jump back into the water.

My last transition was a bit of a comedy- first I forget that I was still carrying my bike pump down my top, and then ran out without my race number. Anyway, after standing around for 5 minutes while they found my bag, I eventually headed out of transition and into the run. As soon as I stepped out into the sun I was overwhelmed by the heat. My heart was racing double time and I found it hard to breath. I immediately stopped and walked but still felt completely overheated. I trudged along like this for the first mile, calculating in my head if I could make the cut off by walking the entire marathon, until I got to the first aid station. I have to say this for Hawaii- they certainly stock their aid stations well, and the volunteers are simply awesome. I spent probably 3 minutes at the aid station, pouring ice water and sponges over me, drinking icy water, and putting ice everywhere that it would go before setting out on a slow jog/walk to the next aid station. I saw my family in this stretch and mumbled out something like 'don't wait up' as I tried to focus on getting one foot in front of the next. Gradually, I was able to do more jogging and less walking between aid stations (other than where there was any uphill gradient), although I still made sure I spent plenty of time at each as I was a little petrified of a DNF (and time didn't matter anymore). With about 5 miles to go, the sun seemed to lose a bit of its sting, and for the first time in hours I felt that I was actually going to finish this race. My running speed picked up a bit, and while I forced myself to still stop at aid stations this was more out of precaution than necessity. A quick look at my watch- and I calculated (something that would have bene quite beyond me an hour earlier) that holding 5 minute k pace I would get under 11 hours- so this became my new target. The last couple of k's were the best of my run- coming into town, and starting to hear the announcer welcoming home athletes, I now knew I was going to reach my goal. A runner next to me shouted 'we've got this', and a huge grin came across my face as I gave them a high five and turned into the home straight.



My final time for the run was 4:13:17- that's about the speed I ran Oxfam in (which was 100km and over mountains)- but I will remember it as one of the best runs I have ever done- and as per my first paragraph it is an experience I will never forget (or repeat). My final time was 10:56!

As all Milers know, you can't set off on these ridiculous goals without heaps of support- and my family and friends have been truly remarkable over the journey. Time now to get back to enjoying running with fresh legs and good company!