

IRONMAN 70.3 CASCAIS PORTUGAL
2019 RACE REPORT – COLIN MULKERRINS



Before I commence I would like to apologise in advance for my extremely mediocre writing skills especially when compared to others in the club. I will do my best to convey what was without doubt one of the best experiences of my life!

In order to do this race justice, I suppose I need to start at the beginning so please excuse my indulgence in this regard. My wife, young family and I moved to the Athy area in 2011/2012 and we built a house on my wife's homeland. I was (and still am) working in Dublin every day which involves a significant time commute. Due to this a number of years passed and I had a strong feeling that I hadn't integrated into local life. This was something I was keen to put right but I was unsure as to what form it would take due to my limited time availability. My wife is great at getting the kids involved in as many extracurricular activities as possible especially sporting ones. One day in early summer 2017 I was informed after returning home from work that the kids would be trying out a junior training session in the local Triathlon club in Athy the following evening. Fantastic I thought, that sounds like great fun. I was secretly envious as this is a sport I often noticed from a far and thought wouldn't it be amazing to be fit enough and skilled enough to do that! Anyway, my two eldest Eoin and Niamh tried out the training and instantly loved it. Why wouldn't they with "Team Kavanagh" at the helm! After a couple of those sessions I went along to witness said junior training events and thought this is really great and the kids love it. I then got talking with a few of the members there and got to hear all about the senior events / races that were coming up and who was entering what. Guess what there even a few of them doing the Ironman event in Dublin later that summer!!! Wow I thought, imagine that!

Anyway, after a few more of these junior sessions my wife Paula asked me why didn't I give it a try. I looked at her as if she had three heads. I had no experience apart for a few cycling sportives. You need to be super fit to be at that craic I said and in any event my swimming capabilities were deplorable. I couldn't swim 25 metres! "You have to start somewhere" and "won't it be nice to get to know a few locals" was the response from my ever wise better half. I guess that's what twiggled it in my head. Sure enough Karen Kavanagh told me there was an event coming up that weekend where a TI guy (Gary Crossan) was coming down to do a bike and run session with the senior members and I was welcome to try it out if I liked. Sure what could possibly go wrong I thought!!! I went along, it was hard work but I loved it. That was it folks. I joined up with ATC in May 2017 and set about learning to swim.

I entered and competed (still laugh at that phrase as I don't think it applies to me!!!) in four Tri a Tri distances (usually 250m swim, 20km bike and 5km run) that summer. My swimming sucked (many say it still does!!!) but I didn't care, I was doing it and it felt great, I was officially bitten by the Tri bug and I was hooked!!! I was also in complete awe at the events my fellow club members were competing in and the distances of the events they were doing. Just amazing. Coming towards the end of the summer that year I had become increasingly aware of pain in my right hip (in particular) after any sort of decent training effort. I got it checked out and long storey short after a few misdiagnoses I was told I had full thickness tears to the main muscles in both my hips and I also needed to have bone removed and pared away in both hips. Surgery. No way around it. This was early in 2018 and I was floored. I desperately wanted to compete in the 2018 season and start upping the distances to Sprint and Olympic if possible but this was all gone now. The recovery period after the surgery meant that racing in 2018 has out of the question. I'm not going to lie. I went through a few bad weeks after receiving this news. I had just found something that I loved to do, was improving at and loved the interaction with the people and club I was doing it with. Again my wife stepped in and told me it was only a minor setback. Get it sorted and get straight back on the horse. The support from my fellow club mates was also brilliant. Suck it up I told myself and just get it done. I booked in and had both the right and left hips operated on at the start of June 2018. Again I'm not going to lie, it hurt afterwards, it hurt badly and the rehab/recovery process was a long one.

I remember my first allowed run post-surgery was when Ger Prendergast came to do one of his Ironman distance days with us in Athy. I went for a short jog with Raymond Rowan in the confines of Athy College and it was slow but I was back doing it and it felt great!!! The plan forward for me from then on in my head was very clear, work your arse off over the winter to build your base fitness and hit the ground running in the spring to start full training. The plan was to complete my first sprint distance tri followed by an event every month leading up to an Ironman 70.3 in late summer. I quickly settled on the races I wanted to do – Waterford Duathlon (Feb 2019), Carlow Sprint (May 2019), Athy Olympic (June 2019), Harbourman Wicklow Olympic (July 2019), Celtic Warrior Olympic (Aug 2019), Dublin City Sprint (Aug 2019) and then the man event Ironman 70.3 Cascais Portugal (29/09/2019).

