

What a Hawaiian Ironman Does to Your Body

Race Day – 12th of October 2019, Kona, Hawaii.

“What a Hawaiian Ironman Does to Your Body” is a reflective story, similar to an earlier reflective, “What a Doctorate Does to Your Brain”, written then (2006) because at that point in time I felt exactly as I do right now – that is, at peace.

The best out of the mind back then and now the best out of the body reflections.

At peace, for on that hot Hawaiian day out in those windy conditions, carrying asthmatic lungs with nasal blood flowing thinking a way through the course cut-off times, there was the full satisfaction of knowing that everything possible was extracted from the body – on that day and in the lead-up to it.

You can't just enter the Hawaiian Ironman and compete. You must qualify for the challenging 3.8 km open water swim, 180 km cycle and 42.2 km marathon run (the distances are the same for all full-length Ironman races around the world). To qualify means you are either gifted with speed (around the top 2%) or you are gifted with a pig-headed stubbornness to complete a minimum of 12 other Ironman races so you can enter.

So, to get there as one not gifted with speed, to the Holy Grail of triathlon and the sport's Olympic Games, the 41st Ironman World Championship, it took 15 other Ironman races along with fellow Ironman journeyman Andrew Montgomery.

The year's lead-up to the Hawaiian Ironman had started well with preparatory completions of New Zealand Ironman in March and Cairns Ironman in June, but it quickly descended into a winter of hellish respiratory issues.

I needed three types of asthma drugs and finally cortisone to be able to breathe enough to compete, dosages that only ceased during the week prior to race day.

Over winter, through lack of training, the base of fitness was evaporating and confidence was going with it. Yet emotionally I was staying upbeat as I'd completed an Ironman with respiratory health affected training in the past and in this year there'd actually been more training than for a health affected Busselton in 2015.

What killed confidence in Hawaii happened on the Monday of race week whilst out on a shortish cycle that ended in astronomical nose bleeds. Nose bleeds are a side effect of the asthma medications. At that point and for the next two days, in the head and in the heart I knew that Hawaii Ironman was beyond what the body could give this time.

In Andrew's words:

Steve had been suffering terrible chest, breathing and asthma issues for months and I was really concerned that he wasn't going to get the job done. There were times in the days leading into the race where the medication that he was on to help clear his airways wasn't helping his mental state – for a guy that is an eternal optimist he wasn't necessarily operating in that mode.

Those who know my growing faith (currently the serving Chaplain at Sandringham Football Club) will understand that it seemed God had a better plan, and on the Wednesday prior to race day this verse from Isaiah 41:10 to the Israelites of that era leapt out offering a modern day comfort – He was with them then and He was with me now no matter what outcomes were in store.

*So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

Instantly from that point in time my spirits began to lift. God already knew the conditions for the day (or intervened in them) and getting the better of them was the only way the asthma affected body could get through to the end.

So often in Ironman races the non-professionals get the worst of the weather conditions because we are out there longer, however for the first time ever (in my case) the best of the conditions was received – still can't believe it.

Saturday, race day, at the start line of the Hawaiian Ironman, along with my beautiful wife Ali, Andrew's beautiful partner Emma and all their kids – Lily, Ava, Kate & Lachlan – a peace was growing and to start the race (as we have at many other races) we prayed our own, now traditional, Ironman Prayer:

*Almighty God our Creator; All glory belongs with You
Grant that we may race long today with determination and strength;
that keeps us rejoicing with You in the abilities of our given bodies
We pray for safety for our competitors, the volunteers, the officials and all people out on course
Almighty God we trust all outcomes to your wisdom and to your all loving purpose
In the mighty name of our Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ we pray – Amen.*

Towards the end of the prayer the spirit was overwhelmed with emotion and I cried through the final lines of it.

Hawaii Ironman is intense and our 15 races lead-up just to get to the start line added to the intensity. This is serious business – you just cannot come back and try again. You get one shot and then need to go requalify again somehow if the body fails, which means many more years in the making.

The intensity was underpinned with a body confidence from knowing that you had done it all before on other courses and the growing faith in the spiritual side, that God, no matter what, had the outcomes already sorted.

