

## THE IRONMAN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP IN HAWAII

*(1.4 mile swim, 212 mile Bike, 26+ mile run)*

*By Eric Davis*

I guess the only way to start to characterize my experience from the last 3 days is to describe how I felt tonight when I got home and found this month's issue of Triathlon magazine in the snail-mail. Perhaps as much as 75% of the stories and photos from this month's issue are about Kona, and I can't believe I was just there, doing that. Having never really paid any attention to the Triathlon or Ironman world until this Summer, I can't believe I got to be a part of such a big event!

So how did it go? To be honest, I don't even know what my exact finishing time was, so I'm going to have to go to look it up right now. I went 11:13 (ELEVEN hours!!!), and I finished 582 place. It was a brutal day. I knew Kona could be brutal, so I tried to adjust my expectations going into the race. My goals were simple. #1 -- Enjoy the experience, and try to avoid the medical tent. On that front, I wanted to be able to be in good enough shape after the race to hang out with my mini-entourage and enjoy the whole finish line scene which is as close to a rock concert as anything I've ever seen in sports.

### **How exactly did THE RACE go??**

**The swim** was relatively clean. The first 200 yards was like swimming in carbonated, fiz water, but being on the far left side of the course, I only got bonked in the head a couple of times, and had surprisingly clear water for the majority of the race. Although the swim is the easiest and shortest leg of the day, I'm always so relieved to get it behind me.

**The bike course** winds through town for the first 5 – 7 miles , so you can't really get much momentum going, but coming out of town, starting out on the Queen K Highway, I noticed there was NO WIND!!! The few plants and trees on the side of the road seemed absolutely still. I thought the Hawaiian gods had showered me with good fortune, and I found myself just flying down the road. I was holding 25 miles per hour on slight uphill stretches, and it was easy. I was passing people like mad, and my pulse was a cool 140 beats per minute. Up until mile 12 or 15, I thought I actually might be able to beat my time from Canada, and maybe even place in the age group. But then the winds came. It was like somebody completely flipped a switch, and the trade winds were ON!! And next thing you know, it was sometimes hard to hold 14 mph on the flats, or to maintain 18 mph going DOWNHILL!! I think I even hit 11 mph going up a few hills into the wind. And if you know the Kona course, you know that if there are strong trade winds from the North East at mile 15, they're going to be with you until at least mile 45, and then they're going to hit you again at mile 55 or so when you round the Northern, windward side of the island.

Just as I had hoped, the winds let up when we got to mile 45 (big mountain shields the road from the trade winds), and next thing you know, I was cranking out 22-24 mph again. Up until this point, I was relatively fresh and in o.k. condition. But as we approached Havi and started heading uphill, it was like somebody slammed the breaks on the race again! The headwinds hit you like a brick wall, and the wind often shifted to a side-wind gust which had the potential to knock you over or blow you into the oncoming lane of traffic. At times, the wind was almost terrifying, and no matter what, you couldn't take your hands off the handlebars. I think this is where the race started to get out of hand for me... From miles 55 to 65, I went about 14 mph, my heart rate was 145-153, and I didn't get to touch a water bottle. In other words, I probably went at least 45 minutes without any fluids or nutrition!

When we finally made the turnaround in Havi, I thought to myself that I might be able to salvage a good race. Now, I'd have the winds at my back all the way home. I could re-hydrate, re-fuel, and I might still end up with a decent bike time. But the short story on that is NO WAY! Maybe I was too wasted, but I just never got any sustained momentum going again on the bike. Descending out of Havi, we were able to go 30-40 mph, but the cross wind gusts made it impossible to relax or re-hydrate. We might have had 10 miles of light cross wind conditions after mile 70, but when we got back onto the lava fields past mile 80,

the winds had shifted into a direct 15-25 mph headwind, or at best, a cross headwind. I had been passing people all the way out to Havi, but on the first half of the return trip, I was pretty much just holding steady versus the other competitors. In the last 25 miles into Kona, I was still passing a few people, but there were guys coming by me with authority (!!!), something which definitely did not happen in Canada. By the time I was coming back into Kona, I was hot, achy, and weary, at best. And more importantly, I was probably already very dehydrated.

After 112-miles of misery on the bike, I had pretty much given up on breaking 10:30, and didn't really even care what my time would be. I just wanted to finish. If somebody had stolen my running shoes from T2, I would have been grateful, and would have quit the race without a whimper or word of protest. I decided my new goal was to finish by 6:00PM, before it got dark, which would be an 11 hour effort. I wasn't looking forward to the run, but I thought if I just took it steady, I ought to be able to run a 3:50 marathon. I told my mini-entourage, Baker & O.B., that I'd be back at 6:00PM.

**THE RUN TOOK FOREVER!** Miraculously, once I started running, I seemed to be doing pretty well. I didn't especially feel great, but I was doing O.K. I went through the first mile of the marathon in 6:50 and thought the course must be marked incorrectly. But when I came through mile #2 at just over 14 minutes and mile #3 in about 22 minutes, I seemed to have a really good run in the making. I was passing people again like mad, and I kept telling myself to slow down. I took the heart rate monitor off at T2 because I didn't want to listen to the beeping for 3 hours like I'd had to in Canada, but up to that point, I was convinced I wasn't going too hard.

