

KONA 2009

RACE REPORT

The 2009 Ironman World Championships were held on 10 October 2009 at Kailua Kona on the big Island of Hawaii. Like many people, I have been a devotee of this race since the early 80's, when Mike Gibson still had a comb over and used to present this race on Channel 9 Wide World of Sports. I was fortunate enough to be able to compete at Kona in 2003, and this year, to be given another chance to participate in this great event. This is the first race report that I have actually ever prepared, and I hope that you find it interesting and gives you a bit of an insider's view into the people, the event and the island. I also thought I'd include some observations about the lead up to the race itself, as this is often the most interesting thing about the whole event – Kona in race week is a fascinating place to be, particularly if you like people watching!

Honolulu

Sydney airport – Ruth and I wondered how long it would be before we spotted our first “Iron-tragic” – you know the type – the person who eats, breathes and sleeps Ironman and is usually dressed from head to toe in gear with Ironman logos on it. Well we didn't have to wait long. Just behind us in the check-in queue, were Mr and Mrs Ironman – husband and wife decked out in identical clothing. A good start, but the winner on our flight was the guy who was wearing the IM cap, IM finishers shirt, and (wait for it) IM jacket. Gold!

We had decided that spending 8 days in Kona before the race was just too long, so we had three nights in Honolulu before flying to Kona. What a great place! If you have never been, I heartily recommend it, whether you're going to Ironman or not. We stayed at the Outrigger Reef, which is right on Waikiki Beach - \$3 mai tais all afternoon and karaoke every night! We ate a lot, drank a lot and did some great sightseeing. It was a great way to kick off the trip. We had such a good time, it was hard to pack up and fly to Kona. But I was certainly well rested (if a bit hung over!)

Kona

After the glitz and bright lights of Honolulu, Kona is a real wake up call. The airport is carved out of the lava fields, and it is like you have landed on the moon. The first thing we noticed was how much hotter it was than at Honolulu. And more humid. It assaults you as soon as you get off the plane. The locals tell you that it is the volcano and the lava which absorbs and reflects back the heat, but whatever it is, it is certainly noticeable.

Kona township itself is quite a small place. I describe it as Bribie Island with a Wal Mart. There is a small shopping strip up Alii Drive (where the finish line is) and lots of old apartment buildings (condos, over there) and a couple of hotels. Nothing new appears to have been built since 1970. Further out of town to the south are some better resorts (including a Sheraton) but unless you have a car (which is almost impossible to hire in race week) they are too far away from the race start to be practical.

We stayed in a 2 bedroom 3 bathroom (yes, that's right – three bathrooms!) condo just off Alii Drive – about 20 minutes walk to transition. To say the decor was 'dated' is putting it mildly – think of your grandma's house when you were a kid and you're getting warm. It was certainly kitsch, but it was clean, comfortable, spacious and the appliances were modern. And my bike had its own air-conditioned bedroom.

Walking down Alii Drive to transition, you are immediately struck by the amazing number of people out running and cycling. Lord – it was the middle of the day and it was 30+ degrees! I was a lather of sweat walking 500 metres to the nearest cafe! And these people were out flogging themselves in the heat. Crazy! Interestingly, I never saw any of the pro's doing that – they were locked away resting in the air conditioning. Like me!

The whole place was buzzing with Ironmen – I have never in my life seen so many IM caps, visors, shirts, shorts, jerseys, and even thongs. It is truly amazing how much stuff you can buy with the M-dot symbol on it. It is an amazing sub-culture – bronzed and waxed people strutting around town, sipping water and Gatorade, talking about wheel selections and race tactics – it is completely overwhelming. It is impossible to be in Kona in race week and escape what I call Ironman Overload. It helps to have a healthy cynicism about the whole thing and take it all with a very large grain of salt.

The next morning, we met our tour group. We went with Tri Travel and they were great. Nice people who try really hard for you. There is no doubt that you could do it cheaper yourself, but the problem with Kona is knowing where to stay. Internet pictures of hotels are very unreliable here. Which is why we left the organising to them. They also organise some interesting events for you. The Tuesday morning, we had a breakfast at which Chris Legh, Michellie Jones and Mitch Anderson spoke. They are also great for your supporters – there was a 'spectators only' cocktail party on Wednesday night (which Ruth loved), and they ferried spectators around in buses on race day to get the best views of the race.

James and Alicia Johnson arrived on the Wednesday before the race. It was fantastic to have them there, and Ruth and I really enjoyed their company. In the days before the race, I would rather think of anything but the race, so it was great to be able to hang out with James and Alicia and take my mind off the event.

