

## Challenge Cairns Race Report- 5<sup>th</sup> June 2011-Belinda Daniels

3.8km swim, 180km bike and 42 km run-Iron distance

My race day inspirational words that I had taped to my arm to look at when things got tough:

- Tough it out
- One foot at a time
- Keep smiling!!!!

(Apologies in advance very very long!!! More of a short story really than a race report) You might need a beer or a cup of tea before you sit down to read this!!





My decision to enter my first Iron distance race was made in late 2010. I had yet to race my first half. I had entered the Port Macquarie 70.3 the previous May 2010, with entries selling out in one week for a race that was 12 months away. At the time of entering the half it felt like the ultimate challenge. I was shaking when my sister Megan entered us both in the 70.3 at Port.

I have been doing triathlons now for nearly 3 years and had only raced 3 Olympic distance races before my first half in May 2011 followed by the full in June 2011. I have steadily seen my results improve going from a 3hr race at Noosa (Olympic distance) to a 2hr 40min the next year. I also had a good season with the sprint distance stuff finishing 8<sup>th</sup> overall in my age group for the Gatorade series in 2011. This is a far cry from my first few triathlons where I was pretty much last in my age group!! I never been a very athletic person and I dabbled in a few team sports at school but was never very good at them.

However, my triathlon journey is not about the results and the places. It is about the fantastic friendships I have made over the past 3 years in the sport, the achievement of committing to a routine and a lifestyle and pushing yourself to do something many people would never dream of. I have been lucky to have the support of great group of people (coaches and friends) within my squad Brisbane Tri Squad (BTS), along with my husband Brett who is also afflicted with the triathlon addiction. My work place has also been supportive especially over the last few months when training has been eating into time at work on the odd occasion; however, it is all swings and roundabouts.

I think my decision to enter the full Iron distance at Cairns came at a point in my life when I needed something out of the ordinary to focus on. The past 6 months had been tough for my family. Dad had suffered a mild heart attack in May 2010 and we watched as his health declined. After numerous specialist appointments, he was initially diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. This was then revised a couple of months ago to Sub nuclear Palsy. This disease is rare only 1300 people in Australia have been diagnosed with it and Doctors are not sure of the cause. There is no available treatment. The effects of this disease are devastating. Dad is almost wheel chair bound and has lost most of his speech. Mum needs a carer in each day to help with his daily routine.

My Dad has worked a life on the land. He was always a very physically strong and fit man. Family friends used tell us stories of seeing Dad out running along the road near our family property. My parents had a cattle property nearby Emerald which had been in Dad's family since the early 1900's. After a full day's work on the property he still managed to go out for a run. Amazing! My sister and I adored spending time with Dad. Because we lived too far from school Mum taught us at home, we used to break our necks to finish school for the day so we could go out mustering on our horses with Dad or drive around the property. My Dad is the quiet type and doesn't say a lot.

My husband Brett says what chance does the poor man have living with a house of 3 women (of course he could rarely get a word in!!) I know however how proud Dad is of his girls. I remember once as a teenager having a fight with him over something trivial I am sure. Dad said to me "Everything I have ever worked for is for you girls." It makes you understand the love of a parent.

Over Christmas 2010 Dad hit a low point mentally. The embarrassment, humiliation, and frustration of his disease were getting to him. We had a family dinner for New Year Eve on the coast and then Brett and I dropped Mum and Dad back up to Maleny. As we went to go Dad broke down and started crying. He said to me "you be careful on your bike I don't want you to die". In my 34 years I don't think I had ever seen my father cry, even at his mother's funeral. I sat there for 10 minutes sobbing and hugging him. I think it was what he needed someone to acknowledge that it was tough for him and that he wasn't coping. From that point on I knew that I would be racing at Cairns for my Dad.

