

## Ironman Race Day Execution by Rich Strauss

This article is an attempt to provide one-stop shopping advice to my clients racing Ironman this summer. I will start with the most basic principles of Ironman racing and then walk you through a comprehensive plan for race week and race day.

**Principle #1:** Ironman is not a triathlon; it's a quadrathlon(?): swim, bike, run, eat/drink. On race day only 20% of your focus will be on your physical performance while the other 80% will be on how to **maintain** that performance.

**Principle #2:** Ironman is not about racing, it is about making good decisions. Use the OODA Loop: Observe the situation, Orient you and determine possible courses of action, decide on a course of action, and then Act. Go over, around, under or through the wall.

**Principle #3:** Show up with a well-made, well-rehearsed plan and expect it to not survive first contact with the race. Be prepared to improvise by "racing in the now." It's a very long day and you have all of it to fix a problem. Do the best you can, right now. The rest of the day will take care of itself when you get there.

Let's now begin by walking you through race week.

### Race Week Focuses

1. **Rest.** Race week is not the time to try to make up some homework you missed during the season. Most experienced athletes agree that it is better to go into the race under-trained and over-rested than over-trained and under-rested. Stay off your feet as much as possible and just relax. Follow your race week taper plan, which should include a few race pace or faster pickups of short duration with ample rest.
2. **Carbo/sodium loading.** You will need two things on race day: muscles packed with glycogen and a body ready to sweat for 12+ hours. Get a head start by ensuring you show up to the race with both of these tools. For a detailed carbo loading plan, please refer to Ellen Coleman's [Carbo Loading Protocol](#). Drink water all week. If you choose to hydrate with a sports drink, don't go crazy with it. You don't want to gain any additional weight. Lightly salt your food one to two days out. For another take on race week nutrition, here is post by [Coach Gordo Byrn: IM Nutrition -- G IMC](#)
3. **Race admin chores.** You're a first-timer and have been training for months. It's almost game time and you can't think of anything else. Make a stack of checklists and follow them through the week. Make a list of everything you'll need on race day, by transition bag, pack it up, put it all in a closet, lock the closet and give the key to someone else. Pack it, check it, check it again, and then FORGET ABOUT IT. When you get to the race site, register early, walk around the expo for about an hour to look at all of the shiny toys then GET OUT OF THERE. Don't go back. Spending time around nervous athletes will suck the energy right out of you. Get done what needs to get done, and then get out. Go see a movie or something. Don't forget to attend the athletes meeting and read the athlete's guide. You'll have lots of questions; all the answers are in there.
4. **Mental preparation.** Since I know you will be thinking about the race anyway, you might as well formalize the process. Well before race day I highly recommend you write a race week/race day plan and submit it to a few experienced peers for review. You may have seen my athletes do this on my message board. This is a valuable tool, as it forces you to actually think about what you are going to do and how you are going to do it. Holes in your plan will become apparent. Your peers will find others you missed and offer suggestions. During race week spend some quiet time reviewing this plan and visualizing the execution of race day in your head. See yourself moving smoothly and confidently through high friction moments: the swim start, transitions, mechanicals on the bike, nutrition difficulties on the run, etc.

### Race Day Nutrition, Pacing, and Mental/Emotional State

I'll now divide the race into its components and address nutrition, pacing, and mental/emotional state for each part. But first, let's start with some simple race day nutrition principles:

1. **Calorie intake and heart rate are inversely related.** Your heart rate is a measurement of the cumulative stress on your body. Eating is another stress on your body, one more thing you are asking it to do in addition to racing. Therefore your race day nutrition plan is intimately related to your racing heart rate. Make sure you show up to the

race with the right plan! The most common mistake is to eat too much at a high heart rate. If your heart rate is up, adjust your calorie intake downward. Also, do what you've been doing in training, don't try anything new on race day. For help formulating your race day nutrition plan, please go [here](#).

