

Ironman Barcelona 2016 – Race Report



The event itinerary (registration, briefing, Expo, famous pasta party etc) is spread over a number of days so arriving in Calella on Wednesday, 4 days before the big day allowed me plenty of time to get accustomed to surroundings, relax and calm the nerves as well as soak up the atmosphere and collect the bike from ShipMyTriBike – I highly recommend these guys, it takes all the hassle out of transporting your bike and race gear. Come Saturday night I was rested and ready. As usual (and expected) I didn't sleep a wink on Saturday night but come the 5am alarm I was as excited as a kid on Xmas Eve and ready to rock.



Breakfast at 5:30am (Hotel Mar Blau – An Ironman friendly establishment opening their buffet/kitchens early especially for us was a nice touch). Back to the room, grab the race day bag and off I went. I'd met up with Aoife McEvoy (Trilogy TC) during the week and doing our bit for Inter Club relations we'd attended the briefing together, did a swim & bike course recce together also. Very useful to check out the course beforehand. We agreed to head down together on race morning and the company on the pre-dawn walk to transition was welcome and nerve calming.

Transition opened at 6:30am, we were there shortly after! As we'd left our bikes in early the previous day, we were advised to leave the tyres deflated (to avoid them exploding in the heat) so I borrowed a bike pump from the lad next to me at the bike racks and went to work getting them race ready. OK, the truth is I had to very embarrassingly ask a fella next to me to help me pump my tyres! I'm such a muppet when it comes to bike maintenance and couldn't figure out the pump nozzles or tyre pressure and was making a holy show of myself trying! Visions of Pdraig Kavanagh and Seamus Rowan effing and blinding at me ran through my head while participant number 1883 sorted out the bike for gobsh1te participant 1884!

Anyway, with 50% of the event participants being “Iron Virgins” (as they were officially referred to at the briefing) it seemed like there were lots of lost souls in need of assistance from fellow racers and onsite bike mechanics!

With the final prerace tasks done, (bike hydration and nutrition done, wetsuit on, goggles and cap in hand) I made my way to the swim start. With classical music playing in the background, 2,500 participants on the beach watching a spectacular sunrise to say the setting and atmosphere was spine tingling is no exaggeration.....



The swim set up was great, with separate (self-seeding) pens for participants. I opted to join the 1hr 15min group in the hope that I'd get on the feet of stronger swimmers and draft a bit, hopefully achieving a sub 1:30 swim. It turned out to be a prime position to watch the PRO's go off too which was a bonus. The nerves were a bit rattled but the sea was perfectly calm, the expected thunder storm had passed through on Saturday night and weather was back to Mediterranean norms so that really helped. I also chatted to a few other "Iron Virgins" to pass the time. It turns out it is perfectly normal to be afraid of sea monsters and rip tides! The inflatable starting posts deflating due to a power cut also helped cut the tension too. The race was a rolling start, (participants being allowed run in to the sea 6 at a time every 4 seconds). This was a tactic employed by the organisers to avoid the mass start brawls and to stretch out the field a bit to avoid drafting later on the bikes. It worked a treat for the swim start at least. By the time I got to the start gate I was calm and ready. I also got to pass Ruth just as I went off so that was extra special (there were hundreds of spectators on the beach for the start but we'd arranged a “VIP” pass allowing you prime viewing spots all along the course as well as meals and other useful add ons – another thing I'd recommend doing as supporters really put in a shift on these event days too).

