

Hi,

I finished the Kona Ironman, although at many times I thought I wouldn't. Towards the end of the bike segment around mile 80, I started to feel feverish and got hot flashes - not from the heat as there was plenty of wind to cool off, but perhaps it was the last throes of the flu that incapacitated me for the prior two weeks. Up until then, I felt pretty good: I made it through the swim in 1:29 (a minute under my target) thanks to a really big guy who had a great kick that towed me and about 30 others along in his wake. Most of the bike felt really good too. I was taking it easy and saying thanks to all the volunteers and supporters, but the final 20 mile stretch back into Kona killed me. I stopped and got off the bike twice in those final miles and seriously considered not getting back on that torture device - how was I ever going to finish the marathon segment?

The start of the swim was awesome as I jumped off the pier near the start line and had about a 150 foot head start on those swimming from the beach. The picture below was taken from about my position - you can imagine the chaos in the water with thousands of flailing arms and legs. Surprisingly, I didn't get run over. Instead, I had to swim around and over people, keeping one arm in front (catch-up drill - I read it in a magazine the night before) so I wouldn't get kicked in the face. This is drastically different than every other triathlon I've ever done, where I'm usually one of the slowest off the line. So I was having a great swim until the approach to the turnaround boat, where my slowing pace reminded me that I've never swam more than 1.2 miles in my life. I did plan to do a couple of long swim workouts before the event, but getting in the water was the last thing I wanted to do while recovering from the flu during the two weeks leading up to Kona.



On the way back to shore, I searched desperately for a good draft having done most of the first half of the swim on my own or avoiding people. Then I just saw bubbles...from the biggest kicker I've ever had the privilege to follow. I slotted in behind him and cruised while my right shoulder felt like it would pop out of joint. Occasionally, the big guy would slow down and I would tap his feet, which always prompted him to sprint away like a fleeing fish. But his wake was so big, I could easily close the gap and we would repeat the drill once more. I stopped looking behind me at that point, content to check out the sea floor and try to catch a glimpse of the dolphins

everyone had been talking about all week. I did get a sense that there were a few people behind me though, and when I heard lots of yelling with around 1/3 of the way to go, I popped my head up to see the bearded face of my buddy Rory who was doing water patrol. I stopped and casually waved hi, until an angry woman in an orange cap glared at me. Apparently, there were about 30 swimmers following me and the big guy, who at that point was about 12 feet ahead and pulling away. After I caught back up to his toes, Rory was yelling at me to go around to the next group. I yelled back that I couldn't get around, and although I did try twice, I could never get more than half-way the big guy. So I was just content to keep on tapping his toes. Finally getting out of the water, I could see that he was indeed about twice my height. As I patted him on the back, he smiled down upon me like a Viking and off we went into transition (position 1566 of 1800).

The bike course was completely unfamiliar, and I took some serious time in transition just thankful to make it out of the swim. Once on the bike, I relaxed and settled into a long day in the saddle. It was really comfortable for the first 55 miles, and I made it a point to say "Looking good" or "Great job" to everyone I passed. I actually wondered how much energy and aero efficiency this was costing me, but most of the people seemed happy with the greeting. No one



passed me on the first half of the bike segment up to Hawi, but I also wasn't passing that many people later in the course either. Usually I'm at least halfway through the competitors at this point to make up for my poor swim, but this was the World Championships after all and almost everyone here had qualified by winning a race somewhere around the world.