2. If you encounter stomach problems, slow down or stop. Lower your heart rate and let your body do what you are asking it to do. Let your body reset itself and then continue with the race. Most problems can be fixed by using this simple tool. Standing down for 5-10 minutes on the bike might save you 45-60 minutes on the run.
3. Think of water as an aid to digestion, not just hydration. If you eat something calorie dense, drink water with it, not a sports drink. High calorie + sports drink = slush in your stomach = cramps.

Let's now apply these concepts to a simple nutrition and pacing plan. We'll start with the night before. This plan assumes that you have been carbo loading and have full glycogen stores.

### The Night before the Night Before

Don't go crazy at the pasta dinner. Go to bed very early. This night should be your best sleep, as it will be difficult to sleep well the night before the race.

### Night Before

A light meal of well cooked pasta, no later than about 7pm. Earlier is better. Before you go to bed, write "Slow is smooth, smooth is fast" on a piece of paper and tape it to the bathroom mirror.

### 2-3am

Eat a liquid breakfast of 600-800 calories. This is my secret weapon. The idea here is to replace glycogen lost to fasting while you are asleep, to ensure that your digestive tract is clean for the race, and to eat something before race day nerves can do their thing. Due to nerves, your normal pre-exercise breakfast might not work the morning of the race.

### 4:30-5:00am: Wake up.

- **Mental/Emotional state:** the first thing I want you to think about is how hard you have worked for this day. Think of all the sacrifices you and your family have made, all the pain and discomfort you have suffered. Get mad, get angry at the day. Now, turn that emotion off and put it in your back pocket for later. I'll tell you when you use it.
- "Slow is smooth, smooth is fast." Now look in the mirror. You are calm and cool. Everything today will be executed with smooth, slow, fluid movements. Haste creates friction. Friction creates mistakes. Move smoothly and efficiently through the day. Today you will do your best to be a cold, emotionless, decision-making machine. The day is too big for pride, too big to get angry or upset about it. Race in the now and just keep moving forward. Carry this slow and smooth feeling with you to the transition area as you check your gear. Move smoothly and with a purpose. Use a checklist of essential tasks so you don't forget something.
- **Nutrition:** sip a sports drink; maybe chew on half a bagel. 30 minutes before race start, drink a bottle of water or sports drink. Personally, I like to start the race feeling hungry, with an empty stomach. I then know that I am in control of what goes in it.

### Swim Start

- **Nutrition:** don't drink the water! :)
- **Pacing:** the most critical part of the swim is the first 500 to 1000 meters. It's very easy to get caught up in the race. Before you know it, you've lost your stroke, blown out your legs, and then spend the next 2k recovering. Do your best to maintain a smooth, even, aerobic pace through the swim and limit your kick. If you don't have anyone in front of you, you're wrong. Always draft. Begin to emphasize your kick about 300 meters before the finish, to warm-up your legs a bit.
- **Mental/Emotional State:** only control what you can control. You can control your stroke and pace, you cannot control the actions of those around you. I highly recommend counting your strokes. This action will put you back in the 7' x 3' box called your Stroke that you can control, taking you away from the chaos around you.

## T1

- **Nutrition:** I recommend eating 1 gel and sipping 6-8oz water with it.
- **Pacing:** I believe that T1 sets the tone for the race. It's a race, so treat it like one. Do exactly what you do for every other race. Move quickly and efficiently. Don't lollygag, per Bull Durham.
- **Mental/Emotional State:** again, "Slow is smooth, smooth is fast." Fluid, efficient movements. If you encounter a problem, relax, fix it, and drive on.

## Bike

- **Nutrition:** For the first 30 min of the bike, sip water, don't take in any calories. Let your body adjust to cycling, get your heart rate down, then start the buffet when you have settled into cycling mode. **Follow the plan you've trained with all season, nothing new on race day.**
  1. +30 to 30 min before bike finish: eat 300-400 calories per hour, regardless of source. Also drink 1.5-2 bottles of fluid per hour. A simple plan would be to eat a gel every 30 min (200 cal per hour) and a bottle of Gatorade per hour (100 cal per hour). Sip water throughout with the gel. Personally, I prefer a liquid food source, since it is very easy to digest. This guidance is unique to each individual and assumes that you know your own calorie needs and digestive capabilities.
  2. Thirty minutes prior to bike finish only take in liquid calories or water.
- **Pacing:** The following outline is taken, with permission, from "Triathlon, Going Long," an upcoming book by Joe Friel and Gordo Byrn.