The swim went better and expected. Due to the rolling start I found clear water immediately and after the 1st 300m (to the 1st turn) I felt relaxed and calm. I started slow and steady, long strokes and breathing easy (I'd worried about the breathing a bit as I'd been carrying a bit of a throat problem but it was fine). The turns were a bit of a washing machine job with kicks and arms a plenty but I stayed largely unaffected. I managed only a few seconds of drafting here and there as it was just too busy in the groups so I opted mostly for clear water and outside lanes and just found the space calming, which allowed me to ease through the swim. I even ended up humming some songs to keep a nice rhythm. In the end I



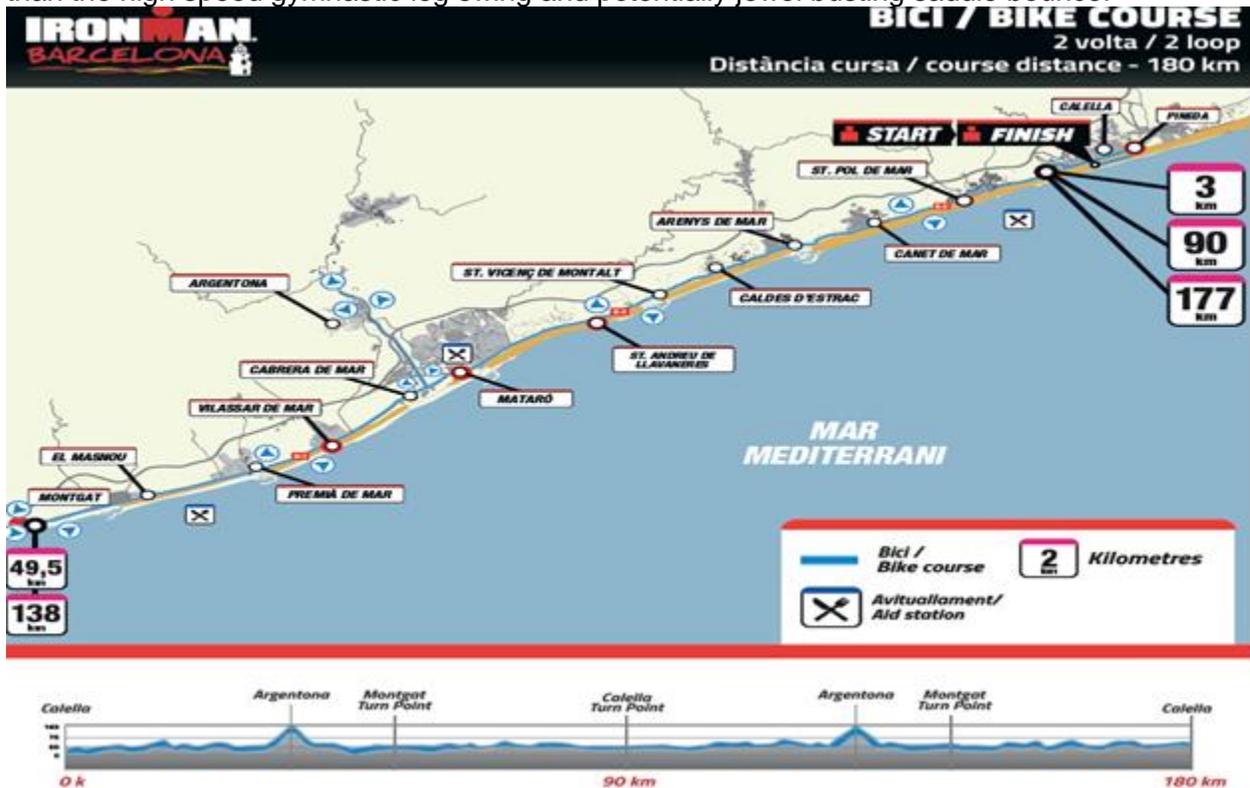


clocked a time of 1:16, not bad considering I actually swam 4.1k (Mr Zigzag!) but more importantly I exited the water feeling fresh and even invigorated. Another super moment was spotting Ruth on the beach; she got my exit on video too, or as I passed her going up the beach, smiling and proceeding calmly and enjoying the moment. It was such a brilliant feeling coming out of the water. Taking it easy and relaxed paid off big time. I was out of the scary sea having avoided a battle with sea monsters (although I did spot several jelly fish) and more importantly I felt

fresh and ready for the next test.