The ride up to Hawi was really windy, and by the turn-around I was looking forward to getting my special needs bag as I was losing some steam despite the relaxed pace (at the Honu qualifying race on 1/2 of the same course I averaged 23 mph - at Kona my average was below 20 mph for all four segments of the course). I also needed to take a piss and straighten my back. All this was done without too much drama and I set off down the hill at about 38 mph and feeling ok. Luckily, I didn't put the super deep dish wheel on the front, as the crosswinds were howling on the way down. My helmet was being lifted off my head and I had to go far left to avoid people

swerving in and out of the wind. I wanted to make up some time because it took me 3 hours to get to the turn-around at Hawi, and my target bike split was 5:30. As I pushed a little bit on the way back, I didn't feel like drinking or eating very much. I did take four of the electrolyte pills, and that didn't sit very well in my stomach. When my regular drinks ran out, I picked up the

Gatorade from the support volunteers, but every time I took a sip of it, I would throw up. So for a while, I just stuck to the water they handed out. About mile 80, I started to feel really bad and forced myself to drink the Gatorade to get some electrolytes - I couldn't swallow any more of the pills. Then I started to get the hot flashes and my paced slowed to a crawl. All the people I had passed miles earlier were now catching me. The only time I made ground was on the uphill's, where physics and gravity seemed to give me a slight advantage. The final stretch from the Mauna Lani to Kona was excruciating. I've never felt so bad in a race, and the whole time I was worried about the upcoming run. In fact, I was resolved not to even start the run. I just wanted to get off the bike and be done with it.

Looking back at the whole race up to that point, I was thinking too much: thinking about the other competitors, the volunteers, the leaders (I didn't see Norman Stadler come back on the bike, and it turns out he pulled out of the race somewhere on the bike course), and my time splits - doing calculations in my head the whole time. In most races and training rides, my head is clear of almost all thoughts - you're so focused on just pedaling and breathing that you hardly even notice the scenery. It makes the time fly by and before you know it, you've finished a five hour ride. During Kona, I was so conscious of everything going on around me, and that made the ride interminable. The little aches and pains had to be noticed, because I worried it would affect me in later stages of the race. The fever made me feel dejected and fearful that I would not do a good time or even finish. So I completed the bike segment and headed into transition ready to give up.

My chiropractor, Jessie, was in transition and he suffered all my complaints and whining. Then he asked, "are you pissing?" and I said a lot. To which he responded, "well, you're still taking in fluids so get out there and run!" So I did, and I complained to anyone in the crowd who I recognized. I was feeling miserable that my peak fitness of just two weeks ago did not carry through, and that the sickness that kept me in bed for four days was still keeping me down. I was a wreck when I first ran past my parents and Molly in front of our rented beach house. The second pass was even worse as I went inside the house and took a dump and thought seriously about crawling into bed. But I got back out, kissed Molly and told her I would finish the race for her. At that point, I had given up all hope of a decent time and just wanted to finish. People who I had passed hours before were now well ahead of me. Around me were people just struggling to finish, and we formed some quick bonds to help each other through the pain.



Surprisingly, I started to feel better. I still couldn't sip Gatorade without throwing up, but walking through the aid stations allowed me to pick and chose alternative food and drinks that I could hold down, like water, pretzels and bananas. Even the Coke was helpful for a little bit. Eventually, my stomach seemed to recover and I stopped feeling any effects of the fever. I was pretty confident that I could finish the marathon, even though I was only 10 miles into it (amazing how distances are relative - I had only run more than 10 miles twice all year).

But Kona still give me one more challenge, and that was my left knee. I didn't have any serious joint pain throughout all the training, and I thought that on race day I could run through any pain, but it was excruciating by mile 16. I couldn't run for more than a mile before I had to walk to relieve the pain. So it was a long slog into the night before I would finish the marathon segment. I actually sprinted the last mile, thinking that it was just a few hundred feet. Coming down Alii Drive was just as incredible as everyone has said. I missed seeing Molly and my parents, as I had to avoid a mother who brought out her two boys just in front of me when I was in full stride. My arms were fully extended in a victory salute as I passed under the first arch, forgetting that the finish was another 200 feet beyond! Below is the finish photo - perhaps I should crop out the clock, but hopefully I'll be back next year better prepared and in the proper frame of mind and body to improve my time. Nonetheless, I finished and I'm grateful. Thanks for all your support and encouragement.

Aloha,
Nguyen