## Miles 1-30

- **Overall Goals:** Settle into a comfortable cycling rhythm, establish food and drink strategy.
- **Effort Guidelines:** Pace should feel easy.
- **Heart Rate Guidelines:** Once the heart rate has settled from the swim, typically upper heart rate Zone 1.
- **Notes:** You should be holding back through this whole segment.

## Miles 31-60

- **Overall Goals:** A continued emphasis on nutrition and hydration, as well as an overall assessment of how the day is progressing.
- **Effort Guidelines:** Pace should feel easy.
- **Heart Rate Guidelines:** Typically, Zone 2 effort.
- **Notes:** The goal of this stage is to maintain a steady effort at goal ironman-distance bike pace.

## Miles 61-90

- **Overall Goals:** This is the meat of the ride. Here is where early ride pacing pays off or takes its toll. Goal should be to work a little harder than goal effort. Athletes that have paced properly will begin to move up the field.
- **Effort Guidelines:** Pace should feel steady. Hills and rollers will see efforts up to moderately hard intensity. Avoid hard intensity.
- **Heart Rate Guidelines:** Typically, upper Zone 2 efforts with short periods of Zone 3 effort when climbing.
- **Notes:** This is the key stage and where you will have to concentrate to maintain your focus. Early ride pacing starts to pay off and athletes receive a mental boost as they start to move through the field.

## Miles 91-112

- **Overall Goals:** Athletes should maintain their cycling momentum and continue to eat. Almost all athletes will have lost their appetites and continued nutrition is essential for a strong run.
- **Effort Guidelines:** Pace should feel steady to moderately hard. There will be fatigue and stiffness associated with the ride. However, these should be manageable.

- **Heart Rate Guidelines:** Zone 2 effort with periods of Zone 3 effort when climbing.
- **Notes:** Athletes should maintain their focus on pacing, nutrition and aero position. Race fatigue can cause the mind to wander. Athletes should maintain a task orientation.

Ideally, you should get off the bike feeling like you could have gone 5-10 minutes faster. Keep this fact in mind: it takes quite a bit of sustained effort to go 5-10 minutes faster on the bike. We're talking 3+ miles here. But walking one mile on the run will ruin all of this hard work. It's OK to feel a little cheesy when you get off the bike.

### Other considerations and techniques for the bike

- **Hills and rollers:** try to remain seated and below a predetermined HR range. Ignore what those around you are doing. Pay attention to the pressure on your feet, keeping this and your cadence the same on the hill as on the flat. This will prevent you from applying power to the bike too early on the hill. Manage this steady effort up the hill and maintain it over the crest and down the first third of the downhill. In fact, if you are going to hammer a bit on a hill, do it at the crest and on the downhill, quickly accelerating to speed. Use this extra momentum to carry you up the next hill or to maintain a good speed across an intervening flat.
- **Aid stations:** use the aid stations as triggers to eat, drink, and stand up in the saddle. Then sit back down and go back to work for the next 10 miles.
- **Use the clock to relieve your legs:** the clock of your cranks. Be aware of local muscle fatigue (quads vs. hamstrings) and relieve one by temporarily emphasizing the other. 6-9 o'clock vs. 2-5 o'clock, for example.
- **Check your form often and relax:** start with your face and work your focus down, through your shoulders, arms and hands. Smooth, efficient pedaling, nothing above the waist is tense or moves.

**Mental/Emotional State:** Two words – Patience and Discipline. Ride your race and ignore those around you. It's a VERY long day and you have all of it to catch people. Let them make a mistake, not you.