The early miles along Alii Drive went by delightfully fast. The road is pretty flat. The scenery next to the ocean is beautiful. There's some shade. And it didn't feel terribly hot. There are lots of spectators, and you're sharing the lane with the professional women who are coming back the other direction from the first turnaround.

I came through mile #6 in 45:55, a very nice 7:40 pace. I couldn't believe I was going that fast, especially considering that I completely stopped at mile #5, sat down in the road, and put Vaseline on both feet. I was starting to think I could pull off the goal of hitting 3:30 for the marathon, and that all I needed to do was pace myself. But how quickly things can change in a hot Ironman.

The first signs of trouble for the Marathon came between mile #9 and #10 where we had to climb a big hill up to the Queen K highway. I decided I had a big time bonus in the bank, and since I was starting to feel a tired again, I should walk up the hill. With the walk up the hill, I still went 9:00 for that mile, but I was suddenly feeling HEAVY and HOT! I ran miles #10 – 13 at 8:00 per mile, right on my new goal pace, but it wasn't easy any more. My time at the half marathon was 1:44, and I thought at worst, I could finish with 8:30 miles. I downshifted my goal to just being able to hang with the crowd around me.

But each mile started to feel like it was taking longer and longer, and the whole thing was becoming a grind. At the half marathon, I calculated that I only had to do a 2:06 half marathon to get back to my original T2 goal of finishing before 6:00PM and darkness. Surely, I could average 9:30 miles, right? I started timing every element of every mile. I noticed that my "just-keep-on-running-pace" was about 8:00 or 8:15 per mile, so I decided I would start out walking 15 to 30 seconds through every aid station. And if I was tired, I could fall back to a 60-second walk in each aid station. Or I could even walk 90 seconds if I had to.

**TROUBLE.** By mile 16, I was done!! All of the sudden, my fingers were numb. Then the feeling crept up my arms. And into my lips. And then my chin. It was the same feeling I had in the medical tent after Ironman Canada when the doctor told me he was worried about my blood pressure being too low.

Mile #16 was downhill, but all of the sudden, people started to stream by me. There was no possible way I could keep up with the crowd around me anymore.

Mile #20 was a 13:41, essentially a fast walk. Only six miles to go and only one more big hill. If I could only regain a sense of not being about to slip into cardiac arrest, I could run 9:00-miles to the finish and still break 11 hours. 10:21 next mile. 13:12 next. “No more walking. Just shuffle!” Mile #23 in 11:16. O.K. Walk the aid stations.” People were passing me like I was standing still. I had seen some of them 10 – 15 miles earlier on Alii Drive. After getting off the bike in 500 place, I might have moved all the way up to 350 or 300 place by mile #13, but ultimately finished 582 place. So what that means is that as many as 200 to 250 people passed me in the last 9 miles. I tried to find a single person that I might be able to latch onto and follow to the finish, but the people would slip out of sight within a half mile of passing me, and then I’d play that same mental game with the next batch of passers. The aid stations couldn’t come soon enough, especially since they were my only legitimate excuse to walk. The fingers and arms were still numb and tingly, but it wasn’t getting any worse.

FINALLY, I made it to mile #25 with only one big downhill and a loop around downtown to the finish line. Getting back into town with people helped my spirits a lot, and suddenly, I could at least keep up with the people around me again. When I finally got onto Alii Drive for the last 600 yards, I realized WHY PEOPLE DO THIS CRAZY EVENT. There were thousands of people – in the street, packed on the sidewalks, hanging out of the restaurant balconies. The running path was maybe only 4 people wide. In the last 400 yards, you can see the huge spot lights at the finish line. The music is rocking. Spectators are reaching out to touch your hand. I probably ran the last 400 yards at 6 minutes per mile – no kidding – with a smile as big as a 5-year olds smile at Christmas. Baker & Obura, who were official finish line volunteers, grabbed me at the finish line. I asked them to take me to the medical tent, but the medical tent was too full for smiley people like myself – they wouldn’t let me in. We parked ourselves at the bar beside the pool at the King K Hotel, where I stared at a cup of chicken noodle broth for 45 minutes. By 8:30PM I was sipping on a virgin Strawberry Daiquiri, and was nibbling on a grilled cheese sandwich. Life’s not so bad.

David & O.B. finally got me moving again by 9:00PM, and we hung out at the finish line until 10:30PM or 11:00PM. All I can tell you about that is that it is INSPIRATIONAL!!! The crowd made you happy to be there. Some of the finishers showed that you really can do anything you set your mind to. Sixty-five year olds who can run 4:00 hour marathons AFTER a bike century. People who are so stiff they can barely stand up straight. People so focused on the finish line they hardly hear the crowd. A one armed man. How does that guy swim? A girl who ran the marathon with her arm in a sling. A blind man. A girl with a prosthetic leg.

**HIGHLIGHT FROM IRONMAN HAWAII:** Passing course record holder, Luc Van Lierde, and pre-race favorite, Simon Lessing at mile 70 on the bike (about 5 miles before they dropped out). The pro’s started 15 minutes before the age groupers, so passing any “real pro” is somewhat of an accomplishment. The fact that both of these guys were wallowing back in 500 place mid-way through the bike shows how unpredictable the body can be in such extreme conditions.