The favourable weather started with the 3.8 km swim in a gentle sea swell (minus any choppiness), a glorious swim in wetsuit-free 25-degree crystal clear water amongst tropical fish and coral reefs, to arrive back to a beach full of cheering people. It was the highlight of the day and I was even stopped in transition for a live media interview with Ironman Oceania.

The heat and wind affected bike ride is what makes Kona a true test of Ironman. The wind was blowing at its best but again was favourable as it didn't really kick in until about 35 km into the bike ride. When it did, the ride became a battle up to the highest point of the bike course at around the 100 km mark. The legs held strong and I made the cut-off time comfortably with 45 minutes to spare.

The ride from the cycle turnaround back onto the Queen K Highway is mostly downhill and the winds, whilst fierce, are mostly crosswinds and end up behind you for the climb back onto the Queen K.

Later, during the final 40 km of the cycle, the winds really fell away and the final part of the ride into Kona was filled with moments of joy absorbing the lava fields and knowing the bike course was done.

For the first time ever we were absolutely favoured by weather conditions, even though tough at times – the best of them.

Heading out onto the now wind-free run course, the legs had little running left in them, struggling with some running in the first 10 km but that was about it. The rest was a shuffle at best, mixed in with a speed-walk.

At that point, with the support crew alongside, it felt like it was going to be a real struggle to finish, but they reminded me (Ali and Lachlan in particular) that I could just walk it in from here and still make the cut-off time of 17 hours.

That detail wasn't quite correct as they were relying for their estimates on a failing average pace to date but it was close enough for me to realise that yes indeed, if I kept up a shuffle/walk and the body held, that in fact we could just make it.

Not more than a couple of hundred metres after that morale boost, the expected blood nose issues, which had been avoided on the bike course, hit with a vengeance and the nose literally exploded into blood flows.

Mentally, again, I was really thrown and the legs began to fail. At one point I heard a young girl from the sidelines yell out, "He's bleeding!" Negative thoughts rose up – they were, "Go to the aid station, pull out, you're done."

There were two internal things that kept those defeated thoughts at bay.

The first thought was Andrew's, who came up with a saying in our first Ironman that we adopted:

I had explained to my constantly worrying mother that there were only four options open to me on race day. I would finish the race under the allotted 17 hours and hence be an official finisher; I would finish the race over 17 hours and not be an official finisher but I would finish; I would be medically removed from the course against my will or I would die.

Removal had to involve multiple nights in hospital and/or surgery. It had to be notably serious. A drip and some hydrolyte and a good rest the following day wasn't going to cut it nor would a twinged calf or hammy.

The second thought was not to deny God his miracle. He'd given His comfort and the prospect of disrespecting the outcome by pulling out without the above hospitalisation made it an easy decision to keep moving until I fell over from blood loss (not likely) or, indeed, was pulled from the course.

In the interim I'd tried everything to stop the blood, pinching and holding the nose, lowering the heart rate – but it just kept on bleeding. I went through two aid stations asking volunteers for tissues or something, nope nothing. All of a sudden, the used athlete ice sponges (rubbed in places you don't want to imagine) lying on the ground were starting to look like an attractive blood stemming option.

At that point of desperation, I remembered there was a piece of paper in my pocket with the cut-off times written on it so at the next aid station under the lights I memorised the times. Then I ripped up the paper into small pieces and jammed them up my nose.

Up until then the mind had been disintegrating but at the point the blood stopped it gave me a real lift, but no bigger a lift than moments later seeing Andrew Montgomery coming into the next aid station from the other direction, hours in front of the cut-off time and looking very able.

As the kms passed by I grew more and more concerned that something had gone wrong. Where was Steve? How is he? I'd better see him soon or he's not going to finish. I probably had about 8 km to go when I noticed a guy on the side of the road who was checking the race tracker. I asked him to check where Steve was. The answer came back that he had just gone through the 10-mile mark and that was just up ahead.

10 minutes later out of the dark emerged Steve, a blank stare on his face, on the other side of the drink station that we were passing at the same time. It was great to see him but Steve was in another world. He didn't stop – he was grumpy and negative but still quite positive and driven – like he had been through hell but that heaven still awaited if he kept going. At that point, I didn't think that he would finish.

Confidence kept growing, while I monitored average pace and expected finish times with prayers of "don't let the body cramp" mixed in with regular salt tablets, sports drinks and Red Bull – Ironman well caters for those struggling on.