I talked over my decision to do the full iron distance at Cairns with my husband Brett and he was supportive. He said you have shown the commitment to consistent training over the past 12 months so you will be fine. I entered the race then spoke to my coach Mark, the head coach of BTS. I was nervous about the conversation when I asked Mark if he would write a program for me to get to Cairns. I had visions of Mark laughing at me (if you know Mark he would never do this, funny how the mind works though). Mark looked at me and said "yep your ready you will get there".

My 20 week Iron distance training program started in mid-January. By this time there were 6 of us from BTS doing the full at Cairns, Jacqui, Ray, Andrew, Shane and Berlinda. We also had the BTS IMNZ group and IMOZ group training alongside us. I went and watched my good friends Alicia Newman and Sarah Hulme complete their first IM's in Taupo NZ. The girls had a brilliant day and it gave me confidence that I would get through my day as well. I then watched the IMOZ group at Port Mac after my half. Again the guys and girls did so well.

The first month of the program was swimming, swimming and swimming. I think I was swimming 6-7 times a week. It wasn't until the 16 week mark that things got a bit harder. The hours on the bike were building and a 5-6 hour Sunday ride became the norm. My training load went from avg 10-12 to nearly 15-17hrs per week, I was so lucky to have Jacqui to do most of my long rides with. The boys were a bit faster than us so we left them to it and Berlinda lived on the Gold Coast so she did her training there.

Jacqui and I passed many an hour on our long rides chatting about life. It was nice to have the support of such a great training buddy and friend. I also kept in touch with Berlinda from our Gold Coast squad and we all supported each other. There were weeks when things were tough and a text and email from Jac and or Berlinda kept me going.

As women we can very hard on ourselves, second guessing ourselves, so the girls helped me keep on even keel and put things into perspective. The boys were also fabulous I could not have asked for a nicer more supportive group of people to share the Cairns experience with.

I have to also mention my wonderful husband Brett, who kept me fed and watered during my training. Brett was the ultimate bike mechanic making sure my bike was well maintained and running safely. Brett was on the receiving end of more than the occasional training meltdown over the 20 weeks, but thankfully, we got there. He understood how hard it can be training for an ironman given he had done one the previous year. I have promised him a new TT bike as thank you. He is pretty lucky!!

## RACE DAY

The alarm went off at 4am. I had been awake since 3:30. I felt rested and managed 6 hrs sleep. I had my brekkie and then my stomach started to turn, so I popped a couple of degas tablets (these things are a godsend).

We all piled in the car and drove out to Yorkey's Knob, the start was about 20kms out of Cairns. I put all my drinks on the bike and then it was time to get in the wet suit.

There were lots of hugs with squad members, other tri friends and supporters and I held it together pretty well until I went to say goodbye to Brett and then the reality of what I was about to do hit me. I shed a few tears then pulled it together and walked to the start with the rest of the full crew. We all wished each other well then found our spots at the start. It was a beach start so we started standing in waist deep water. I got talking to the girl beside me she said she was nervous, I told her you will be fine. I asked her if this was her first full and she said no it's my 6<sup>th</sup> and then she laughed when she heard it was my first. She said I should be the one supporting you!!

Before we knew it the race had started, no Ironman cannon or musket, just a horn. I settled into a nice rhythm after a few minutes. The course was quite technical we had a total of 7 buoys to swim around on each lap and given it was an m shape there were several sharp turns. I kept saying to myself get on a nice pair of feet or hips and ride the magic carpet along. Before I knew it I was standing up after my first lap, I glanced down 34minutes xx. Great I was swimming better than my half swim at port. We ran up the ramp and around beach about 90mtres before re-entering the water. I reckon this took me about 3 minutes. The half guys were in waiting for their start. Next thing I knew I had 50 or so age group men doing the half smashing over the top of me. This was unsettling and as each wave started and the faster people swam through it was hard to get into a rhythm. In general, the swim was pretty clean except for one guy who pushed me down under the water at my shoulder blades. Pity I couldn't get my fist working fast enough!! At last I was back out stood up in about 1hr 13 mins. I was happy enough, I knew the 2 laps and beach run was going to take me a bit extra time.

