

# **Busselton Ironman 2010 – Race Report**

## **Blissful Suffering**

As I write this I've completed 3 Ironman triathlons. All have been different in their own ways, yet remarkably similar in many aspects; distance, anxiety and of course pain and suffering. But this is a recount of my second attempt at 'the big daddy' of the sport of triathlon, the Ironman. I've talked to many about my day in early December 2010, but putting this down on paper is as much about preserving memories as it is about others learning of my experience. Out of the three Ironman's I have done, it was in Busselton where I really learnt what lurks deep down in my soul, in a place only accessible with countless hours of preparation culminating in 10 hours of blissful suffering.

My first Ironman in New Zealand in March 2010 was a true watershed of my life. I completed it in under 11 hours on a thoroughly enjoyable day. I know that sounds strange but looking back I couldn't recall really hurting all that much. Sure it was tough but our preparation, carefully guided by Mark Turner, paid dividends come race day and both I and my newly 'wifed' Sarah had a great race both going an hour under our goal times. Afterwards I was keen to knuckle down again for another campaign to give it another crack. We both agreed Busselton in WA was the next race and signed up not 4 weeks after getting back from NZ.

## **The Long Road Ahead**

Winter was a fairly lazy affair with only a moderate training load of social rides, fun runs and little swimming. The BTS bike camp in July was set to be the start of the 8 week build through to 12 weeks out from the race. A solid 350k weekend felt ok, but I wasn't 100% and sure enough, that following week I was struck down with a bad bacterial sinus infection rendering me couch bound for a week and off training altogether for 3 weeks. I remember my first ride back after recovering, riding over the new Gateway bridge I could barely make it up, Sarah waiting for my at the top. Great start to the season, a 20 week build down to 16 already.

With consistent but casual training week on week for 4 weeks for of easy rides and short runs, gradually my fitness returned to the point where Mark and I were confident that I could handle the training load of a full IM program.

My wife Sarah and I had decided to do Busselton in December not long after we got back from New Zealand in March. We thought there would be a few from the squad going over, however only Sarah, Coach Suz and I ended up racing. Given Suz's coaching commitments and moving down to the Gold Coast, Sarah and I ended up doing pretty much all of our training together. When we signed up for these races, we knew the training would be tough physically and mentally, however with 20 hours a week committed to training, it really tested the resilience of our relationship like never before.

To my mind, Busselton has the perfect leadup races of any local Ironman race, Gold Coast half IM at 9 weeks out and Noosa at 5 weeks. This allowed us to test our bodies at consistent intervals, as well as honing race craft. They also work perfectly with the recovery week being straight after each race, so vitally important to training and racing at peak condition. Although I went into each race quite fatigued at the end of 3 solid build weeks, I was very happy with both races, posting 20 and 5min PB's at the HIM and Noosa respectively.

Part of the journey to Ironman is to complete a 200k ride with full race nutrition. In previous years the squad had done the ride up to Calounda via Montville. This is a long and gruelling ride which really gives you confidence heading into the race, but for Busselton, given it was a pancake flat ride with potential winds, we instead chose a ride from Southport to Byron Bay and back. This was a perfect test for us as we were able to spend a straight 5 hours on the aero bars. Being able to stay in the aero position for long periods of time without being uncomfortable is vital to posting a good bike split, then being able to run off the bike. We both felt really good after the ride and short run, things were starting to come together well for race day.

### **The Race Plan**

Before you go into any race you need to have a goal, and to reach any goal you need a plan. My goal was to go under 10 hours. To do so would mean I'd need to go almost an hour faster than I did in NZ only 9 months earlier. The course is known to be fast and Mark and I figured that it was going to be about 20mins faster, mostly on the bike leg with the rest having to come from sheer hard work and race planning. I knew I could knock 5mins off in transition as Busselton has one of the shortest transitions with T1 only 100m from the swim exit. That left 30mins. I was pretty happy with my 3:53 run at NZ but I knew I needed to go quicker to reach my goal.

Enter early morning Mt Cootha runs. Sarah and I did these every week for 8 weeks starting with 1 1/2 hour and peaking with 2 1/2 hours and 28k of trails and hills. I firmly believe these made the biggest difference on race day as not only was I running stronger, I was able to run on tired legs much better, meaning I could push the bike a lot harder than I had previously.