Finally, the absolute joy of the day started to come at 3 km to go when you can see and hear the rockstar-like finish line and you know it is all downhill to it – I'm coming!

Yes, it was done. In Andrew's words:

I couldn't believe that he had held his pace and put himself in reach of finishing. It was most definitely against the odds. I still have no idea how he did it – plenty of prayer, was the answer he gave me.

There is nothing quite like an Ironman finish line and it being also the World Championship finish line is a multiplied exponentially experience – the final few hundred metres are lined with cheering crowds, loud music, flashing lights, slaps on the back, hi-fives and congratulations, and I certainly played my part in building the occasion – just so exhilarating.

The only downside was that in the deafening celebrations I couldn't spot my beautiful wife and the support crew. At the finish it looks like I turn around for a big crowd fist pump but in fact I was really looking, with some disappointment, to try to spot them with a final glance – how could I have missed them?

In Ali's words:

We had been there for hours marking our front row red carpet spots, screaming our lungs out, crying and reaching out for you as you went past. But the roar of the World Championship finish line deafens the cheers of even the most passionate and loyal support crew.

The brief disappointment soon ends when they string a medal over your head and you are back out with them sharing in the joys in no time at all.

That joy is only growing as the sheer enormity of it gets clearer. I really look forward to going back one day as a spectator who's done it, to re-live the moments and hopefully be supporting another one of our crew to their own Hawaiian Ironman finish line.

Ironman is a lone wolf sport, but it is not.

Ironman is often labelled a lone wolf sport because it is you alone against the 226 km course, or it is you alone against fellow competitors. Whilst the actual exertion on the day is all lone wolf as it is you alone who must get the job done, an Ironman being a lone wolf sport is far from the truth as it is done with an enormous amount of support both on and off the course.

On course, if you keel over with cramp a fellow competitor (stranger) will at least give you some encouragement or remind you how far the next drink/aid station is – just keep moving, mate. The Ironman volunteers in particular will give their all to get you through to the finish line. Some volunteers even give up 3 or 4 days a year just to support the event, Ironman could not exist with the volunteers – without them – no race, so thank you.

Friends you are racing with pep each other up whenever we spot each other during the race, friendly banter and waves of all sorts keep you motivated.

The crowd support at Ironman is enormous and as your name is printed on the race bibs people will be yelling out "Go, Steve!" even though you have never met them or never will. Spectator support especially on the marathon leg where fatigue deflates your reserves is most uplifting, perfect strangers with big smiley faces yelling their support – it's a bit surreal, but it is true.

The amazing support from your family and friends following you along the days journey online (race day trackers, Facebook, live feeds etc) or the ones who can come out onto the course during the day to cheer make Ironman so very far from a lone wolf sport.

Special mentions begin with Alison (Ali), my beautiful wife of nearly 5 years.

Ali's great anxiety (aka love) whilst out on course can be annoying (heck, I'm tough, don't worry about me) yet it is her anxiety, which shows her total love for her nutty husband out there on course, that is the greatest support, finish or not – Ali just wants her husband back.

Ali and I were reconnected 25 years after our church youth group days (Mentone Baptist) in the week after my second Ironman. We were then engaged a year later in-between the 2 Ironmans in 2 weeks campaign (2 in 2, crazy eh) and married not long after Ironman #6, so this very lucky girly has been there for nearly all the Ironman journey and is by far the greatest supporter. Who's the lucky one, Steve?

At our wedding day whilst there was Harry, my son, the one who will always be my best man, as is my beautiful daughter Emma who will always be my best woman (but not my best bride!) the witnessing duties fell to the two best men of Aaron De Fina and Andrew Montgomery, both fellow Ironmen.

Andrew Montgomery has been an exceptional motivator. He had to talk some sense into me after doing our first Ironman when I said I'm done (before fully understanding the Ironman addiction). Andrew had signed up again pretty much straight away and rightfully kept reminding me to pull the finger out and do the same.

In the same way, he also fed the Ironman addiction by signing up for 2 Ironmans in 2 weeks and once again kept reminding me to do the same.

Likewise, Andrew again was always the first mover in setting a speedy agenda for getting to the 12 Ironman qualifying mark for the World Championship before Kona eligibilities were altered.