The summer events all went well and most importantly I stayed relatively injury free apart from a few niggles here and there. The races came thick and fast and before I knew it there was only one left. The main event. The one that scared the beJesus out of me. Ironman 70.3 Portugal. 29th September 2019.

Anyone who knows me knows I like to plan well in advance, be organised and have multiple spreadsheets (usually laminated) to help me do so!!! To this end I planned on booking the accommodation for Portugal well in advance (as in back in Feb/Mar of this year). I had learned from my trip to Ironman Barcelona in 2018 (to cheer on our amazing 21) that the location of your accommodation was very important. You needed it to be as near as possible to the start of the race. I poured over Air BnB for a few days and finally, after detailed research of the swim start location, transition location etc. settled on the exact location I thought best served our needs. I say "ours" as my fellow club mate Anna Deegan had agreed to sign up to the race also and we thought it best to room together. We settled on a particular apartment and booked it. Over the next few weeks flights, pickups etc. were all booked. I wanted to get this done and out of the way early so I could concentrate on the real preparation. Training.

The summers training went well and I was happy enough with my performances in the various races I had signed up to. But now for the main event. Everybody in the weeks leading up to it was asking me "how are you fixed" and "are you happy"? In truth I didn't know. I had never done anything like this before and I suppose I just said to myself, we will soon find out!!!

So the plan was to fly out on the Thursday morning of race week. We had an early start. Anna dropped her car to mine for 6am and my father in law Dan dropped us to Kildare Village to catch the 6:30am bus to the airport. All our gear including the bikes were already on their way to Portugal via Ship my Tri bike. We arrived at the airport, checked in and set back and waited for boarding time. The mood was a healthy mixture of excitement, a few nerves and sheer happiness that we had gotten to this point. We were anxious to get going and get the job done!

We arrived in Lisbon airport around lunch time and you could feel it straightaway. We didn't say anything but we both knew what the other was thinking. The heat. It felt warm. Nice if you were here for a holiday but we weren't. I quickly decided to put it to the back of my mind. What did you expect, I said to myself, it to be cold!!!

We left the airport in the pre-arranged taxi (yes it was on the spreadsheet ☺) and after a short 20/25 min cab ride arrived in Cascais. It was beautiful. Way beyond my expectations. Gorgeous beach, marina, buildings, old town style narrow pedestrian cobble streets, the works! This is a great start I thought! The taxi brought us to the door of the apartment. We quickly met the host and received the keys. The first thing I did was look out the window of our first floor apartment and I was looking straight at the swim start location about 350m away!!! Perfect I thought! We ditched the bags and went for a walk around the lovely old town and were blown away by its beauty and welcoming locals. Ironman fever was in full swing and had taken over the town. It truly was like an out of body experience. Was I really here??? Was I actually going to compete in this??? Can it be true??? I felt like a kid on Christmas morning times 1000.

We had our paperwork with us so we decided to register (which had just opened). It was magical. There were Pro's beside us registering in their section. I was on cloud nine. We received our race packs

and wrist band. I couldn't help giggling when this was being put on. It really was happening!!!! They gave us our Ironman branded back packs and that was it! No going back now. It was on!!!! We went into the Expo tent. I got chatting to a few fellow competitors and the mood was buoyant. Everybody very excited and anxious to get going! One t-shirt, that's it I told myself! Ye right. €250 later I left the tent. However, I am superstitious and this virtue was on high alert this week!!! No way was any of this being worn until the race was done. Straight back to the apartment and into the back of the wardrobe not be looked at again until Sunday evening!!!

On Friday we rose early and set about getting ready for our planned training bike ride / bike check. We called up to the agreed pick up location adjacent to the transition area. We picked up the bikes and bags with minimal fuss and went back to the apartment to get into our bike gear. Once set, we set off on the planned bike route road. The temperature was 24 degrees. It felt warmer but it was gorgeous. A single layer short sleeved jersey and it was beautiful. I could get used to this I thought. A far cry from one of our Sunday club spins earlier in the year when, John Sourke, Rob O'Brien, Joe Dunne and I were huddled in someone's gateway outside of Portlaoise in the belting snow ☺ ☺ ☺. The bike felt good, no mechanical issues. We stopped for a few selfies and after an hour returned to Cascais. The rest of the day was spent relaxing and taking in the atmosphere.