Transition 1 was largely uneventful. Bar of course the sight of 500 or so men stripping and lubing their nether regions up with handfuls of Vaseline while wetsuits and salt snots went flying about all over the place! I took my time but didn't dither about. I put on my cycling gear (including my beloved Alibaba 75cent finger socks), checked my gear and nutrition and jogged easy to my bike. All told T1 took 7mins.

Bike mounting went fine; I opted for the safer stop and mount one leg at a time approach rather than the high speed gymnastic leg swing and potentially jewel busting saddle bounce!



The bike route was 3k through the town of Calella then 2 laps to Mongat and back to Calella and the same 3k to finish. The first 3k was technical and bumpy and with no drafting penalties in this section bikes really grouped up. The next 10k were hilly but not too testing, then flat and

with the wind at our back for 15k, then the main hill climb to Argentona came at 25k. After descending the same hill we were back to perfectly surfaced coastal roads out and back to complete the 90k loop. From the moment I was on the bike I switched my watch to my 2nd screen showing heart rate and cadence only. This was my plan from the start and I was determined to stick with it. I didn't look at the main screen (showing time, distance & speed) until I reached the turnaround at Mongat. The main climb/drag to Argentona was a gradual 150-200m climb over 6k. It felt much longer on the way up! Again I stuck to the HR plan throughout the bike course and ignored cyclist flying past me. Some drafting groups whizzed past which is a bit annoying but what others did was completely irrelevant to me. I had mentally prepared myself for this happening and used some tried and tested mental mantras to keep focussed. This whole thing (training & race day is 75% mental focus & 25% physical effort). I stuck to my nutrition and hydration plan too, 750-1,000 millilitres of isotonic or USN drink per hour with one quarter of a cliff bar every 15mins or so. I also took salt tablets periodically and slowed down to apply anti-inflammatory to my knees, lower back and neck/shoulder whenever I needed it. I'd grazed my neck quite a bit in the water from the wetsuit friction and it was raw. Putting the anti-inflammatory gel on my grazed neck is a pain I'll never forget. The poor sod cycling past me at the time probably won't forget it either, the expletives were blasting out in full volume! The turnaround at Montgat came at about 45km and that was where I got my first real surprise. I'd expected the wind to be as little a factor as it was on the way out but there was a nasty headwind. I found it tough. So I had a 35k stretch against the wind, trying to stay aero, navigate the roundabouts (of which there were plenty) and avoid the pelotons. By the time I arrived back in Calella I was feeling the effort and my pace had clearly slowed against the wind as I stuck to the heart rate plan but coming to the turnaround was something special. It was just like all the utube video clips I'd watched. A fast section down to the turnaround point and crowds shouting and cheering everyone. It was absolutely deadly. I felt like a pro! I felt like I was doing something special. To top it off I saw Ruth and few other friendly faces, or more important they spotted me and Ruth managed to get a clip of me waving going by. As Peter O'Beirne always says "enjoy the day and smile the whole way".....



That moment fuelled my determination for the 2nd lap and I went off with a cheesy grin and revved up for the road ahead. I applied the same approach second time around. Staying largely in the endurance heart rate zone, going for it on the down hills, holding back on the uphill, managing the heart rate and feeding religiously on the 15min mark. Again the return from Montgat was tough. To pass the time I started employing some mental mind games, one of

which was going from A-Z naming ATC club members. A for Arno, B for Bernie, C for Caroline, D for Ducky!!..... and so on. Starting again anytime I lost my place. It was a nice way to 1) pass the time and take the focus off the immediate effort and 2) bring the club along with me. I also shared a few words with some of the Irish contingent but participants were largely keeping to themselves. Some seriously focussed/grumpy cyclists taking part. I knew early on that I would not achieve my sub 6hr target, which for me was hugely ambitious anyway and predicated on a flat and wind free course. When I checked the clock at the 90k marker I figured I could get close though if I kept things steady I shouldn't bonk or run out of steam. Aoife (who'd clocked at 1:30 swim) whizzed past me at 120km marker and looked in great shape. She's a very strong cyclist and had a sub 6 hour as her must have. She managed to clock 5hrs 47mins - impressive stuff). I wished her well as she disappeared up the road and I just reminded myself to stick to my plan. I had to dig in a good bit for sections but with 10-15k to go all I was thinking was just get me to T2 without a puncture. I'd earlier lost one of my two co2 canisters but also the canister valve on bumpy roads so if I'd had a puncture I was snookered. I'd have been snookered anyway but the fear was heightened when that happened. So in the end I'd clocked 6 hours and 9mins (approx. av speed 29kph I think) for the bike. Happy enough with that. More pleasing was the fact I didn't have to stop for breaks. The only time I stopped was to check the puncture kit and close the bike box that opened when I hit a bumpy section. My longest and most enjoyable cycle ever.