Thursday night is the welcome dinner (Carbo Banquet for those who have done IM OZ) but on a much bigger scale. Over 5000 people and everyone got fed (unlike at the Gold Coast, I hear...). There is Hawaiian dancing, fire juggling and a fake volcano with fluorescent lava. I am really hoping James' photos of that turn out! There is also a video presentation of special interest stories, usually involving disabled athletes.

This year there were three featured athletes. The first one was a young bloke in his 20's who had both legs amputated above the knee when he was 5. He learned to ride a bike using only his glutes! Imagine that – 180 km with no quads. Incredible.

The second athlete was the winner of America's "Biggest Loser" competition – he had lost the equivalent in weight of a small Ford truck, apparently – and had decided to do IM. He still looked like a big unit to me. Trouble there, I thought....

The third athlete was a man who was competing on the third anniversary of his heart transplant operation – jeez, I thought, I hope they gave him a strong one!

But all of these cases drive home how important IM is to many people – and that helps you understand a bit why there are so many "Iron-tragics" out there. And if it makes people feel better about themselves, and gives them direction, then who am I to knock it!

The day before....

Like all IM events, the day before the race is when you get your gear sorted out, check in your bike and gear bags, and have a good look round transition.

I woke up on Friday morning with a bad feeling – my throat was really sore, and I had a chesty cough. Uh oh, I thought, this is not good. I sent Ruth on a medication hunt to the local drugstore (where it seems you can buy almost anything but drugs) and she got me some cold and flu tablets. Unfortunately, these had very little effect and as the day wore on, I felt worse and worse. The real problem was that I am an asthmatic, and I was finding it quite hard to breathe. The bug had gotten a hold on my chest and was not letting up.

Anyway, I had to get ready, and went down to check in my gear at lunchtime. As you walk in with your bike, there is a crowd of people sitting in chairs and writing on clipboards. What the hell are they doing, I thought? I later found out that they are employed by the bike companies, and they are counting the number of each brand of bike going into transition. So that's how they get those stats every year!

A nice old bloke named Pete who had no thumb on his right hand (I know this because when I went to shake it, I ended up shaking his forearm!) took me round transition and helped me rack my bike and gear bags. I joked with Pete that I hoped that my race number (which was 730) was not the time of night that I'd finish. Hmmmmmm.....

Back at the room, I retreated to the sofa and the major league baseball playoffs. Trying to ignore the worsening throat and cough. But I was getting worried.

James and Alicia came over for our pre-race pasta cook up, and then we went off to bed for an early night.

I spent most of the night trying to cough myself to death. Ruth ended up sleeping in the other room because I was coughing so much. I was awake before the alarm next morning having felt like I slept about 10 minutes all night.

Race day

At 4:30 am, sitting in my race suit in the lounge, I seriously thought about pulling out. I felt like I had swallowed a bag of nails, my chest was really tight, and man, was I tired. But this was HAWAII!!!

So as you do with these things, you put off making the decision – we got on the Tri Travel bus and headed down to the start. I'll see how I feel later on, I said.....

Body numbering in Hawaii is a very formal affair. You line up according to your number and they use little stamps to stamp the numbers on you. And if it is not perfect, they use a Nikko to colour in any light spots. The volunteers take their jobs very seriously in Hawaii! I stuck my bottles and gels on my bike, pumped up the tyres and that was that. Ready to go.

There is not much to do then before the start. We retreated into the King Kam Hotel lobby and rested on the carpet with a few others. It was then I made my decision – I would start, but I would take it very, very easy – just making it to the finish was my goal today. If I took it easy enough, I believed I would have enough in the tank to finish – even if I had to walk most of the marathon. I thought about the kid with no legs and the heart transplant man and realised that they had far bigger hurdles to overcome than me. Ruth decided not to go on the bus with the rest of the Tri Travel people in case I had to pull out and needed to contact her. I felt bad about that, but it was the right decision in the circumstances. I said I would see her on the course. Time to race.

The start

The starting ceremony at Kona is spine tingling. The drums, the Navy parachutists, the singing of the national anthem as the sun peeps over the hills above town, and the whole buzz from thousands of

spectators can't help but get you excited. I was smiling in spite of myself when I entered the beautiful water. You have to give it to the Yanks – they really know how to put on a show.

The pro's started 15 minutes before the age groupers, and then I slowly swam out to the start position. I was close to the front, but not too close. There is actually a lot of room at the swim start and I had no trouble finding a patch of clear water.