On Saturday morning we rose early. I wanted to get the planned practice swim in early for a few reasons. 1) It would mimic the start time for the race the next day, 2) give the wetsuit a chance to dry over the course of the day and 3) My wife Paula was arriving in at around 10:30 ish. Donned with our swim gear we made the short trip down to the beach and the swim start and quickly decided on a route for our planned 30 min swim. In we went and it was lovely. The water was a balmy 18.9 degrees. How lucky we were I again thought. We completed the measured effort and chatted to a few fellow competitors who were doing the same. We went back up to the apartment and changed and Paula arrived on schedule (this was not on the spreadsheet ☺ ☺ ☺).

We went for a bite to eat and then set about preparing the blue (bike), red (run) and white (street wear) transition bags. Then it was quickly time to go to the race briefing. This was being held in the tent adjacent to the transition area in the Hippodrome. On the walk down I noticed that it felt really hot again and this was the time we would be running tomorrow. I immediately dismissed it from my mind and told myself to cop on! We arrived at the briefing location. This is when it all started to feel really, really real. They expertly set the tone with some music. We took our seats. Chatted to the people beside us. The tent quickly filled. The music stopped and then the announcer (the same dude from Barcelona last year) started to talk. I can't believe I'm here I thought!!! They went through the various instructions, courses, rules and disciplinary measures all in a light hearted but clear succinct way. No messing here I thought. This is the real deal. Then a funny moment even though it wasn't supposed to be. The announcer said that the athletes needed to be aware that the water was "only" 18.9 degrees and that he would recommend a second swim hat and that the Ironman committee had decided that due to this temperature they would allow athletes to wear neoprene socks if they wanted to!!!! The Irish and UK athletes in the audience burst out laughing. They would want to be in the Barrow in April I thought ☺ ☺ ☺ They finished the briefing, wished us all luck and we all went back outside. We returned to the apartment picked up our bikes and bags and returned to transition area to rack the bike and hang the bags in the pre-determined locations. We spent some time memorising

our gear and bike locations against land marks within transition and noted the swim in, bike out, bike in and run out locations. With these elements committed to memory we then collected and immediately donned our all-important timing chips on our left ankles, left the transition area and returned to the apartment. Talking was less common place now. The fact that we were starting in a matter of hours was now noticeably apparent.

Anna was cooking back at the apartment and Paula and I went down to a restaurant I had been eating at for the last few days. A lovely Italian with friendly staff and good food. I ordered another bowl of pasta and polished it off clearly in the mind-set that I would need every bit of these carbs in a few hours. We finished our meal and returned back to the apartment to finish the last few remaining tasks. Then it was off to bed at 9pm with alarms set for 4:30am.

To my extreme surprise I actually managed to sleep for a few hours. I was still awake however in advance of the alarm going. I set about my pre planned and pre – rehearsed routine and ate my normal pre-race breakfast. We then left to go to transition which opened at 5:30am to do a last minute check on the bikes. Again, all planned in advance. We arrived down and the place was humming with activity already. Everybody adding nutrition to their bikes, pumping tyres and completing last minute checks. The bikes were as we left them. All ok. The only difference being the dew fall from their overnight stay out doors. One last check at all the entry and exit locations and we were off back to the apartment.

The excellent location of our digs afforded us the opportunity to change into our wetsuits etc. in the apartment which we duly completed on our return. The plan was to be on the beach for 7am. The Pro's were due to set off at 07:27 and I estimated our start time circa 07:45 to 08:00. This gave us some time to kill back at the apartment so I watched some favourite Ironman motivational video clips on YouTube. Then it was time to leave.

