

Ironman Barcelona – 2015

I arrived at transition nice and early, I was pretty nervous, I could tell I wasn't alone, quite a queues for the toilets, and not a lot of laughing and joking. It was tricky to find somewhere to sit and change. I went outside to wait for the start, still quite a wait, it was about 0745. I went to drop my street kit bag in the cage for transport to the finish, there is a guy leaning over the back of the cage looking in, he was in a hoody, definitely looked a bit dodgy. Was he going through the bags? I made eye contact with him, it was only Jonny Brownlee! I used the internationally recognised hale between blokes "alright?". I took seeing Jonny as a good omen for a good day.

I went down for a warm-up swim with Rob Lennox, I raced into the water like it was proper start, no problem getting into the water and swimming, the water was surprisingly warm. I made a very inelegant exit from the sea, no drama though, that helped with my confidence.

I got into the funnel for the rolling start, I had heard that it was going to be chaotic, I also expected to be slow in the swim, as it would be my first sea swim race and the "washing machine" to contend with. I stayed with those expecting a 1:35 to 1:40 finish, I thought that was realistic. My fastest 7 laps of LP was 1:22 in the last couple of weeks.

My nerves have gone now, the build-up is very exciting, there are drones flying overhead, the MC is giving us encouragement, there is thumping music and great support from MVH'ers and family. That "Say Geronimo" track will always bring back that moment.

The pros go off with a big fanfare, the drones are really buzzing around now. We start to move down the funnel to the start, I'm trying to clean my goggles which have misted up whilst sitting on top of my head. I'm rubbing at the lenses, I realise they are cheap ones from Aldi, and whilst the don't leak they might fall apart of I'm too rough. Just nerves.

I get to the end of the funnel and into the water, it's a bit chaotic but not as bad as I thought. I go a good bit left to avoid any trouble, the last thing I want at that point was a kick in the shoulder, I turn at the first buoy and now its plains sailing, I get into a nice rhythm. I am going quite quickly and overhauling a number of swimmers, it was difficult to get past some swimmers who were drafting or swimming alongside each other, that was a bit frustrating. I turn at the last buoy and head out to see which is a strange feeling, the sea state changes here and the swimming is a little more difficult and I've lost my rhythm a bit, I turn and head back towards the finish, the sea state is better now, and I think "That's more than half-way, and the current is carrying me back, happy days", I think I'm going quickly but have a sudden feeling of doubt, maybe I'm going really slow and I'm not going to make the cut-off. I look over to my left and there is a long tail of swimmers and long way behind me, that is encouraging. It is a bit chaotic on this leg, I can see I am a long way out to sea now, I have been sighting well and I'm happy I am on track. There are swimmers to my right who look more then 200 metres away. There are swimmers coming across my path at nearly right angles to my direction! The swell is quite high on this stretch, some strokes miss the water as I sink into a trough, some don't come out of the water as I ride up a swell. I'm still feeling strong, my breathing is in good shape, I have taken on board some water, but I'm not panicking. I turn at the last buoy and head for the beach, I can see a lot of people on the beach, they are making a lot of noise, I pick up speed and race for the beach, it's difficult to see where the swim exit is, so I aim for the centre of the crowd. I'm looking forward to getting onto the bike now. I get to the surf-line and the sea is quite rough, I can see people on my right getting swept off their feet, I just keep swimming onto the beach, the sea recedes an I'm on my feet and running. I've lost my swim hat, oh well, I'm not going back for it. There's a big shout from the crowd, Elaine and co have got right to the front, I didn't

expect to see them. I look at my watch to check my time and press lap, I haven't pressed start in the excitement, I always do that when I'm racing!

It's pretty chaotic in transition now, I'm struggling to find my red bag, and I struggle finding elbow room to change. I get out into bike transition, I've got all my gear and I'm good to go. I get straight to my bike, more by luck than preparation I think. There are still a lot of bikes in transition, I must be doing Okay. There are a lot of people moving in transition, I don't want to fall over anybody or knock anybody over either, I remember somebody complaining about somebody getting in their way at the mount line, I make sure I don't get in anybody's way and nobody is in my way. I'm off. It's a bit of a messy start with some switchbacks and uneven surfaces, then I'm on the narrow road which runs along between the town and the railway line. I'm behind two fast looking boys, the chap on the right loses control messing with bottles or nutrition and runs into the other chap, the both scrape along the high curb for a few feet and then end up into of each other, I just breeze past thinking, the guy on the left is going to be very upset, hopefully they both are unhurt and can continue, that would be a horrible way to end your race. I'm on the main race route now, on my first lap. It's a bit hilly at the start but I'm setting a good pace, I'm enjoying being in the saddle, there is lots of support at the start of the bike route. I'm trying not to draft but it is pretty much ignored down in the ranks of the age-groupers, as the day goes on I see groups of 40 or 50 riders all together. The stretch before the turn at the end of the lap is long flat and pretty featureless, with few supporters, I'm not enjoying that stretch. My neck is getting very sore by the end of the first lap, I've noticed that since I broke my collarbone, that's making it hard for me to get into aero position, that means I'm in a funny position which is hurting my bum, and giving me lower-back pain, I'll just need to keep moving about and stretching my neck.

