

Race Report - Richard Mason - Ironman Barcelona – Calella Sunday 4th October 2015

I can see it..... It's there leading off round the corner that I'd looked at four times on the previous laps: The Red Carpet..... Right, compose yourself Richard, no rush now, enjoy the moment..... Woah - downhill round a corner on these legs after 42km is a little tricky till the internal gyroscope kicks in. The lights are bright now that dusk is just turning to dark and the volume of noise smacks you in the face..... faces and outstretched arms lining the way – go on... catch some high fives!!! Looking for Eleanor in the crowd (she is there – video evidence exists) Point to the number.... “RICHARD, YOU ARE AN IRONMAN” echoes round... adrenalin surges and the air is punched.....Yes!

Wednesday 9pm: ‘You haven't set off yet have you - I've forgotten my heartrate monitor strap.....’. ‘I'll pick it up for you now’..... a call from Spain is a welcome distraction from trying to pack what was previously a bike into a bike box which had turned up just that afternoon, the day before setting off to Calella. I really hope this will go back together again with just 3 Allen keys at the other end.....

We're off to the airport at the crack of dawn Thursday. Check in is uneventful until the bike box was x-rayed and I was politely asked to remove my CO2 canisters - **note to self #1**: can't carry them on a plane (even internally as some suggested to Rob Lennox who asked the same thing on Facebook later that day..... ;-))

It seems East Midlands airport has been colonised by MVH. We bumped into Lisa Wright, James Cobb, Ben Starbuck & Ian Burrows while waiting to be called to be kettled into a departure gate for a foggy delayed flight (oh well, I had plenty of time to indulge in the paranoia of wondering whether my bike box was actually making its way to Faro instead of Barcelona....)

As we shoved the bike box (on the right plane... phew) through the hotel reception we saw Stuart Williams heading out.... ‘You just got here - have you seen the sea?’ ‘Erm, no.....’ The next person we saw was Warren Simms - ‘Good to see you – have you seen the sea?’ mmm, definite pattern emerging here. I did then have a look - looked a little bit ‘frisky’ but apparently not as bad as the day before. This isn't really helping the anxiety of not practicing sea swimming apart from a very dicey 100 metres shared with a smack of jellyfish a few weeks earlier. Right, now to turn my expensive carbon fibre Meccano set, which thankfully wasn't tap danced upon by the baggage handlers, into a TT bike....

With oily hands and an unnerving sense of achievement in my Allen key skills, I set off down to the Athletes village for the first time to register. A quick flash of the passport and race licence gets me the rucksack and more importantly the wristband (which gets you into all the ‘athletes only’ places....) This was the first taste of the Ironman athlete experience, which as the weekend unfolds ramps to fever pitch by the end – may sound daft but you're made to feel like a ‘real’ athlete.... That's a priceless feeling..... Knowing now what I experienced later in the weekend might go some way to understanding why it looked like a deranged carb loaded version of supermarket sweep was taking place in the merchandise tent for anything with an M-Dot on. I'm too superstitious to buy anything just yet (akin to a footballer touching the FA cup before the final starts).

Friday started out with what would become the daily game of ‘finisher t-shirt top trumps’ at breakfast in the hotel (I won't repeat here what Eleanor and Liz called it for the readers of a more sensitive nature ☺) and after a coffee and cake stop (the first of many over the weekend) wetsuits were donned and out

into the briny we went. 100 metres or so out to the buoys, hey, this isn't all that bad. Tastes a bit saltier than the usual brand of duck muck in the Lavender Patch but on the whole, ok. After bobbing about with some of the extended MVH crew and Ashbourne Tri guys it was back to shore to practice surfing back into shore - took me back to bodyboarding days as a kid. Maybe I would survive the swim after all.....

Next to test out the bike and make sure the pedals were tight (Long story, see race report from Derby triathlon 2004 for full details - Learned that one the hard way). Down the coast on the course – wow, how smooth and quick is that road, this is going to take some willpower on Sunday not to overdo it on these roads. Arrived back to the hotel unscathed (after being hunted down by a transfer bus carry 2 Clarks and a Fishwick) with a big grin.

