

Mark Turner is the head coach of Brisbane Triathlon Squad. In mid-2008 he undertook the mammoth task of completing 3 Ironman length triathlons in 3 days. This is his story of the build-up to the event, the 3 intense days and the aftermath.

WESTPAC TOUR DE TRI 2008

I have been asked a few times to write about my experiences in July last year when I did 3 Ironman in 3 days. The reason I have not done it is I didn't want to come across as blowing my own trumpet so to speak. However with the 24hr tour de tri coming up in June hopefully my experiences will encourage people to participate this year.

WHY?

I have always dreamt of doing something extreme. When I say extreme I don't mean climbing Mt. Everest or diving with great white sharks but an extreme endurance event. Something that would challenge me in every possible way. At the same time I wanted it to benefit others.

My eldest son William has epilepsy. After being born 9 weeks premature William started to have seizures at 6 months of age. At their worst he would have up to 200 seizures per day some. On one occasion those seizures nearly killed him and he spent a week in the intensive care unit. Fortunately these seizures are now under control through medication but they have permanently affected him. Now 7, William cannot talk, is not toilet trained and will forever be dependent on his family for support.

I decided to do the Tour de tri for Epilepsy Queensland for the great work they did supporting William and other people who suffer from epilepsy. I also wanted to raise funds for the Law Enforcement Torch Run which is a charity that has raised millions of dollars for athletes and their families who compete in the Special Olympics.

THE EVENT

Prior to the Tour De Tri I had only completed one Ironman in 2006. Whilst I was satisfied to finish I was unhappy with my time and certainly have some unfinished business with Ironman racing.

The thought of doing 3 IM in 3 days popped into my head when I started thinking about a charity endurance event I could do. I felt to really raise awareness and funds it had to be something a little crazy. So it didn't surprise me when I first started talking about it to a few people that their first reaction was often, "you're crazy."

After some more thought and deciding if I had time to train and do it, it became a reality. Before too long we had signed on Westpac as a major sponsor, formed an organising committee and set a date.

THE TRAINING

How do you train to do 3 IM in 3 days? I had limited time due to my commitments as a father, coach of Brisbane Triathlon Squad and head coach of the Brisbane Girls Grammar cross country and track and field programs. I knew I had to maximise my training time, ensure I get enough recovery and peak at the right time.

With approximately 5 months to prepare for the event I spent the first 4-6 weeks doing a lot of technique work and a few local sprint races. I believe that before starting a long aerobic preparation your technique needs to be sound. I think moderate speed work and drills especially in the run help to promote technical efficiency and give you a great starting point. I have been training consistently for many years now so I was confident in my aerobic conditioning but knew I would need to step it up for this.

Another training principle I believe in is specificity. Your training needs to replicate the demands of the event. The objective of the tour de tri was not complete each Ironman as fast as I could. It was about finishing them so I could recover from each and back up the next day.

My heart rate for the event would be between 130 and 150 which is 65-75% of my maximum. Whilst I use heart rate in training occasionally I don't rely on them and only use them as a guide. However for the tour de tri I would be using them to ensure I kept my heart rate in that range. Any higher and I would risk going too hard and not being able to back for the other days.

For my training I would also be using the altitude training facility located at Executive Excellence in Brisbane. I had limited amount of knowledge about altitude training but after their team approached me and said they could help with my training I decided to use it as part of my preparation. Twice a week I would spend 1 hour in their run chamber and another hour on the wind trainer using their altitude simulation equipment.

Initially I found this training quite difficult. It took a while for me to get used to going so slowly due to the altitude. However after a few weeks I really began to notice a positive change in my training. I was able to go faster at a lower heart rate and found that I was recovering well from my harder sessions.

Outside of the altitude training I tried to keep things simple. I had worked out a routine to fit in the hours required which meant doing a lot of my normal admin duties at night. A good training week would have me doing 2-3 swims including a long ocean swim of 60-70 mins, 4 rides per week including 1 long ride of 5-7 hours, 4-6 runs per week including 2 long runs of up to 3 hours and 2 core sessions where I would focus a lot body weight exercises.

My staple core workout was 6 chin ups, 12 push ups, 30 sec prone hold and a 30 sec squat hold x 20. I have used this workout for a number of years now and know how well I am going by how long it takes me. With my long runs and rides I would often combine them with my coaching duties at BTS and Girls Grammar. For example. If I had a 5.30am mid week bike session to coach I would get an hour done prior, then coach the session and finish with another 3-4 hours after. If I had an afternoon coaching session at Girls Grammar I would run for an hour prior, then run with the girls for their session and do another 1 hour after before coaching an evening swim session with BTS.

It was extremely hard at times to fit it all in but I knew it was for a short time only. Plus the fact I knew there were people relying on me to finish, made it a strong motivation to get the training done. I was also doing a lot of visualisation when I trained. I constantly pictured myself finishing the event on the third day and the elation I would feel as a result. I wanted to my mind to convince my body that no matter what happened I would finish.