I grabbed my gear bag for the bike. The vollies were a bit new so they just stood watched me struggle out of my wetsuit (not to worry they will get this sorted for next time). Brett told me to take my time in transition and make sure I had everything.

In total T1 was about 10 minutes, but I used the time to put on sunscreen and make sure all my food was in my jersey pockets. Brett joked that I should have packed a knife and fork as I had so much food. Finally, I was on the bike.

The road looked pretty good. Brett passed me about 3 minutes into the bike after his half swim. It was nice to see him. The first section was a bit rough in parts with a narrow shoulder. In general most people took it easy through this bit (it really should have been a single, no passing zone as it was a bit narrow). I was as far left as possible without running into rough loose gravel, when some rude guy screamed at me "get over, get over. Sorry buddy my hearing is gone .Have a nice day.

My legs felt pretty heavy for the first hour or so. I was sitting on about 27kms hour. So many people had told me take it easy on the bike. I remember recently reading fellow BTS Ironman Dave Doyle's race report for IMOZ and him saying "you have a marathon to run after this take it easy on the bike". The course was very scenic the ocean was aqua/green blue, just beautiful.

I hit Rex Hill, the highest point of the course, the climb was fine and the view was awesome. I decided I needed to stop off at the porta loo at the 2<sup>nd</sup> aid station. I was just about to walk over to the loo when this guy pulled up and barged in front of me. Oh well he looked in a hurry and a bit of a serious stick insect so I just let him go.

The half people turned before Port Douglas, after this the course thinned out. It was nice to get a few call outs from people I knew who were heading back home on the half ride. I saw Brett again and he gave me wave and smile. I see Andrew, then Ray, Jac and Shane all heading back for their second lap, they were all looking good. I am pleased they are all having a good race. .

Just as I was about to reach Port Douglas, I heard the motor bike behind me. My instant reaction was to panic, I was looking around there was no one near me surely I wasn't being done for drafting. The guy said it's ok just letting you know the pro men are about to pass you. I turned around to see Macca flash past on his second lap.

I reached Port Douglas and heard my name being called. It was Jacque G, then Muffy and finally I saw Anthea Howard. It was great to see familiar faces.

I also see Berlinda on her way into Port D, she says she is having a tough day as her stomach had been playing up

After the turn at Port Douglas things started getting harder. I thought to myself I wish I didn't need to do another lap. My feet were starting to hurt like never before, the hot spots were so bad I felt like my cleats were burning a hole through my shoe. At one stage I was pedalling with one foot at a time out on top of my shoe. I tried to take my mind off things by looking at the gorgeous ocean and breathing in the salt air. I was hurting on the bike like I had never felt before. The 190km ride we did with the squad was way tougher in terms of gradient and I didn't have this much pain that day. I guess you are a racing at a different intensity on race day.

There are a small group of us battling away on the bike. I was a bit annoyed when I saw the faster riders riding in big groups of 10 or so and drafting away as there was minimal TO bikes

on course. As much as the 12 metre rule at IM races is annoying I do think it results in a much cleaner race. A lovely American girl and I are riding about the same pace and finally we roll into transition. 7hrs 24mins (including 2 loo stops, not so bad).

As much as I wanted to get off the bike, my mind turned to the 42km run I had ahead of me whilst I was sitting in T2. I thought to myself come on let's get this done. As soon as I was out on the run course all the pain from the bike was gone. I was running well and everyone around me was walking. I must have passed about 10 people on my way into town. I was surprised that I was able to hold the run together. Whilst everybody said the run into town was going to be tough because it was a lonely 19kms stretch with no spectators other than the aid stations, I actually enjoyed it. It was cooling off (about 3:30pm in the afternoon) and I was happy in my own thoughts. Before I know it 12kms had gone by. I saw a familiar green BTS singlet running towards me. It was coach Mark out for an afternoon run. It was nice to have a bit of a chat and soon I hit the Esplanade. My first 21 kms was done in 2hrs30mins.