Our bike sessions weren't too much different to our previous campaign, with hill repeats during the week and our Sunday rides starting a 4 hours and topping out at 6. Long, slow, controlled heart rate was the aim of these long sessions, but afterwards we were pretty well shattered, so Sunday afternoon was usually sleeping on the couch. While swimming was my strength, I still needed lots of time in the pool. My staple set every week was 20x100's with paddles and 10 pushups on 2mins. Like everyone else, I love the wetsuit, but I do find it restricts my arm recovery more than I'd like, so these sets were perfect for building arm strength and endurance for the 3.8k swim in a restrictive wetsuit.

2 weeks out from race day, while taking a Friday morning swim session I was stretching my glutes sitting on the starting blocks when I felt a twinge in my lower back. Thinking nothing of it I got in pool for my usual 20x100's but my back had flared up and was killing me. I got out to find I couldn't support my lower back, with it collapsing in pain. A visit to the physio confirmed that I'd torn my spinus erectus muscles which support the back bone. This had me really worried as it hurt to do anything. Lots of physio and heat after an initial few days of rest had me back mobilised but only doing water running, wind trainer and pull buoy sets. Being 2 weeks out though, I wasn't going to gain any more fitness, and with the right volume, I could have a 2 week taper and have the back right for race day.

After 100km in the pool, 4,000km on the bike, and 700km of running, all in 260 hours over 5 months, we were ready to race.

### **Land of the Sandgropper**

Busselton is a picturesque town about 200km south of Perth and in the Margaret River region. Ever December the town is inundated with the tense excitement of 1500 Ironman athletes and their families. We were fortunate enough to have good friends Mark, his wife

Elka and their gorgeous little girl Georgia, living in the town so accommodation was sorted. It was ironic that we were staying with Mark as he got us into the sport 4 years earlier when he challenged me to do the swim leg at Noosa.

Not having a big group over there was actually quite good for me. I tend to go into my shell before a big race and become a bit of a recluse. Without the distractions I could get out on the course to familiarise myself with it and visualise my race.

### **Sunday, 5th December 2010**

Waking to my alarm on race morning, I went through the usual mental argument with myself, "would anyone care if I slept in and missed the race?". Remembering all the sacrifices made, and expectations of family and friends, I came to my senses and climbed out of bed to prepare for the day.



A breakfast of 2 Up&Go's a banana and Powerbar, we headed down to transition to make the final preparations after dropping our bikes and gear bags off the day before. We were set to embark on a journey 5 months in the making. The morning was cool but still for the time being. Hopefully the expected 20 knot south westerly, known as 'The Freemantle Doctor' wouldn't kick in until the afternoon when we were on the run to give a wanted reprise to the heat that would build throughout the day.

Entering the cool, clear morning water, the stillness hid the unrelenting torrent of arms and legs which was to come. My plan for the swim was to be more aggressive than in NZ and try to get into the lead group to get a draft for as long as possible. I seeded myself front and centre, anxiously waiting in neck deep water until the cannon sent 6000 arms and legs on a 226km journey.

The starting horn sounds like that from almost any other race, only you know that this one is different, this one signals the start of a long day, and for some exceptionally dedicated people, a long night.



I quickly settled into a solid rhythm, trying not to let the nerves and anxiety overcome my ability. Quickly though I realised that I wasn't with the fast guys, they were 50m off to my right and left. I found myself at the front of a large group of slower swimmers who were

wanting to stick to my feet and not come through to take a turn. I considered crossing to one of the other packs but the distance would of meant I'd loose quite a lot of ground, so I just knuckled down and tried to hold a decent pace out to the end of the pier.

When I got there some 30mins later I was still able to see the ocean floor some 10m below, the water was that clear. At the turn around the groups merged so for the return leg I was able to get into a pack of about 20 and draft most of the way home. Having this made the return leg go by much quicker then on the way out, and I existed the water in 54 minutes. Transition is no more then 100m from the exit so I was quickly able to grab my T1 bag and head out on the bike for the 3 lap course in around 2 mins.

The Busselton bike course is flat and fast, but I has some long sections of open road where the prevailing wind makes life tough. My plan was to spend the first 45mins getting the heart rate under control from over 85% to my race rate of 75%, and warm the legs up for the big day to come. Unfortunately I take up to an hour on the bike to feel good, so I use this time to get my body into the groove and dial my nutrition in which consists of solids/gel and water ever half hour and electrolyte on the 15 & 45, for a total fluid intake of 700ml per hour.

