

## Busselton Half Ironman 2009

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One of the benefits of doing a race out west is that my body clock wants to go to sleep at 7pm and the race didn't start til 8am, so I think I got the most sleep I've gotten before a race ever. The proprietors of our B&B got up early to make us toast and set out muesli and fruit. I typically have cheesy oatmeal for breakfast before a race (and many training sessions), but I thought I'd go with toast with cream cheese and vegemite. So delicious. How can you not have vegemite before your last race in Australia?

At registration I find out that this race does age groups based on your age by the end of the year. This means this was my first race in the 30 to 35 year old age group. Seems like the unkindest cut of all, when I still have a good few months of 29 to go.

I wasn't nervous. Walking out to the start, most people have full wetties on. Mine is sleeveless cause I reckoned, I live in Australia, it never gets cold enough to really need the sleeves. There were still a few other sleeveless people like me and I thought, at first, I'll be fine. Then I realized all these sleeveless wettie people were probably from Tasmania or New Zealand. Hmmf.

I took a little warm up swim. I could feel the water seeping up through the ankles of the suit, then down the back along the zipper. Not too bad. Finally I dive in, but it feels frigid, my arms ache with cold, and it knocks the breath out of me. I came back to shore and gave Simone a quick hug and head off with the rest of the women toward the start line.

Up to this moment I felt calm. Standing there watching the wave ahead of mine get started it all hits me. It's my last race in Australia, and when this is done, it's time to go home. My eyes well up, and I start laughing at myself for crying at the start line. I must have looked a mess with tears streaming down my face and a case of the giggles. A woman next to me asked if I was ok. "yes, just excited, and trying to get the crying done now so it doesn't come on during the race" "good call, crying in the goggles doesn't work very well. I've tried it. You'll love the race".



*Swim course the day before the race.*

And then the horn is blowing, and we're rushing from the beach into the crystal clear Indian Ocean. The course is basically out 900m, 100m across then 900m back to shore. This has to be the best tri swim I've ever had. The water is beautiful and just gently lapping against the shore. I can see the bottom for the whole course. I tried to just stay relaxed for the swim,

conserve my energy. When I could, I swam on people's feet (tapping their toes with my fingers). I never really got into a rhythm with my spotting, and I felt the bottom was moving very slowly by. I didn't feel very fast, but tried to just focus on completing each stroke well. At each of the turn buoys people bunch up to take the turn as narrow as possible. This creates a lot of kicking and swimming on one another. Coming out of the second buoy, I took several breast strokes to try to get my bearings. I still couldn't spot the next buoy, so I tried to just follow the other swimmers. Before I knew it, I was about 200m from shore. I swam right up til where my hands hit the sand, as I've been taught. I hit my watch and to my amazement I had swum a 32 minute swim. I had thought I'd do something closer to a 38-40 minute swim (usually 37 in the pool, but slower in open water). They say you go faster in a wetsuit. I can't wait for those cold water New England swims. I was rapt!



*This was probably the best moment of the day when I realized what an awesome swim I'd had.*

The bike course is also out and back, 15K each way, times 3. Coming out of transition there's a water bottle station where you can pick up water or electrolyte. I had brought one bottle (my Houston one) and put it in my back cage. I had a squirt of gu (Simone had gotten me a gu bottle, so I wouldn't have to negotiate the individual packets during the race), and it's awful. Maybe it's the bottle, maybe it's that I purchased them here instead of in the states, but blech! They are terrible.

Heading out of town, I get into my 30k/h pace. I get passed by people, women in my age group. In an olympic, I would not let that happen. In an Olympic, I pass girls who were faster than me in the swim. But here, I have to keep reminding myself the plan is to hold 30k/h, to have something left for the 2 hour run. Do my own race. About halfway through the first 15K I realize I've never done this long of a ride by myself. This is going to be at least as mentally tough as it is physically. The course is dead flat and runs through a few developments then into bushland. Only real downfall of the scenery was somewhere, in that bushland was a very large, very dead animal, and it stunk (drop bear, perhaps?). Coming back into town I felt fast. Got speeds up to 35. I didn't want to overdo it, but I felt good with the speed, though my back was starting to get a bit stiff. I kept an eye on my average speed and at the end of the first lap; I had it up to 31. That was perfect cause it gave me a little buffer for the next two laps.

The course is dead flat, which is good for a consistent time, but not so great for variety. I think my favourite part of the course was the 20 seconds or so coming out of the corners where I could get out of the saddle. Just after the turnaround was the water bottle disposal. I tried to put my Houston bottle back into the back cage, but I couldn't manage. I had to chuck it to have room for a full bottle. :-(

I started getting bored on the second lap. I would have killed for some music, so I decided to think about songs. My number 1 pre-race song is still Wolf Parade's You are a Runner. Although this is a terrific song to belt out in the car, it leaves something to be desired in the a capella version in my head. Ok, how about something a bit simpler. What pops into my head? Henry VIII. I don't think I've heard this song since middle school, but there was definitely something appealing about the second verse being the same as the first. After a few rounds of that was the Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini. Very strange.

I got to the halfway point. It was time to eat my bar. I had broken it up to 6 bite-sized pieces. However, after the first bite, it was clear, they were too big. Got it all down eventually, and all before riding past the dead animal again.

I did have one panic moment on the bike. I went to put the water bottle back in the cage and the nozzle caught on my brake cable, the bike slowed abruptly. Luckily, it didn't lock the back wheel, and I pulled it out again before any damage, but certainly raised my heart rate a few beats.