Coming into T2 was the first sign of my emotions rising to the surface. I'd said all along to myself or anyone else asking about my plan that I just needed to get to T2 unscathed. If I made it to the T2 changing tent in relatively decent shape I was confident I would finish. Sounds a bit arrogant considering there was still a marathon to run but I just felt that after the big brick sessions in the summer and my final long run session a couple of weeks back that I had the fitness and mental determination to go the distance. This hit home in the tent and I don't mind admitting I welled up and had to wipe some happy tears away and have a few words with myself to keep calm and focussed.



So out into the run and my legs felt fine. Immediately leaving the tent I saw Ruth. She was doing a deadly job tracking me and seeing her gave me a super buzz. I told her I was good and was "just going for a nice jog". Because I'd paced the bike my way I'd not "burnt too many matches" and found my running legs immediately. I actually felt quite springy so purposely

eased off and settled into a rhythm and pre-planned pace well below my running capabilities but one I knew I could remain at for the duration. Again I switched the watch to HR and cadence and checked it every 5-6mins. This was to be the basis for my marathon. To hell with time it was about feeling right throughout. This was a real test of will power and self-control. I was determined not to repeat the mistakes of those training half marathons, that 10k race the week



before. There were already some athletes on the run course walking, puking, pouring water over their heads, complaining about the heat. To be fair they could have been on their 2nd or 3rd lap but I was determined not to be one of them at any point. I'd trained too hard not to enjoy this run. About 2k into the run foot blisters were causing me real discomfort. They were on the inside of both arches and rubbing against my runners with every step. I'd anticipated this problem however and had thrown some K tape in my jersey pockets in T2. So I stopped, sat

down roadside and took off my runners and socks and applied the tape. Time lost at this early stage yes, time saved and physical comfort improved later, most definitely. The biggest problem I had for the marathon was on lap 1. My stomach was bloating and cramping and I felt like the dreaded runners trots were about to scupper my day big time. I took some more salt tablets and ice cold water (the aid stations were really well stocked) and used the facilities 3 times in the first 10k. I actually spotted a young girl (with her family) in the crowd early on holding a sign that said "never trust a fart in an Ironman". It was sound advice! I'd been running with a clenched arse for the first hour! The salt tabs and some ice cold water sorted matters however and after 10k I was feeling great. I had planned to try run the 1st lap (15k) without stopping and then use the aid stations on laps 2 & 3 to take a walking break, only for few seconds mind and with never stopping. Apart from the toilet breaks on lap 1 I stuck to that strategy throughout the race.