I felt the key to being able to complete the tour de tri well was the ability to back up in the run. The swim would be a matter of just getting through as easy as possible and in some ways would be a good recovery from the day before. With the ride I was going to be able to sit in a pack with people that were joining me for the ride section of each day. However with the run I had to have the ability to back up and run the marathon for 3 days.

Other than a slight head cold about half way into my preparation the training went well. Naturally I was tired a lot and there were many occasions I asked myself whether I had bitten off more than I could chew. I managed to average about 18-20 hours training per week with my peak week around 26 hours. Looking back I don't think I could have done any more to get ready.

THE ACTUAL EVENT – DAY 1

The day before the event the reality of what I was about to undertake hit me. Up until then I had been so focused on training, coaching and life as normal. However driving down to the Gold Coast where the tour de tri was starting I had a very uneasy feeling in my stomach. The natural questions of, will I finish, am I fit enough, what if I get an injury all entered my head. I had really put myself out there and was trying to use the fact that people were relying on me to finish as a strong motivation.

So with some nerves I entered the water at 6.30am on a beautiful Friday July 25th morning at Currumbin Beach Surf Club for the first 3.8km swim. I had a few people join me for the swim as the guys from the surf club also assisted by keeping a lookout for Sharks in their rubber duckies. I had decided that I would enjoy every part of the 3 days as much as I can. The first swim was great and I thoroughly enjoyed being out there and getting lost in my thoughts.

Whilst the transitions were not quick I did not want to waste too much time between each leg so after a quick change and something to eat I was onto the bike. For the bike sections each day I had anywhere up to 20 cyclists riding with me. At times I felt like Cadel Evans with my own group of domestiques. Within the group there were a few cyclists working with me by protecting me from the wind and getting me food and drinks.

Many of the cyclists were friends from the triathlon community but more importantly a couple of them were very experienced Ironmen with multiple Hawaii finishes between them. Each day they were checking on me to see how I was feeling and ensuring I was getting enough food and drink.

The first bike leg took us south to the Queensland New South Wales Border and then north back to Helensvale, through Coomera, down to Cleveland and into the CBD to finish. We stopped at 90km each day and after the first 90km I was feeling good. The pace on the bike was fairly swift with our average around 32-34km per hour. The terrain was a mixture of flats and rolling hills but I just sat in the pack and enjoyed the views.

Coming into the CBD the Queensland Police gave us a motor bike escort from Southbank into Post Office Square. I have to say this was a real highlight with all the public looking on and going straight through the traffic lights. We had made great time completing the 180km in just under 6 hours including the break at 90km and stops for traffic lights etc. I started the marathon on day 1 feeling good and didn't really have any problems completing it in about 3.50. I found this pace to quite easy

and hoped that I could hold it for the next 2 days. Overall I felt pretty good after day one. After a massage and something to eat I headed home for a good night's sleep.

DAY 2

I woke up feeling okay having slept well. A little stiff but not too bad and I was starting to really believe I would finish the 3 days. The start of the second day was at Suttons Beach, Redcliffe. The team from the Redcliffe SLSC were on hand to set out the course for us on another beautiful morning. Flat calm water and another few swimmers to join me for the swim.

I had spent a lot of time training at Suttons Beach in the lead up so I was comfortable from the start. It took me a while to get going but I soon found a nice rhythm and really enjoyed the swim. Before too long we were back on the bike with a lot of the same faces from the day before. The second day's ride took us south back into Brisbane and then north again to Caboolture, Caloundra and finishing at Noosa.

Like the first day we were clipping along at a swift pace. My heart rate was still good and once I got going on the bike I felt really good. Having the luxury of being to sit in the pack and people passing me drinks and food made an enormous difference. Once we finished at the Lions Park in Noosa I knew I was past half way and despite everything I looked forward to starting the second marathon.

Up until this point I had no injury concerns, sore points and everything had sailed along smoothly. I didn't know how long that would last but was going to enjoy it while it did. Running along the Noosa River I was on a massive high. I was enjoying the adventure and I covered the first 21km 1.45 with my heart rate still sitting between 135 and 145. Keep it there I thought and I should finish the marathon somewhere between 3.35 and 3.50 like the day before.

It's amazing how things can change so quickly. At about the 23km mark I started to get some pain and tightness in my groin. The more I went to greater the pain became and for the next 6-8km I would jog/walk until the 30km mark where I couldn't run at all. The pain had moved around to the outside of my right knee whilst my groin area was still incredibly tight.

Now that I was walking I was also getting quite cold so I donned a jacket and set about walking the last 12km. I still had a positive mindset and thought with another massage, a good night's rest I'll be right to get through day 3. Though the final 12km of walking I found harder than any of the previous running I had done to that point.