We arrived on the beach just after 7am. Last minute adjustments to kit (stuffing a spare set of goggles down the front of my wetsuit – thanks Zuzana for the tip) and we were ready for the off. We were allowed a very quick practice swim dip so I used the opportunity to let some water into the suit and acclimatise my face to the water. We then received the call from the announcer “all athletes out of the water and please take your places in your appropriate pens”. This worked on a self-seeding basis based on the time you estimated you would complete the swim in. The organisers were at pains to point out (including during the briefing on Saturday) that athletes should be realistic with their times as there was no advantage going into a quicker pen as you would be overrun with swimmers coming from behind you. Despite the warnings many didn't listen as I will explain later. I decided on the 40 minutes or under pen and went to the front. Anna joined me. Then the build-up commenced. The music started. The announcer warmed up both the athletes and the supporters who lined the back of the beach and down the promenade wall. The atmosphere was electric. You have earned the right to be here I thought to myself as I looked directly over to the Pro's who were only metres away and getting ready to start their race. Amazingly I wasn't that nervous. A new feeling washed over me for the start of a race. Sheer excitement and a burning desire to start!!!

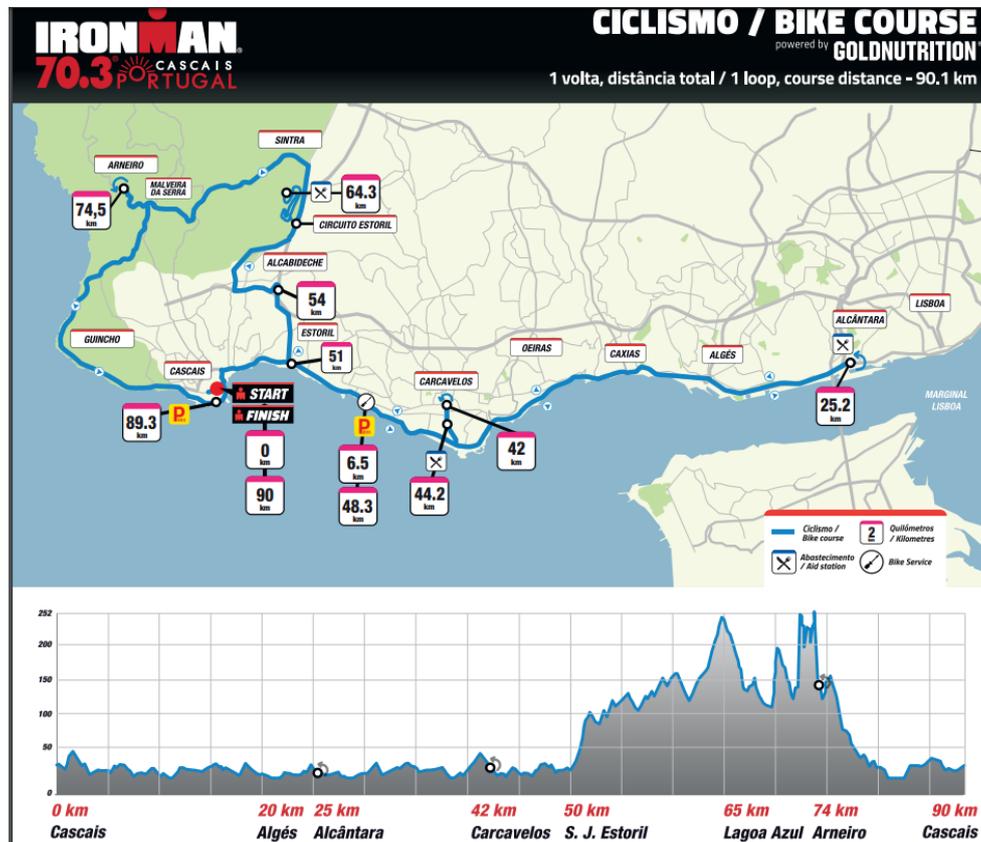
Then as the sun rose over the bay in Cascais as if directly on cue, the Portuguese national anthem was belted out by a female opera singer whose name regretfully I can't remember. Then the music started back up, the countdown commenced, the announcer confirmed that the race was a "GO GO GO", the bell rang and the male Pro's were off taking only 5 or 6 strides to enter the cool Atlantic waters. They were followed quickly by the female Pro's and then it was the age group athletes turn. I'd say we were only waiting about 10 minutes or so and it was our turn. Our pen was allowed down to the start. I had a few in front of me. Anna and I exchanged one last hug for good luck the bell rang and we were off!!!!