Even after all that steadfast persistence I'm sure Andrew considers himself very lucky that I first helped nudge him into the Ironman sport with a phone call saying, "Do you reckon I can learn to swim in a year," after watching the very first Melbourne Ironman action.

The uplifting competitiveness we share has kept us powering along – Andrew's steadfastness is a rock to my more emotional side; the emotional side is well nourished by the other of the two best men.

Aaron De Fina is the opposite to Andrew, whilst equally as strong. Andrew is the bullock at the gate (with heart) and Aaron is the heartfelt encourager (with a bull on the inside).

Aaron is an elite athlete trapped in a wounded body, yet even amongst the wounds he has found a way to get through three Ironman races and I don't think I could be any prouder of anyone in the sport.

Though those aren't necessarily my best moments with Aaron; those came in the first two Ironman races where Aaron rode support all day (before he himself was overwhelmed with Ironman addictions). Those shared moments are precious, almost as precious when in his first Ironman we told each other how much we loved each other in passing on the marathon leg home.

Being out on course with Aaron, watching him unable to run physically but still finding a way to cover the 42.2 km marathon leg well within the cut-off times, is just so inspirational.

Then there is the Cairns Cobbers formed in 2016 when Andrew started chatting with two beautiful people, Mick and Helen Sharman. It grew deeper the next day when we both bumped into them (at a post-race pub, of course) and began our lasting friendships.

The group grew to include other friends, notably Darren Walker, Shayne Le Roy and Grant Olsen – along with our beautiful partners. As you can imagine there is a fair bit of stirring involved in a group like this and eventually Mick decided to attempt his first full distance Ironman. Cancer struck him and he had to take a year off; it was one of the most emotional times to finally compete with him (Cairns 2019) and see him demolish the course, very special.

Darren gets a special mention as well because I just love his constant cheek-filled banter, it just never ends – but he backs it up with strong finishing performances that he also chronicles in great detail, the reasons why a strong finish wasn't even stronger. And, of course, there are his noted bottom pats and reminders to do so if you forget to pat his!

For Shayne, I've never met anyone so dedicated to fitness and diet and to watch him cash in those well-earned cheques on a race day is unbelievable, legend. Grant, also a machine, quiet by nature and then bang, humbly delivers great results along with being a genuine top bloke, fortunate to have been involved within such a great crew.

The one standout feature of the Cairns Cobbers is that it is just so welcoming and it rapidly accepts any new competitor (or their partners) into the group. People such as John Francis, who we met when we were both struggling on through the marathon leg at Cairns 2016. John's a fellow chaplain and we shared that day and still share to this day.

Warwick Bishop rose from being the quiet non sporty kid at school to walking the tallest in front of a bunch of family and friends at Cairns 2018 and I will never forget his smile at the 5k mark of the marathon, it was pure joy, just like James Parry's smile, like Warwick he's another Bayside Bandit (our cycling crew) one year later at Cairns 2019

finishing soon after I'd crossed the line myself and was given the honour of presenting James his first Ironman medal. Moments that will stick forever.

One final Cairns story kicked in 3 months before Hawaii while cycling past one of the age 70+ competitors Cliff Genn at his first Ironman race (Cairns 2019). We had a brief chat about him being a potential qualifier for Hawaii as there were only 6 competing in his age group. Cliff quickly replied that he was the slowest and had no chance! Then they all went DNF (did not finish); Cliff finished, and we were together again 3 months later at the world champs. Legend.

Outside of the Cairns Cobbers there are many other mentions, none less than Adam Findley, a cousin we grew up with but had rarely seen post our youth. We both coincidentally competed (but didn't see each other) in our first Ironman race (Melbourne 2013) and then we fully reconnected at Busselton Ironman (2015) to share the Ironman journey, yet he is far more special as he has overcome heart surgery to compete – astonishing.

There are many other people and clients over the journey that we have watched step up and compete, with a special mention to Ray Hegarty (Melbourne 2015). To see so many others be involved and, in some way, be a part of their accomplishments and the changes this experience brings to their lives gives enormous joy – long may that continue.

Andrew Crockett who has followed the Ironman journey from day one and has been a great supporter, riding alongside on the bike with his essential beer stops, cheering along with Ari West following us home on the run legs.