The first lap felt good, I came into town well under my goal time, my back felt fine and the wind on the return leg wasn't too bad. The second lap was much the same, although this time the wind had picked up and the last 15k into town was pushing headlong into it. The second lap was a similar time to the first. Having warmed up and able to push, I was feeling great and even managed a little celebratory 'woo hoo' to myself for no other reason then I was feeling on top of the world. On the final lap, heading out of town I was sitting on 45km/hr with little effort, this would mean a tough return journey.



At this stage I'd yet to see Sarah all day. As I was heading out to the turn around, she passed me and shouted something out I couldn't quite understand. This couldn't be right, she was over 90mins down on me so something must have happened to her. A little later when passing the on course mechanics, she had stopped on the side of the road, 3 mechanics working on her bike, she shouted out "keep going, I'm fine". Still unaware of what happened I pressed on.

It turned out that on the second lap, her chain snapped, causing the rear derailleur to be ripped off and a spoke to break (sorry Timmy). The mechanics got her going again, but only by reconnecting the chain without the derailleur therefore with only 1 gear to finish the rest of the 100km bike leg. To her absolute credit, she got through the bike and was still able to run the marathon, not a PB, but finishing more elated then if she had.

Many people have said to me how boring it must be to spend 5 or more hours on a bike, in one position, with no one to talk to. The reality is far different. In an IM race, and indeed even during long training rides, there is so much to think about that the time flies. Heart

rate, speed, cadence, elapsed time, estimated ride time, nutrition, hydration, drafting distances; all aspects which need to be monitored to ensure that you finish in a good time, and feeling good.

The aim of a well paced Ironman distance event is to come off the bike feeling fresh, like you haven't ridden, let alone spent the past 5 plus hours in one position hammering your legs. Your back, glutes and hamstrings needs to feel good, and your nutrition spot on so that you have enough food in you system to avoid having to eat anything solid on the run. I pushed the bike harder then planned. My average heart rate was 76%, and I'd ridden a 5:15, 10mins quicker then the target time. So when I got off the bike and headed out on the 4 lap marathon course, I felt apprehensive about how good I felt. It was still very early days though and the time gained on the bike could easily be lost on the run if I had to walk.



My original goal for the marathon was to run around 3:35, needing an average pace of 5:05min k's. My race plan though was to do a run-walk strategy, running for 9:30mins, walking 30 seconds. This needed a 5min/k pace. The first 21k's went well, but I was really struggling to hold the pace needed. By half way I was on target for a 3:40 which would get me under the magic 10 hours, and I still had time up my sleeve from the time made on the bike. My nutrition was going well, a gel and water every second aid station and gatorade every other.

On lap 3 though things took a turn for the worse. At around 24k I put a gel down onto a cramping stomach, which only made it worse. My pace went to hell from the discomfort of the cramps, falling to the high 5's. I pushed through most of the lap but was losing time badly. At this stage I knew I had to reset, so I took a toilet break (my first and only for the day it turned out) with 2k to go of the third lap.

Mark Turner had been out there all day urging us on, asking how we felt and that we were looking strong, but this time when I saw him as I ran back into town, he knew I had lost time and ran beside me for a short while building my confidence with words of wisdom. To be honest I can't remember much of what he said, only that I had to pull it together to beat 10 hours.

Getting back going again, I pulled out my secret weapon, a Redbull shot. I found out in training, that for some reason, these things transform my mental and physical state. Throwing it back, I felt rejuvenated and ready to nail the last lap. With 6kms to go, I was line ball to making it home in time, so I ditched the run-walk strategy and went for broke. As I made the final turn into town, I grabbed the last lap band, this time a red one, the one which I'd been longing for all afternoon, and looked down at my watch, it was going to be close. As I turned around the final corner, finish line in sight, the clock read 9:59, this was going to be close.



I don't remember too much of the finish straight, only that ridiculously they had a ramp going up to the finishing line which took the last ounces of energy from your legs. But fortunately, as I crossed the line in 9:59:20, I was greeted by two 'catches' who, you guessed it, catch you as you literally fall over the finishing line.

The effort of the day, the elation of reaching a goal that I have had years before but never thought was achievable, eventually became a reality as I laid on the massage table face down, eyes closed, deep in my own consciousness. I shed a tear.

Looking back on the 9 months of solid training I did for Busselton, then New Zealand 3 months later, what really stands out in my mind is the support and interest of my family and friends, and in particular my training friends. Having their understanding and keen interest in what Sarah and I were putting ourselves through to pursue a goal really drives home that this crazy triathlon event called Ironman isn't really about the race, it's about the journey you go on and the things you learn about yourself as you teach you body over many months of training to endure 226k of blissful suffering in one day, and love it.