BANG – the starting cannon is really loud and scared the hell out of me. I had decided to swim an easy opening leg – keep my stroke long and slow and stay out of trouble. The first few hundred meters were good – not too crowded and I kept my heart rate down. Somehow, though, my navigation went awry, and I ended up too close to the right hand side of the course – near the boundary buoys (or 'booney's, as the Seppos say) and it suddenly got busy. Very busy. The whole field seemed to want to swim in the same patch of water. There were people jammed hard up against the buoys, female competitors screaming "Help" as people dragged them under the water and swam over them, and general chaos. Worst of all, I was hemmed in and couldn't find a way to get left and out of trouble. I ended up swimming with my head up for an eternity until things evened out a bit and I could gradually move my way left and into some clearer water.

Finally, I was able to settle into a stroke and get my heart rate back down. From then on, it was a fairly regular swim. The water in Kona is magnificent and you can see coral and fish all the way around. It is also surprisingly deep. I managed to find some toes which were moving at about my pace and I locked on. The guy in front must have thought I had a foot fetish I spent so much time tickling his toes.

The swim exit was in a different place from the last time I did this race – down the same side of the pier as where we started. I stood up in 1:02 – slower than originally planned but ok given how I felt.

The run to transition was not long – grabbed my bag and sat down to change. The volunteers in Kona are not as helpful as in Australia – you are left to do everything yourself. Someone helped stuffing my gear back into my bag, but that was about it. Transition was slow, but I was happy to take my time and catch my breath. Then out onto the bike.

The Bike

Uh oh - I forgot the sunscreen! They won't let you use it before the swim so your numbers stay on, and you have to put it on in transition – which I forgot to do. Oh well, nothing to do about it now.

As you leave transition, you do a little loop around the old airport and then back through town on the Kuakini Highway, before backtracking and heading out to Hawi on the Queen K Highway for the turnaround. The first few kilometres were enough for me to realise how compromised my lung capacity really was – every little rise had me panting like a B grade porn star. This was going to be a long day.

People were going past me like I was standing still, but I had made my decision to take it easy, particularly in the early stages, and kept it steady. The temp was quite good then (it was about 8:30am) and very little wind. Here's hoping, I thought.

Out on the Queen K, I settled into the best rhythm, I could. The road surface is simply brilliant, for which I was extremely grateful. The ride is hard enough as it is.

I was still being passed at a fairly regular rate, but I kept to my plan, and overall I was reasonably happy with progress. My throat was really sore but as long as I kept my heart rate under control, the breathing was ok.

The thing about Kona is that there is almost no flat ground. It is one long series of rolling hills. None of them steep, but long and steady. And this gradually takes its toll on you. Also, as the day wore on, the temperature started getting up, as did the wind. On the way out, the temp wasn't too bad, but I could start feeling a headwind. That's ok, I thought, it will be behind me on the way home.

There is a small village called Waikoloa about 35 miles into the ride –just after this is where the Tri Travel bus and supporters were set up. As I rode through an intersection, I saw James Johnson lying full length on the bitumen trying to get the perfect angle for his camera shot. I wondered: what in God's name is he doing! That road surface would have been about 50 degrees! I hope it was a good shot mate!

As I approached the end of the Queen K, to make the turn towards Kawaihai and Hawi, I noticed the wind starting to get up in my face – great, I thought, there would definitely be a tailwind on the way home. I needed all the help I could get.

Turn left at the end of the Queen K and long downhill stretch into Kawaihai and then more undulations on the 15 miles to Hawi for the turnaround. I'd just like to make a point here about the race being measured in miles – it's a real pain in the ass. I can never work out how fast I'm going and each mile seems to take FOREVER to pass. Give me kilometres any day.

Anyway, the road from Kawaihai to Hawi is more of the same undulations and then a long-ish climb into Hawi. By now the wind was really strong, and as you go round the coast, it was becoming a direct headwind. I was down to about 19 kph now and trying to stay down on the bars as much as possible, but it was hard.

At Mile 50 or so the first of the pro's came past going the other way, having made the turnaround. They of course were flying downhill and downwind, and I looked at them enviously. Nothing to do but keep on pressing into the wind.

Finally, Hawi arrived and I made the turnaround. The special needs station was located just past the turnaround and I grabbed my bag and stuffed a few more gels into my pockets and off again.