On the last lap, I tried to psych myself up, thinking how exciting it was that I was doing my half, and how sad I'll be after it's done, in 3 hours. But I wasn't buying it. I'd spent 2 hours on the bike already. I wanted to get off. Also at this point, I rode past the run course; the pros were just out on their first lap. There were significantly fewer athletes on the course. I seemed to have settled into a group of riders who were of similar paces. We weren't pack riding, as that's against the rules. I tried to be careful to maintain one Holden Commodore (7m) between me and the rider ahead of me, but we seemed to be passing each other back and forth. At the 10K to go mark, I surged ahead. I was excited to finish the bike. I started talking to myself. And why not? I couldn't talk to anyone else, and no one could hear me. I started planning for the run. First few ks just turn the legs over. This is my race. I will finish this race. Just two more hours.

At about the 5K mark, 2 people passed me. I was a little miffed cause I thought I had actually dropped them. I kept up for a few seconds, then reminded myself to not be competitive, and sat up to have some water. Suddenly, an official pulls up beside me. Oh no, please no penalty, not this close. "9-5-4" he bellows "When you get passed, you need to drop back more quickly" ok "this is a warning". Oh. Thank. God. Penalties on this course are 5 minutes.



I'm back in transition. Two thirds done. I was thrilled to be off the bike. I spot Simone and tell her as much. I'm feeling parts of my butt that have been numb for hours. The run is also out and back, 3.5K each way, times 3. I brought a banana with me to have somewhere and 2 gus.



*Must have been first lap, there's the banana.*

I hear a cheer for BTS. I'd heard several along the bike course, but was never sure who it was. On the run, I finally spot them. It was Tri Alliance people, our sister squad in Melbourne. That was awesome. it was great to have another voice cheering me on.

There were water stations at either end of the course and one in the middle. From the first water station to the middle one was packed with crowds and distractions. I have not loved the people who dress up to come cheer on triathletes more. Honourable mentions to the "Lurve Lounge", dressed up as hippies, in wigs and leisure suits with their own Elvis, the 1920s style bathing beauties with sequined bathing caps and inflatable duckies, and the house blaring Eye of the Tiger"



The back half of the course was quiet though and another mental challenge. Just before

reaching the turn around, I spotted Andrew (Simone's bf). He was walking. It was the first time I'd seen him all day. I patted him on the back, taunted him a bit and ran on.

My plan had been to walk at each aid station. It's easier to actually get the fluid in me, and it gives a good mental break. I had half the banana at the first turn around. I felt pretty good, completed the first lap in 40 minutes. That was perfect, if I could hold that for the next 2 laps, I might crack 5:40! And it would give me a 2 hour half marathon. Hmm, if 40 minutes was my goal time, maybe it's not great to have done it on my first lap. Or, maybe I'll go faster cause I would be running funny from the bike.

At this point, I can start to feel the chafe under both arms. I had put on body glide that morning, but clearly it had worn off. Nothing to be done, but keep running.

I made it out to the halfway point, still feeling ok. I have a gu, some water, and amazingly, I still don't have to pee. My second lap comes in at 44 minutes. Hmm, I've slowed down a lot. Got to just push through. There's no way I'm going to run 36 minutes for the last lap so my 5:40 is out. But maybe a 42 minute lap. That would be good.

The field had thinned out significantly. My stomach is getting a little burpy, and I can taste the bar I had hours earlier. This is not a good sign. It means, I'm not doing a good job digesting, I'm not getting water and I'm not getting sugars or salts. From the middle aid station to the turnaround is 500 breaths, and I start counting each one of them. About 50m from the last turn around my hands go numb and tingly. My heart rate sky rockets to 180bpm. There's no way I'll digest anything at that rate. I try to push for the last 50m, but I just don't have it in me. I walk to the aid station.

In addition to water and electrolyte, they also provide coke. I figure the coke will either give me the push to finish, or it will make me puke. Either way, it's probably better than how I was feeling. I keep walking and my lower back starts to seize. I stopped and gave it a little stretch. I could still touch my toes, so it couldn't be that bad. My heart rate was back under 150, so I started to jog back. I didn't stop at the last aid station. I just focused on the next landmark. First the bathing beauties, then the toilet block, then the Lurve Lounge, the "living the dream" posters, now it's getting close.

I turn in for the last 100m in the finishers' shoot. I hear Simone yelling at me to pass those boys ahead of me. I sprinted as hard as I could manage to the finish (and I do pass those boys). About 20m before the line, I get passed by 3 girls who are running in a team. This pisses me off. They haven't done the whole race, how dare they have the audacity to pass me just at the end. Still I like my finisher picture.



And that's it, it's over. My official time was 5:50. Which is what I thought I could do, and is sub 6 hours. But having that thought that I could do 5:40 after a strong swim and a good bike, well that was disappointing. I wandered through the competitors' area, seeking out water and food. I lied down in the shade and very slowly ate a banana. I took off my shoes and examined my blisters (not too bad). I collected my finisher hat (no towel, which is also terribly disappointing) and I found Andrew.

That afternoon we chow down on cheese plates, fries and champagne, and tell our race stories.

Overall, it was different to what I expected. I didn't enjoy it the same way I enjoy shorter races, it was mentally tough. It wasn't about going hard, it was about conserving. Throughout the race, and particularly the run, I thought to myself. Yeah, I don't think I ever need to do this again. But as my body has forgotten the pain, I'm tempted to do another. I know what to expect now. And I know I can run a 2 hr half marathon.