I'm passing lots of cyclists, some on really fancy bikes, that's very pleasing. It's difficult to know who's on what lap after the leaders have passed on the way back on the first lap. When I am on my last lap though I can see how many people are behind me, I'm doing Okay. There is great support at the turn in Calella, lots of MVHers making big noise. I was carrying plenty of nutrition so I didn't need to stop at many aid stations, I did need to top-up with Powerbar energy drinks, I didn't need to stop, the aid stations were pretty slick operations. The last lap was a bit tricky, there was a big crash on a hill just outside Calella, they guy on the floor was making a lot of noise, something had really upset him, the next challenge was the final aid station before Calella, as I was approaching I thought there must have been another crash there were so many people in the road, as I got there I realised there were lots of people off their bikes, eating or drinking at the aid station and many walking up the hill, it was a bit tricky to get the crowd, but I'm not far from the bike finish now, I'm pretty sore now, sore back, sore arse, sore neck and the tell-tale pain in my arm related to my broken collarbone. I'm pretty keen to get off my bike now. I get into bike transition, there is obviously a lot of people still on the road, that's encouraging, I'm doing okay. I rack my bike and give her a pat, "Well done my iron steed". I need to use the loo now, I use the open-air urinal, that'll be fast. I can see that I'm not very well hydrated, I need to sort that out, I've got a drink in my red run bag. It's not very busy in transition tent now, the field has obviously really spread out, there is a lot of chat and encouragement now, I see a couple of people I know. I run out of transition, there are a lot pf people on the route, the atmosphere is electric. I've got about 7 hours until cut off, I'm beginning to think I'm going to do it. In fact, if I can do a 4 hour marathon I might finish with a great time, dream on! The first lap is stacked with people, shouting encouragement, lots of people shouting my name, I assume I must know then at first, but they are just reading my bib. It is great encouragement and a

great atmosphere. I get to the end of my first lap and I can hear the winner crossing the finish line, that is an impressive effort.

The other end of the lap is very different, there is nobody up there other than runners, again you can't tell what lap anybody is on as there are no wristbands. I'm running past quite a lot of fit young looking types, many are coming past me too. After about 3km I can't run any longer, I can't really figure out why, my arm hurts a bit, my lower back hurts a bit but nothing to stop me running, it's just pure fatigue, I'm not sure I've ever experienced this in quite this way. It's going to be a really long way if I have to walk long stretches, that is a bit demoralising. The support helps, but the end of the lap where there are no crowds seems to go on forever. I turn for my last lap, Lisa Wright is just running to the finish, she's done a great time. She shouts to me, "Keep going Stuart, you're going to be an Ironman", that brought tears to my eyes and gave me a real boost. It's dark now on that last lap, there are a lot of people walking on the run track, I'm still running past fit young looking types. I got a bit of extra energy on the last lap and that felt a little bit easier, my arm is hurting quite a lot now, I could really do with some painkillers. I'm getting close to the finish now, I can hear the MC shouting "You are an Ironman" to finishers, the finish chute is lighting up the sky. There are a couple of people up ahead of me, I decide to slow down a bit so I can milk it a bit as I run into the finish, they turn left for another lap, my heart goes out to them. There is a steep bank and turn made out of plywood and it a little unsteady as you turn into the finish chute, I nearly fell over. It's a bit unreal as you run down the finish chute, the noise is deafening, the lights are blinding. I'm holding two thumbs up like the Fonz, I'm high-fiving somebody, I can't remember anybody saying "You are an Ironman" I'm assured the did. I can see Elaine in the crowd, waving madly. That's it! I'm across the line, somebody puts my medal over my head, I've done it; I'm an Ironman! I must get that collarbone fixed.