What a relief to have the wind at my back! The next 10 miles were the best of the race – I sat between 50 and 60kph most of the way, although the wind was starting to become a cross wind, and that certainly made things hairy at high speed. Once the descent from Hawi was over, the wind was no longer assisting, but had become a pure right to left cross wind. I spent more time leaning to the right than Malcolm Turnbull! My pace was ok, but I was starting to worry that the hoped for tail wind on the way home was not going to be there. I was trying to remember the island geography in my head and work out which way the wind would be blowing back on the Queen K.

Back into Kawaihai and up that long climb to the junction with the Queen K. Then a right turn and back to Kona.

I was immediately smashed by the headwind – Madam Pele had played the ultimate bad joke on us all – the promised tailwind had turned into a massive block headwind. This was going to be a long 40 miles!

There is nothing much to say about the ride back other than that it was the hardest ride I have ever done. The temperature had risen to about 40 degrees (I was later told) and the wind was relentless. All you could see ahead of you were rolling hills stretching into the heat haze. Better just to keep your head down and look at the road! The wind was so strong that on several downhills I was pedalling as hard as I dared and only doing 27kph. Uphills were about 19kph at best. It was just a slog now.

One of the hard things about the Queen K is the lack of landmarks. Once you've passed Waikoloa, there is nothing until you get to the airport, which is about 12km out of town. You find yourself looking longingly over every hill to see if you can catch a glimpse of the airport in the distance. But all you see are more hills.

After what seemed an eternity, I finally arrived at the airport. From there into town, it is generally downhill, although still undulating. The road gently curves left, which relieved some of the headwind, and I could lift my speed a bit. As I passed the turnoff to the Energy Lab, I was now on the run course, and I passed the leading pro's heading out to the run turnaround. I noted Chris Lieto was leading and had quite a gap over Craig Alexander in second place, but Alexander looked strong. Go Craig, I thought.

Right turn at the shopping centre, and back into transition. People everywhere, screaming at you. Great vibe. Rolled into the bike finish chute and gratefully handed my bike to the catcher. The old legs were not very happy about having to run, and I shambled into transition. This involved running around the outside of all the bikes – about 400 m, over artificial grass, in my socks. Not fun, I can tell you. Grabbed the run bag and slumped into a chair.

I'd decided to take my time in transition – have a drink, stretch, and most importantly, get some sunscreen on! I could feel that I was pretty sunburned already, but hopefully I could stem the damage.

Again, not much help from the volunteers – they were more interested in telling people where to sit than doing anything productive. Eventually, I was ready and headed back out into the heat.

The Run

I had decided that I was going to take the run really easy and break it into segments – run to each drink station, walk steadily through the station, then run to the next one. I was going to do this for as long as my energy held out.

About 1.5 miles in, I saw Ruth and Alicia and James, standing along Alii Drive. I stopped to give Ruth a quick assessment and then found that I had pretty much lost my voice. I rasped out that I was pretty toasted but would be able to finish if I took it easy. And off I shuffled.

The run course goes from town out along Alii Drive for about 5 miles, then back the same way into town and then out along the Queen K bike course to the Energy Lab and back again to Alii Drive and the finish. The temperature here was not as high as out in the lava fields, and there was quite a bit of shade along Alii Drive. Lots of spectators encouraging you along the way, and well stocked aid stations. The best things in the aid stations were the sponges soaked in ice water, and the ice cold water and Gatorade. I stuck to my plan and walked through the stations and ran steadily between them. But by the time I got back into town (Mile 10) I knew that there was a limited amount of time that I would be able to do this for. Quite simply, I was bugged. The virus and the conditions had sapped me of most of my energy, and the walking breaks were getting longer and longer.

Out on the Queen K again, and up and down those same undulations. The wind had died off quite a bit, and the temp wasn't too bad. I chatted to a couple of other blokes walking, but they dropped off when I started running again. By now, I had decided to walk 5 minutes and run five minutes on and off and see how that went. I could do that OK, but by the time I got to the halfway point, I realised I was going to be out here for a very long time if I didn't speed up. And I was getting very sick and tired of being out here!

Even shuffling along, you can still go twice as fast as you can walk, so I gradually extended my running periods. I could see the turn to the Energy Lab up in the distance and decided that I would

run all the way to that point and down the hill to the Lab and then have a break. I had of course, forgotten how far it is from the turn to the Lab (about 3km) but I managed to run almost the whole way. This is where the special needs station is located, and I had made sure I put some pain killers into my bag, which I gulped down with some red bull (I needed all the help I could get at this stage). They eased the pain in my throat and chest a bit and I was pretty confident now that I would make it home – it was just a question of how long.