My plan was to settle into my stride as quickly as possible and pace myself and not go mad at the start. Find clear water as best you can I told myself, put the head down and go for it. All was going to plan as I turned the first buoy and headed left towards the next one. The low sun in the sky made it difficult to see the next turning buoy which was a considerable (500m) distance away. Then I started to meet traffic. Why are these guys going so slow I thought to myself? It seems that some people chose to ignore the advice of the officials and went into a time pen which they had no right to be in. This caused some difficulties as I constantly found myself having to swim around slower swimmers. Never thought I would here myself saying that I thought 😊 This continued for a good amount of time but I tried to put aside the frustration and just concentrate on moving from buoy to buoy. Within no time (it seemed) I had reached the outer marker buoy and we started to turn at 45 degrees back towards the harbour wall. Then for the first time I had some clear water in front of me. I put the head down and tried to put some decent effort in without over cooking it. I quickly reached the second last marker and turned 45 degrees for home. At this point I knew there was 650m to go. Again I put the head down and headed straight for the swim exit. I was moving well and making good steady progress. I passed the last remaining marker buoy and tore into the remaining few metres. Like that the swim was over. I couldn't believe it. I felt fresh exiting the water and was delighted.

The nature of this course involves a 600m run (uphill for the first 100m) to the transition area. To be fair its red carpet all the way 😊 It was then I first caught sight of Paula and she looked genuinely relieved to see me pass by and I gave her the universal thumbs up sign to say all was okay. I quickly made the jog down to transition (wetsuit at waist level) and made my way to the bag stands. I located my bag numbered 1581 without any issue. I emptied its contents on the ground, removed my swim gear, put on my bike gear, had a quick spray of sun tan lotion (not sure how effective that was!) placed my swim gear inside this bag, racked it and headed down to the end of the racks (required for a neutral

transition) and located my bike in row “H”. I sprinted as best I could to the bike exit and this involved a jog uphill again (this would be the theme for the day ☺) to the mount line. This section was narrow and there was a bit of congestion. I rounded the corner passed over the mount line, jumped on and was on my way.



I flew by Paula and again exchanged the thumbs up sign. I then set about getting into my rhythm as soon as possible. The first section of the bike course involves cycling out through the urban centre of Cascais town and out on to the dual laned carriageway coast road to Lisbon. Once you leave Cascais it is relatively flat apart for some rolling up and downs but I thought to myself, that’s fine the run course can’t be out here can it? That’s far to hilly. More about that later!!! Once out on the open road it is relatively flat to Lisbon and the turnaround point. I quickly settled into my planned HR and commenced my religiously applied nutrition plan of drink every 15mins and eat every 30 mins. Time seemed to pass quickly and before long (I’d say about 10km from the turning point a motorbike with blue flashing lights was approaching me from the opposite direction. Sure enough it was Javier Gomez the lead male Pro in his perfect tucked in position whizzed by me. I let out a “Yahooooo!!!” don’t ask me where that came from or what it was supposed to mean but there you go. I thought I saw a wry smile on his face but maybe I imagined it!!! I settled back into my rhythm and headed for the turnaround point. This came quicker than I had expected (I wasn’t tracking my speed or distance only my duration and HR). I made the turn and headed back in the direction of Cascais now with a small headwind to face into. At the 40km mark we turn of the main coast road to complete the first out and back section. At this stage (and I apologise in advance for this next bit) I was dying to pee. My plan was not to stop and to pee on the bike (and yes saying this still disgusts Paula ☺). After three failed attempts to do this I reluctantly stopped at the aid station and to my horror there was someone in the

single Portoloo. I cough, cough again and then impatiently knock on the door. The guy inside exits with an annoyed look on his face. I didn't care. I squeeze past him, complete the task at hand and jump straight back on the bike and continue.

I complete the next section of the coast road back to Cascais in a short period of time and then I take the right turn for Estoril. I knew this was coming. I had mentally prepared for it. The hill climbing started here and boy did it. No kissing just straight into it! I do my best to control my breathing and HR, stay seated, work through the gears and grind it out. A lot of riders around me started to struggle badly but to my delight I was making steady progress and my HR was reasonably steady. Happy days I thought. We continued to climb for the next 10km until we reached a very unique aspect of this bike course and indeed event. You get the very cool opportunity to do a lap of the Estoril Moto GP racing circuit! I fly into the narrow entry tunnel into the circuit. To quick it seemed as I have to jam on the brakes for the tight 45 degree right turn entry point onto the course. Then next thing I know I am flying around the course. Now, thing is, motorbike racing tracks are not flat either! Who knew! But it was great fun. I mean how often would you get to do that!!!