### T2

"Slow is smooth, smooth is fast." Again, fluid, controlled movements, executed with a purpose. Allow the positive momentum of the bike to carry you through the transition area and onto the run course. Don't lollygag. I'm going to go against the grain a little here and recommend that you do set a goal run time when you get off the bike. This goal time will give you a focus when things get very fuzzy later in the day.

### Run

- **Nutrition:** Hopefully you have over-fed a little on the bike so you do not have to make up a calorie deficit on the run. If you have made nutritional mistakes during the race they will most likely rear their head on the run. I recommend a simple plan: drink Gatorade at every aid station, take a gel with water every 30 minutes. This will easily get you 200-300 calories per hour. Don't try anything new on race day!! If you think you will want to use flat coke towards the end of the run, practice this in training. Ice in the cap works great.
- **Pacing:** If your pacing and nutrition plan was good on the bike, expect to feel good within the first few miles of the run. You may even like you are able to run "fast." However, huge amounts of time are gained or lost in the last 6 miles of the race. Hold back something until the end of the first half. Then when things get very tough, pull out your resolve and the little "extra" you saved in the early miles. Very simple. Use your goal run time to provide focus and to push you forward when things get fuzzy.
- **Walking:** walking can be either a racing tactic or a survival strategy. I prefer the former. I recommend walking through the early aid stations. Move quickly and with a purpose, let your heart rate come down a bit, then run quickly and with a purpose to the next aid station. Repeat. Walk short distances early so you don't have to WALK long distances later in the race. You may lose a little time to your running self in the early stages, but I believe this strategy will enable you to maintain a faster overall pace for a longer period of time.

### Mental/Emotional State

- **Early Race:** the most powerful tool you have on the run is your mental focus. Keep your head in the game as long as you can and you will be able to continue to make good decisions. Some tools:
  1. A simple plan. A simple plan is easy to execute. Focus on the proper execution of this simple plan and let that process drive you forward.

2. A goal time. Focus on the goal and let it drive you forward.
3. Form checklist and key phrases. Every few minutes I'll count my cadence for a minute. For this one minute I'll check my running form and run the best I can. At the same time I'll run through key phrases like "Relaxed, smooth, fluid," or "Shoulders, Lean, Hips, Push-off," or "Pain lets me know I'm still alive." Sorry, that's a Marine thing. :)
4. Mark someone ahead of you. Run to them, pass them, and then mark the next guy. Or if you get passed, run with that person, with good form, for a minute or so. Wait to catch the next ride coming your way. Use the energy of other people to push you along for short distances.

- **Late Race:** Remember that emotion you put in your back pocket early in the morning? You'll need to bring it out somewhere between miles 13 and 18. Get angry, get mean, get tough, and get giddy. Whatever you have to do, get it done because you run the last 8-12 miles with your heart, not your head or your feet. If you have raced smart all day, hopefully you will avoid the big times gains that happen here, as others are forced off their pace by the need to walk.
- **Other Competitors and Walking/Talking:** I see two ways to look at this.
  1. **Option #1:** the course is littered with groups of 2-5 people walking and talking about what a great day their having walking and talking with other people. Did you train 9 months to walk and talk with someone for 2 hours, or did you train to put up a good race? Misery loves company. Talk to these people and they will suck you in. Focus, keep moving forward. For you, walking is a tactic, not a survival strategy or social endeavor.
  2. **Option #2:** you are completely shattered. Find someone in a similar circumstance and combine your energies. But I want YOU to be the leader, not the other guy. You have the plan, you are the role model. Leaders remain aggressive and have to think. Leaders act. Followers react. Followers are on autopilot and let others think for them. Be the leader. The added pressure of being the leader will help retain your focus for longer.

## The Finish

Near the end you'll look at the gas gauge and realize you've got enough in the tank to make it. At this point pick someone near you and offer to push each other to the finish-line. Then let it all hang out. Raise your arms, smile for the camera, and break the tape. Thank your family, get a massage, and then have some brown liquor and a cigar. Not because you like it, but because that's just what warriors do. Today you are a warrior.

# Triathlon