Mr Crockett (Andrew!) gets a further huge mention because in amongst it all he's battling his own health/cancer issues and in February 2020, just before writing this story, we were both checked into the same hospital at the same time for different issues. We were both finally wearing "athlete wristbands" together (hospital ID bands look the same as race day ID bands) – that selfie we took will be one of my most treasured real Ironman photos.

So many other family, friends, fellow athletes have all shown enormous support over the journey, there are just too many to mention. Such as in Ironman number one, popping out of the water to see family and extended family (the EntWest connection) on the beach, which was very uplifting and I replied to their support with a huge smiling "I didn't drown", as the swim course that day was brutal (and shortened). The love and support from so many has been enormous and I thank everyone who has followed or joined in the journey with their encouragements.

To those who have also joined the Ironman fraternity or soon will – because if you stand close by for more than a few minutes I'll probably be in your ear about getting into it as well (spreading the addictive disease) thank you, Ironman is a shared journey.

But as this short reflection well describes, internally the main growing support for me was the faith aspect that ensures you are not alone out on course and it is a beautiful time with the creator of life.

In so many ways Ironman could not be further from a lone wolf sport.

Stories that stick.

As you can imagine, from a long journey there is a full repertoire of stories collected along the way. Often it's simple things that stay with you, like crossing the Ironman finish line for the first time with the catcher going, "Well done, is this your first Ironman?" Usually competing at Ironman is after a long build-up that starts with short distance triathlons building up to the full distance, and my reply to him was, "Actually, this is my first ever triathlon." I can still see the puzzled look on his face – very proud of that moment, just a little audacious.

I'll share just a few of those stories, ones from my favourite course outside of Hawaii, the New Zealand Ironman, which has provided many memorable moments.

The Chinese competitor shuffling up on the hilly run leg and animatedly saying, "We must finish – today we suffer, but tomorrow we will party," or the older lady overtaking on the bike (after a particularly rough swim) saying, "Have a lovely day," a brilliant reminder to enjoy it, along with the phenomenal support provided to their indigenous athletes the "Iron-Maoris". These stories stick amongst the zillions of other stories that will endure.

The 2015 the “2 in 2” Ironman adventure with Andrew deserves a special mention, competing in 2 countries – Ironman NZ and Ironman Melbourne – 2 weeks apart, 2 in 2.

The 2s didn’t stop there as we both (2 great mates) ended up finishing 2 minutes quicker than our previous times of 2 weeks earlier. Uncanny, but true. The outcome couldn’t have been symmetrically better, but it did get better, as in that 2nd race of the 2 it was alongside Aaron De Fina knocking out his first Ironman, so personally a race with my 2 best mates.

Even the days that aren’t race days are special. One in particular: this time in Busselton (2016) where Aaron and I joined the practice swim the day prior to race day where the water was crystal clear, dead flat and perfectly warm. We swam out just a few hundred metres and chatted for a bit, soaking it all in – unforgettable.

In conclusion.

This second reflective is of a planned trilogy – the 3rd instalment to come later in life: “What the Holy Spirit Does to Your Soul.” Three reflective stories – MIND, BODY & SPIRIT – that last one to come is a long transformative work in progress. This world is no fluke, there is a God and one day we will all stand before Him, no-one can do it without Him so therefore it is His story not mine.

To prepare for this second reflective I re-read the first and the outcome from both these stories is the same, full satisfaction (in other words, being at peace) knowing that I had pushed the brain (mind) to complete a doctorate leaving nothing in the mental tank, just as completing the Hawaiian Ironman journey was getting everything out of the body – and that again, is being at peace with it.

Steven Enticott

2013

Melbourne Ironman

2014

Melbourne Ironman

2015

New Zealand Ironman

Melbourne Ironman

Busselton Ironman

2016

New Zealand Ironman

Ironman Australia (Port Macquarie)

Cairns Ironman

Busselton Ironman

2017

New Zealand Ironman

Cairns Ironman

Busselton Ironman

2018

New Zealand Ironman

2019

New Zealand Ironman

Cairns Ironman

Hawaii (Kona) Ironman

"If you set a goal for yourself and are able to achieve it, you have won your race." **Dave Scott** 6-time Ironman World Champion (whom we also met, whilst in Kona - 2019)