Just before you exit the track there is an aid station. This was a planned stop for me to get an extra water bottle on board and pour my energy drink sachet into it. This cost me a few minutes but there was no way around it with my current bike set up. I was off again then, exited the circuit and went back out on to the road and the hill climbing started again in earnest. I made my way up through the towns on Sintra and Malveira Da Serra and then commenced the final climbing section up to a turnaround point at Arneiro. The wind was blowing quite strong up here now and there were a few shaky moments with the deep rimmed wheels. Then I saw it, the turnaround point. I was still climbing well but I was delighted to see it at the same time. I quickly rounded it but then hit a wall of a head wind. What the hell I thought!!! This can't be right. I gritted my teeth put the head down and commenced the most hair raising white knuckle ride I have ridden yet which was the next section which wound its way back down to the coast. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time. Just don't come off, just don't come off I kept chanting to myself. Before I knew I had passed through Guincho and was back at sea level and was passing some beautiful deserted beaches. Concentrate on the job at hand I told myself. I put the foot down again eager to make up the slow pace during all of the hill climbing. I then saw the welcome signs of the outskirts of Cascais. I took on board some final fluids and prepared to spin the legs for the final km into Cascais. I rounded the roundabout and passed by Paula who was delighted to see me. I smiled and powered on to the dismount line. I parked the bike and ran to the bag stands and in a similar fashion to before emptied the run bag onto the ground. Placed the bike gear in said bag and donned my additional race belt which held all my prepacked gels. I slapped on some sun tan lotion grabbed my squeezey electrolyte drink bottle and headed for the run exit.

At this point I now, for the first time since starting, start to feel tired. Only 10km to go I say to myself. Suck it up and get on with it. But the heat is really starting to take hold. I think of Jeff Butler and his amazing MDS exploits earlier this year. How can you moan about heat after what he went through I thought. It spurs me on, I swallow hard and continue. I then pass a female athlete lying on the path adjacent to the road. Clearly unconscious with four medics frantically working to resuscitate her. Jesus I thought, you have a wife and four kids at home, be sensible and see this out, no heroics (not that I was capable of any at this point). I carry on and make my way to the turnaround point but I am not nearly as comfortable as the last time I passed this spot. The last 5.5km was just about trying to keep a reasonable steady pace. I make my way past the cool sign at the roundabout on the way into Cascais that says "This is Ironman Territory". I manage a smile even at this this point. I pass the supporters that are lining the main street. I pass the finishing line one final time but still don't allow myself to look at it. I make my way up to the roundabout but Paula is not there but I know she would have made her way to the finish line at this point.

I make the turn and run through the water shower one last time and it feels so refreshing. I break into a slightly quicker pace and make my way downhill towards the finishing shoot. I then experience what I can only describe as an out of body experience. I round the corner on to that magic black and red carpet. I put my hands on my head, people are shouting and screaming but I don't see any faces. I allow myself to look at the gantry for the first time and then the emotions just start to spill out. I can hear Paula calling out but I can't see her. I look up and my name appears on that famous clock screen. I can't believe it, I've done it. All the hard work has paid off. The announcer calls my name and I pass over the line. One of the officials puts the medal around my neck and I can't hold it in anymore. I move to the side and cry like a baby for a few seconds. I am so so so happy! Wrecked but ecstatic. I don't what time I have done and I honestly don't care. I stand up and Anna is there and we hug for ages. Nothing is said. We both know what we have just done and we are over the moon. I enter the recovery area and down some very welcome chilled water. I take some food but really I just want to get outside to Paula. I take on some more food, have my medal engraved and leave the recovery area. After some searching I find Paula and again I cry. We hug for ages, its brilliant.



It took a while to sink in that I am finished. I ring the kids at home and they have been following me on the tracker and they are delighted for me. It's so good to hear their voices. I call my parents to let them know I'm ok. I then just sit on the wall and try to take it all in as other athletes stream over the finish line equally as happy. After a while we decide to make our way back to the apartment for a much needed shower and recovery drink.

So that's it folks. Sorry for the long drawn out tale but you can blame Mr Eamonn McEntee for this! I can highly recommend this race to anyone considering a 70.3 next year. It has everything and is held in an absolutely beautiful town and location.

Thanks,

Colin Mulkerrins.