I saw Ray heading home on his last lap with only about 3kms to go, he had a great race and I was so happy for him. I ran along the length of the Esplanade and through the crowds I saw my sister Megan, Brett and the BTS crew and friends all waiting for me to pass on my first lap. I got a bit emotional, as I had not seen anyone much since leaving Port Douglas about 4 hours ago. Finally, I got my first band, that first lap seemed like it never ended.

I see my good friend and training buddy Jacqui Elliot collect her last band whilst I was on my first lap. We walked through the aid station together; I gave her a hug and told her to enjoy the finish. It gave me a bit of a boost to see her on the way to finishing, but that was short lived.

Whilst I had managed to only walk through aid stations, things started to unravel for me at about 30kms. I hear people talk about the wall, I hit it big time. My legs started to feel like blocks of cement and mentally I still wanted to run but I couldn't. I walked more extended stretches for about 5kms, and then I started to feel better. I told myself I didn't come here to walk the marathon and got going again. At one stage I was jogging and there was a bloke walking who passed me. I made a comment to that effect and he just said keep going matey you will get there!!! I laughed to myself maybe it was quicker walking. Parts of the course were very dark with minimal people around; it was easy to slacken off when things were getting tougher.

As the night wore on each time I arrived at the aid station the lovely vollies would say what do you want water, ice, electro mix, lollies, coke? I would stare blankly for a few seconds unsure what I needed and then make a decision.

I ran past the support crew on my second last lap. Kristen one of my squad friends knew I was doing it tough, she said do you want some company for the last lap. So she met me after I had done the pier and kept me going for the last 6 kms I needed to get done showing up at points on the run. Finally I collected my red (last lap band) it was like holding the winning lotto ticket!!!

The feeling of running down the finish Shute was amazing; all the pain of the last 14hrs plus hrs was dissolved. The great thing about challenge races is that you can have family members run with you up the finish, so my sister Megan ran with me. I could not wipe the

smile off my face. I even managed a skip and high 5 to some people in the corporate box at the finish line.

Whilst my day was much longer than I expected (I initially was hoping for between 12.5hrs and 14hrs) I was happy to finish in 14hrs:51 minutes. I needed no medical assistance and felt good the next day. It is easy to downplay the achievement and feel disappointed about not hitting a certain goal time, but if you finish an iron distance race, you are part of an exclusive club of people. Less than 1% of the Australian population has completed an ironman.

So many people have told me I have inspired them (I am a bit embarrassed when I hear this as I never think of myself as a role model). My message is simple if you believe in yourself and commit to a goal you can achieve what you want in life. It took me 34 years, plus one iron distance race to learn that lesson!

### ***Thank you***

There is a long list of people who have helped with my journey who I need to thank. My husband Brett, for his support and encouragement and his never failing belief in me. Brett had 2 flats on his half IM day at Cairns, but he said to me afterwards I am glad I got the flats instead of you. That sums up him up.

My Mum and Dad and sister Megan (Dad you are always in my thoughts).

To the numerous friends, family and work colleagues for your words of support and donations to my Every Day Hero cause for Parkinson's Queensland. I have raised nearly \$2,700 well exceeding my initial goal of \$2,000.

My Brisbane Tri Squad coach Mark Turner, for getting me drawn into the crazy triathlon sport at a Suncorp staff Bridge to Brisbane run training session 3 years ago. When Mark first met me a 5km run was a big achievement for me! Mark has since coached me through my first Ironman distance race. Your words of encouragement and support have been awesome.

To the great bunch of people Ray, Jac, Shane, Berlinda and Andrew who I trained with for the full at Cairns. We lived in each other pockets, on our bikes and at the Valley Pool for the past 20 weeks, I couldn't have asked for a better group to train with. And to my wider group of triathlete friends, who have supported me, provided wonderful advice and encouraged me along the way!