I spotted Ruth an Aoife at different points on the run and the Irish supporters were out in force. To be fair there was great support from all nations. 40 odd different nations represented over the 2,800 participants apparently. On several occasions during the run I asked myself was I reaching any dark places, was it time to use my "happy place". I'd prepared some "go to memories" in case things got tough. A tip garnered from reading Chrissy Wellington's autobiography – an excellent read, along with Gerry Duffy's Tick Tock Ten – I recommend both! Each time I questioned myself, the answer was categorically "all is good". That was the most satisfying thing about the whole day. I'd stuck to the plan and it was working. At 21k into the run I checked my time and was delighted with the average pace and overall time. I ran the numbers and calculated that if I upped my pace by even 30 seconds per km I'd be on for a Sub 12hr finish. This was the only time I considered my finishing time or seriously considered going off script/plan. As appealing as that was, I also could have risked a blow out and ending the event hurting or worse bonking and not finishing. I finally showed some true self-discipline and chose the much more sensible option of sticking to the plan and just seeing it out comfortably and enjoying the atmosphere. As I continued around the course I made a point of acknowledging every supporter that called my name or said something positive to me. It was usually just a lifting of the arm or a thumbs up. On the last lap I thanked each one of them verbally. "Thanks a lot", "go on the Irish", "fair play lads". I high fived the little hands that stuck out along the route and I gave some encouragement to anyone I passed who looked like they could do with a positive word. With 5k to go, I finally allowed myself a moment to let it all sink in. Very shortly I was going to finish an Ironman. I was about to achieve a long held dream and hear the immortal words. The run course (3 laps of 13.5k + 1.6k) went past the finishing line so 3 times I could see people head down the red carpet, I could hear the MC and his Spanish compatriot congratulate participants with the famous line. As I reached the red carpet, (after 4hrs 30mins) for the final 200m I steadied myself, zipped up the top and straightened my participant bib (ya gotta look your best for the finish line photo!) I jogged easy, looking all around me, soaking up

the atmosphere. I high fived anyone with a hand out. I saw a video clip of my finish later that night and there were loads of people finishing in the minutes before me but as I went down the red carpet it was clear of participants so I knew it was my moment. I stopped right in front of the MC and lifted my bib indicating it was my first race, he looked at it and me and spoke straight into the Mic "From Ireland, Eamonn, YOU, ARE, AN, IRONMAN. I slapped his held out hand and smiled like I've never smiled in a race before. His Spanish counterpart saw me coming and repeated the phrase, technical making me a two time Ironman! Then as I reached the finishing line I spotted Ruth in the reserved section just before the line. She had her phone out but the battery had just died seconds before (which I could see had her more than a tad disappointed) but it really didn't matter a jot to me, she was there and that's all that mattered. We hugged, kissed and exchanged a few words, "we did this". Then I walked slowly across the line with my hands raised and accepted my medal. I really savoured the last few moments. I turned to see my name and time on the clock. A moment I will never forget.



The aftermath:

After force feeding myself some pasta and grabbing a quick light massage I headed out to meet Ruth. I had hoped to see Aoife finish but I missed her, she clocked a marathon time of 5hrs 12mins to make the finish line in 12hrs 48mins and in great shape. Ruth was waiting right outside the finishers' tent which was great as I wasn't in any shape to go searching! We walked back down to transition, another 1.5km down the run course which I could have done without but it allowed us the opportunity to cheer on the remaining participants. It seemed that since I stopped running my gut kicked back into gear and it was time to get its own back for pouring horrendous amounts of sugars and stimulants into it for the last 12 hours. My guts turned and my stomach was on fire. I needed 3 pit stops just to get to transition and only barely made it back to the hotel. I had planned to dump the bike and gear back with the ShipMeTriBike guys and head back to the finishing line for the final hours of the event but when I reached the hotel room I absolutely crashed. I poured myself into the bed and lay there exhausted and sore. We decided to stay put and deal with the bike tomorrow.

Monday morning brought some real clarity to events. It started to sink in and with the never ending texts n posts of congratulations from club mates, family and friends I felt really grateful and kinda special. There were a few follow up messages I wanted to do which I did that morning from the comfort of my bed and then spend the whole day just taking it easy and recalling the day with whoever would listen. We rounded the day off with a super dinner (Calella offers some fab restaurant and bar choices) and we indulged in a few celebratory pints of course.



Ironman Barcelona was an experience of a lifetime, one that has reinvigorated my desire to stay in shape, live a little healthier (especially during the Winter hibernation) and maybe, just maybe do another long distance event sometime in the future. This event and location is also perfect for first timers and most definitely as a destination for a club foreign trip. There were so many clubs with massive numbers of participants and supporters. It was special but with a group of club mates it would be out of this world. Who's up for it in 2017/2018?.....