My running periods were now getting longer again, and back out on the Queen K, I was able to shuffle along quite steadily for extended periods. The mile markers slowly counted down, and by the time I got to 22 miles, I knew I could run to the end. The sun was slowly setting over the Pacific, and photographers were taking photos of my feet silhouetted by the sinking sun. The temperature was quite good now, and the breeze was lighter, all of which helped.

Finally, I came to Pay and Save Hill (the last hill into town, where Mark Allen ran away from Dave Scott in 1989 to record his first win and set the still standing marathon record). Needless to say, Mark Allen's speed up the hill was not in any way challenged by yours truly, but I trudged steadily up to the top.

1 mile to go.....

Down Palani Road Hill – masses of spectators yelling at you and you start feeling happy. I even stretched out down the hill and approached something like a normal run. Left turn into the Kuakini Highway, 500 metres along there, and a right turn down to Alii Drive and 400 m to the finish.

Turning the corner into Alii Drive was more of a relief than anything else. This is where the crowd waits. The volume of noise is astonishing – people lining the streets, cheering, clapping and banging things. The sun had gone down about 10 minutes before and the scene was surreal in the semi darkness.

Then, looming out of the dark, are the bright lights of the finishing chute. The volume increases exponentially - there are thousands of people going nuts. If there is one thing you can say for the Americans, they know how to cheer people on. Then I am on the carpet – I see the finish arch – I see James Johnson and he snaps off another pic – I see Ruth over on the right and I run over and grab her hand – I lurch up the ramp to the finish –

and cross the line.....throw my head back and spread my arms in a gesture which is nothing more than pure and utter relief.

The catchers grab me and throw a flower lei round my neck and a towel round my shoulders and help me off towards the finishers area. There is a “loved ones” area behind the finish where your family can meet you. When I get there, Ruth is waiting for me – she is of course in tears – and so would I have been had there been any left to cry.

The rest is a bit of a blur – get the medal and shirt, have a photo taken with Ruth, scoff down as much pizza as I can grab, get a massage, get the bike and gear and get back to the condo. A beer and a lie down. Watch the rest of the finishers on ironmanlive.com. Sleep, sleep, sleep....

Post race

There are two particular things I want to talk about post race.

The first is the breakfast that Tri Travel organised the next morning for all tour participants. This was memorable because Craig Alexander (who had won his second world championship) came to speak to us. I thought this was incredible – here is the man who is in demand all over Kona taking time to

talk to a bunch of age groupers. We gave him a standing ovation and he was completely overwhelmed – which was really nice to see.

Craig confessed that he thought it was a very hard day and that he felt nowhere near as good as he did the previous year. I was glad to hear that even the winner found it hard out there yesterday. Craig hung around for quite a while before heading off to other media commitments. But he left a lasting impression.

The second memorable event occurred at the awards dinner that night. I have only ever been to one other awards dinner – at Kona the last time I was there, but this one was great. What made it remarkable was Chrissy Wellington's speech. If you can find it on an IM website or YouTube – do yourself a favour listen to it. In my opinion, it is the greatest acceptance speech delivered by any athlete in any sport that I have ever heard. The passion, humility and eloquence with which Chrissy spoke was truly remarkable. The entire audience was transfixed. I won't do her the injustice of paraphrasing it – you should listen yourselves.

So what of our 'special interest cases' – the handicapped athletes who featured in the welcome dinner presentation?

Unfortunately, it was not a great year for them. The double amputee didn't make the bike cut off and was excluded, and the Biggest Loser man finished, but outside the 17 hour time limit and so was not classed as an official finisher. The most heartbreaking case, though, was the heart transplant man, who missed the 2 hr 20 minute swim cut off bywait for it..... 8 seconds! They stopped him on the steps out of the water, and he just lay down and cried. It was devastating, Ruth said. But that's how it is at Hawaii – no exceptions.

And in the end.....

I told Ruth years ago that I would give up Ironman racing when I finished in the dark. Saturday, 10 October 2009 was that day. Granted, it was only 10 minutes in the dark, but it was dark, nevertheless.

So this is it for me. No more Ironman races. In the words of Plutarch -

"When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept for there were no more worlds to conquer"

I have had a great year and enjoyed everything I have achieved in Ironman. But I've had enough. I think I'd like to spend my time now helping others in the squad experience what I have in Ironman and hopefully getting the same enjoyment and satisfaction out of the experience. Ruth of course doesn't believe me - she thinks I'll get the bug again. And who knows – she may be right – but I doubt it.

I hope you have enjoyed this report. It was great fun writing it. See you on the road.

Scott.