Pasta party next with some of the MVH team mates – the videos of last year's event on the big screens and then Paul Kaye (the voice of Ironman) did some geeing up of the crowd, then back to the hotel for evening meal number 2 (I am carb loading not just greedy).

Saturday morning was the athlete's briefing - a different tone to the Pasta party the previous night outlining the myriad of ways you can get on the wrong side of the race officials and the rainbow of cards that can be wave at you for different reasons. All starting to get a bit real now, gallows humour amongst the athletes is setting in. Some, including me, are going a bit quiet.

Red, white and blue bags packing next and after several u-turns on what to wear and when and what to cover in talc, enough was enough and the bike and bags were pushed up the now becoming well-trodden 1.5km to transition from the hotel. After queuing to enter transition, the arms race started in the bike racking area (I've never seen so many disc wheels in one place). I wrestled in wind and drizzle to get a plastic bike cover on my white bike (which was now sporting freshly applied chain lube all over it from the chain via said plastic bike cover – oh well, **note to self #2**: carry wet wipes) and had a walk though from swim exit through to bike exit, after that a bit of calm unexpectedly sets in.....

'.....and now we wait.....'

2am Sunday morning – Aaarrgh!! – forgot to put the 2nd spare inner tube in my kit in transition..... think Richard.... Not a disaster, don't forget it in the morning..... go back to sleep.

6am and down to breakfast – not at my chattiest and struggling to do what I knew I had to and get some fuel in me. A few calming pearls of wisdom from Warren got me to compose myself and it was nice to see a friendly face in the shape of Sarah Clark in reception to send us off (top spectathlete performance). A good luck kiss from Eleanor and then off on the now familiar walk up to T1.....

The atmosphere in Transition was strangely chilled out, a sort of calm before the storm, and the wind had dropped from the night before and the sun was coming up. Got there in plenty of time before the swim start to get bottles onto the bike (and the extra inner tube from 2am into my kit) and to idly watch the preparation rituals of some other triathletes (some 'so obvious' 'what a good idea' and 'why didn't I think of that' examples committed to memory along with some other bizarre ones like emptying an entire pack of biscuits into a top tube bento box - hey, if it works for him then great). Got in the queues for the assault on the senses which are the portaloos (see note to self #2 above again – multipurpose that one) then into my wetsuit and down onto the beach for the seeded areas in the rolling start snaking down to the shore.....

That's when time started to lose its perceived linear characteristics - In other words, the 30 minutes leading up to the swim start seemed like an eternity. In the part of the snake that overlapped where I was stood (with the 1:20 swimmers) I saw a friendly face – James Cobb, who was also miles away in his own thoughts. Then, good luck handshakes and doing up of wetsuits zips as the pro's went off into the water and a drone flew over filming it all. I'd gone quiet again and thoughts of home, loved ones, the months of preparation flew through my head..... choke back the emotions Richard..... Focus..... Calm... clear your mind..... The heartbeat comes thumping over the PA then 'Say Geronimo' which has been playing seemingly all weekend starts blasting out (now my ringtone....) and the snake begins to wriggle forward..... Right, here we go.....

Picking up speed running down the beach I cleared the first breaker which took out and sat back on the beach a couple of unlucky neoprene parcels, and after a kick in the ribs from a breast stoker (?) I used the tune in my head to relax into a rhythm and found some toes to swim on. Sighting at the turn point at roughly half way was 'interesting', with up to 4 metres of swell – a wall of water which thankfully wasn't breaking (**note to self #3** – sighting is best done from the top of a wave). A surprising number of swimmers were hung off kayaks but as the distance numbers on the buoys went up I started strangely to enjoy the swim and started to pass other swimmers – never thought I'd type that!! After surfing in and seeing and hearing the MHV spectathletes in their orange finery I wrestled my wetsuit down and checked my watch – 1:18 – that was better than I expected.... A good start...