After getting a massage I had a lot of difficulty walking. I started to shake and feel quite nauseas. That night I did not sleep much at all and would have to say I don't remember many times in my life when I have felt so unwell. Every time I rolled over in bed I would get shooting pains all over my body and also found myself having cold sweats. At that stage I had serious doubts about my ability to finish.

DAY 3

When I woke up and got in the car for the drive to the Mooloolaba Surf Club for the start of day 3 I wasn't looking forward to the day ahead. I could hardly walk and was still feeling unwell. The main effect of this was the fact that I did not want to eat anything. The thought of food was enough to

make me want to vomit. Although the thought of not finishing and letting a lot of people down was worse than any physical pain I was suffering. To get this far there was a huge team of people that made the tour de tri happen. I knew I had to do whatever I could to finish no matter what my body was telling me.

The pain in my right knee was my greatest concern. I wasn't sure what the problem was but hoped that once I got going it may come good. Paul Fien, my physiotherapist drove up from Brisbane that morning to see if there was anything he could do before I started. He felt the ITB on right knee was damaged and after giving me a work over taped it up and said "good luck, you'll need it."

People later said to me that the look on my face when I started the swim on the third day was one of pure discomfort and a wish to be somewhere else. Unfortunately they were right and I had no idea what my body would do once I started. Fortunately the conditions were perfect again and despite some minor cramping I made it through the swim. I still felt quite unwell but was able to eat something after the swim before I started the bike. The bike on day 3 took us north to Twin Waters and then west into the Sunshine Coast Hinterland before heading south to Caboolture and into the Brisbane CBD.

Paul had said that my knee shouldn't affect me too much on the bike but the run would be a different story. The first hour on the bike was in a word, horrible! Every joint, tendon, muscle and nerve ending ached. I kept trying to convince myself to take it 15 minutes at a time. My knee was sore but in comparison the rest of my body was much worse.

Once we got into the hinterland and surprisingly into a few hills I started to feel better. Maybe it was the fact I knew this would be my last ride and we were heading back to Brisbane. The closer we got to Brisbane the better I felt which I think reflected in the group. The pace picked up the closer we got to home so I think everyone was looking forward to getting off the bike.

I spent the last section of the bike trying to work out how long it would take me to walk a marathon assuming I wouldn't be able to run. I figured a time of about 6-7 hours should be reasonable and felt that once I started the final marathon I would finish no matter what.

After arriving in Brisbane CBD again I headed off to start the marathon. I tried to run but the pain in my right knee was too much so I set about doing as fast a walk as I could. At various intervals I would try and run but to no avail. After completing the first 10km I thought another 3 of those and I am home. I think the adrenaline was keeping me going as other than my knee I didn't feel too bad.

At about 12km I tried a slow jog and whether it was because my knee had gone numb or other points of my body started to hurt more I was actually able to do it. It certainly wasn't pretty and those with me said I looked like a wounded dog trying to run. The more distance I covered to more I was able to get out of a walk. I would walk 100m and then jog for about 5 mins and this worked well until about 23km.

At this stage my whole body started to shut down. I wasn't able to keep any food down and even water went straight through me to the point where I brought new meaning to the "ring of fire". My ankles were screaming with every step, I was cold, nauseas, couldn't take anything to give me energy and still had about 19km to go.

Every step of the final 19km was tough but at this stage nothing was going to stop me. I never stopped other than to go to the toilet (which was frequently) and constantly told myself I was nearly home. Just keep moving forward and I would make it. I had a few people travel the last km with me and it made all the difference. The last stretch into the finish line was a feeling of relief and elation. Crossing the finish line meant I had finished but the physical pain would be there for some time after.

POST EVENT REFLECTIONS

I didn't sleep very well the night after day 3 and continued to suffer shooting pains throughout my body that kept me awake. I spent the next 2 days on crutches as I was unable to put any weight down on my knee or ankles. After a few days off I was feeling better and coaching again but only from the sideline.

After 8 weeks of doing very little except for a few light bike rides I tried jogging. I was advised to rest the ITB for about 6-8 weeks and hopefully it would heal it's self. Initially I had no problems and after a couple of weeks of light training I did a local sprint race and then Noosa. I felt okay at the time but after Noosa my knee flared up again and my energy levels were rock bottom. In hindsight I came back too early and my body was not ready to train or especially race.

My knee eventually required surgery to repair the ITB which has been a success as I can now run without any problems. However I am still suffering from very low energy levels and am constantly tired. The medical professionals have told me in time I might get back to normal. They likened my body it to a car engine that was red lined and had to be rebuilt. Would be okay but may never be the same again.

At times I do feel okay so I am optimistic that I will be back to normal again in the future. I am often asked would I do it again and do I regret doing it due to the side effects? I don't regret it as we raised valuable funds for the charity, I got to live my dream of doing something extreme and I learnt so much more about endurance training.