Full kit change in T1 (the sand got everywhere, and I mean everywhere, in the practice swim on Friday so taking no chances..... and looking at the timing splits, contrary to popular belief I didn't take a packed lunch in there with me!) Tri suit on, cycle top for pockets stuffed with the planned nutrition and an empty pocket for bar / gel wrappers – I'm definitely not picking up a cheap yellow card for littering, and we're off to the bike with more shouts of encouragement from the orange jerseyed spectathletes.

Although good for me, my swim time isn't the fastest in the field, so it proved for lots of overtaking on the bike (see the big grin on Richard ☺). After the initial heartrate spikes from the transition between swim and bike, it settled down to zone 2. The watch beeped every 28 mins to eat a bar / gel (thanks Colin Maclean for the tip) and continued like a metronome, interspersed with a 'treat' of half a banana at feed stations if I had managed to get my hydration topped back up. Looking down at the Garmin, the average speed was hovering around 34kph – keep it calm Rich, don't blow your legs to bits, you've still got to run.....

The turn point near the lighthouse had the highest density of supporters – again orange MVH shirts were all over and out of the corner of my eye I could see Meynell the fox licking its paws clean after finishing off its first Brownlee of the day.... The noise was immense and it was probably the fastest bit on the course as we whipped through at about 60kph down the hill before braking, turning 180 degrees and powering back up the hill overtaking as we went (the hill training paid off then.....) – even managed a high 5 with Paul Kaye stood in the middle of the road going full tilt down the hill and got a name check from him on the way back up - result!!!

Coming back into town thought the last technical section back to T2, through lots of 90 degree and dead turns, checking left and right shoulders for loons belting through became vital – one did get caught out just behind me, the unmistakable sound of carbon fibre sliding across tarmac ruined someone's day as they overcooked a corner – focus Richard..... Don't bin it now.....

Safely into T2 (5:19, it flew by in what felt like a lot shorter time than the century sportives in training - very happy with that), my first port of call was spending over 2 minutes proving that my hydration strategy was spot on (you can guess how) and a quick change of socks and stocking back up on gels and I was off out onto the run course....

..... It's just 4 10k runs... come on Rich, how hard is that..... Time started to bend again, this time the first 10k seemed to take ages. Legs were tired, but every time another MVHer shouted encouragement or high fived whilst running the other way or the orange t-shirts were cheering it seemed to ease just a bit. After the first 10k was done (clear it from the mind like it never happened, move onto the next 10k....) a constant level of pain and discomfort was reached (from my sore (latterly found to be broken) foot, which wasn't getting any better or worse) and heart rate had found its level just below threshold – I can do this..... Confidence started to come back after the dark moments in the first 10k out at the far end of the run course, where no spectators ventured and I had to have 'a right good word with myself' as they say in Yorkshire. By the time 30k was up, dusk had started to settle in, cap and sunglasses were ditched, the sums done in my head to tell me I was still on for sub 12 and time felt like it started bending the other way.... Speeding up now.....

The last half lap, from the turn point back home hurt... another little burst of adrenaline took the edge of that as more spectators crowded the last few kilometres and I could hear carried on the wind the muffled sound of Ironmen being called out over the line.... Soon be my turn..... Run past the expo with crowds milling around and the frankly brilliant and tireless MVH spectathletes (massive thanks and respect), up to the turn point - I can see it..... It's there leading off round the corner that I'd looked at four times on the previous laps: The Red Carpet.....

Well, I'm sat here typing just over a week after that moment – one I had built to for the best part of 10 months, to close the chapter and fight off the Ironman Blues (yes it is really a thing....), the pain has dulled, the comical inability to walk downstairs (as displayed by many in a finisher t-shirt in the Barcelona area) has disappeared, the appointment with the tattoo artist is booked, the itch has been scratched..... For now..... Now does IM Lanza fall in a school holiday.....? Oh no.....