

Ironman World Championships Kailua Kona 2007 – A first time impression.

I know I am not the greatest athlete in the world. I know few apart from my immediate family and friends may find this of interest. Perhaps someone heading over to The Big Island of Hawaii might be tempted to cast an eye over it, but to anyone who does stumble across this race report on the internet - please forgive me my little indulgence - I am writing it for me. Before the memory of those amazing few days in October 2007 begin to fade and every hard fought mile blends into the next, I want to put some order on my thoughts so that in the years to come when Fergus is sick of lending me his bikes and if the rumble of the turbo trainer in the kitchen is replaced by the wailing of children, maybe even grandchildren, or the mysterious appearance of pools of water in the middle of the kitchen floor can only be explained by a leaking nappy – I may read this report and say “I was there, I did that.”

While queuing in Heathrow Terminal 3, waiting to check-in for the American Airlines flight to LA and Kailua-Kona, ahead of me in the line, I spot for the first time a number of my fellow competitors. They are clad in their very best Ironman branded Lycra gear and bike boxes -festooned with stickers proclaiming past Ironman glories-dragging behind. I suspect the posturing has begun. They look fit, fitter than me. What have I got myself into?

I am travelling incognito in my denims. My (Fergs) bike was checked-in in Dublin. Jacket pockets stuffed with my heaviest travelling necessities add a little bulk. I have a video camera over my shoulder and a sore throat. Apart from the mounting fear in my eyes, outwardly nothing suggests I am off to the Ironman World Championships. Me for Gods sake, the World Championships in Hawaii! Twenty years ago I used to work here in Heathrow Airport; a most enjoyable if somewhat unhealthy time of my life. Then much of the preceding 41 years were. A few years back something changed and I unearthed a long dormant character trait – a fondness for participating in sport, not just watching it. I would never have believed when first dipping my toes into the river Liffey to be pummelled by the rest of the field and eventually waddle across the finish line of my first triathlon that it would have brought me here.

Qualifying for The World Championships has been a great adventure, but now reality is hitting home. Looking at the cut of the people ahead of me in the queue (and they are all the same unbelievable shape – blonde, six foot and tapering to the ground), makes me feel like a bit of a fraud. What right has this ex fatso, ex smoking, Johnny come lately to the sport, got to go to Kona? Who am I kidding? I try to banish such thoughts immediately and resolve not to let myself be intimidated anymore - no matter what Hawaii may have in store. I am going to enjoy every minute of it. Then after the race I am to be married on the beach. I am a very lucky man.

Today is Sunday. The race will be over this day next week. That gives me just five days to recover from any jet lag get use to the heat, humidity, familiarise myself with the course and hopeful finally shake off the chest infection that has nagged at me for the last two weeks. Eimear and some of the family are travelling out later in the week.

All the advice is to keep off your feet in the lead up. Lie on the beach, soak up the atmosphere and slowly 'acclimate'. Impossible. There is too much to do and see. I need to get food in, register, attend the athletes' parade, the expo, the race briefing, do some celebrity spotting – it goes on.

Five minutes into my first trip down to the beach on Monday morning for official swim practice and my feet began to give out. They are still a little swollen from the flight yesterday. My normally comfortable footwear is now cutting the heels off me. An emergency detour into the nearest shop for a pair of Crocs (flip flop style - all the rage in Kona this year) is called for. They will probably cut my feet too, but not where my runners are going to rub. You can plan for all eventualities but not for everything.

There is a great buzz around town and hundreds of athletes have gathered at Dig Me Beach. It's tiny, but still the most famous few square feet of sand in the triathlon world. None of the race infrastructure is in place yet, but it does nothing to take from the excitement. I have arrived and I am not disappointed. I am struck by the temperature and clarity of the water. Immediately we are swimming over corals, shoals of exotic fish, turtles and I am loving it.

On my way back from the swim I notice the street names, all are familiar to me from pouring over maps of the course and watching video of previous races. Alii Drive, Palani, Kuakini etc. The shop fronts welcome the triathletes and their families. Many being made over for race week have moved the ukuleles and grass skirts into the back and replaced them with Zipp wheels, Newton runners, CO₂ cartridges and the latest in swim suit technology. I have my eye on a Blue Seventy .03 speed suit. As does just about everyone else out here. The streets are buzzing with athletes and their bikes. Last years champion Norman Stadler's new lime green Kuota *Kween K* is being paraded up and down Alii Drive by a large overweight gentleman but the Norminator himself is not to be seen.

Eimear and I have rented a condo about a ten minute walk from the race start. It's in a perfect location with a magnificent view of the bay and most importantly a large balcony for bike assembly and tyre gluing. The owners have left a tarpaulin with note attached suggesting all mechanics should only be done on the tarp - to protect their furnishings. Little do they know Fergs bikes are always spotless – he would be horrified if he thought I might put oil anywhere near it. Unless I have an accident with a tube of tyre glue they have nothing to worry about.

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Tuesday is run day for me. It's not recommended, but I am keen to do one good run before Saturday and I decided it was going to have to be a long one. I planned for an hour and a half, out and back along the Queen Kaahumanu Highway, taking in the hill on Palani Road. I need to show the body what's in store for it, clear the lungs and burn off the jet lag. Something similar is planned for the bike on Wednesday. That will leave me with two full days of total rest before Saturday. I set off with water bottle in hand at a slow jog, so much so that I had hardly left town 45min later when I turned back. But I felt fine and pleasantly surprised at how well the chest behaved. It was definitely hot and I will need on race day to get as much of my body in under the

only shade on the course; the shade provided by my hat! Some clouds come over on the way back making it actually quite pleasant.

By Wednesday I had reassembled the bike, glued brand new tyres (courtesy of my local bike shop, Kenny's for Bikes in Enniscorthy) to the wheels and headed out once again on the Queen Kaahumanu for a test run. This time I am going a lot further into the barren lava fields. The highway is implausibly straight and long. But I like that – I don't do corners very well so I have decided this course suits me. I only intended to ride for an hour and then turn around, but I have got carried away and go north for two hours. In my defence I have been taking it easy and as a geologist I was enjoying the scenery and the barren basalt landscape. Come Saturday I won't have a chance to see any of this.

The surface of a lava flow is very uneven and in places where the road engineers have cut through these undulations some shelter is provided to the cyclist from the wind. It's a little unnerving coming out the other end where the bike can suddenly be caught by a cross wind and whipped across the road. I found I was nervously getting out of the tri bars in advance of this - with any luck I can hold my nerve on race day and stay in them. Another worry was, although the road surface was smooth, at the cutaways the hard shoulders were littered with small rock fragments that have fallen off the rock face. Basalt cools quickly making it a fine grained rock that fractures with a sharp edge. This could be a problem. My tyres are filled with self sealing goo but I will carry a spare just in case. I am riding with a new setup on the bike, Zipp wheels and a big front chain ring (54 to those who know these things) both of which I have not used before. (not a great idea before the biggest race of your life) but I like the feel of it and the look of the course. I can't wait to get going for real.

On the way back my feet begin to hurt. The pain is severe in my left foot and quite alarming. I put it down to them still been a little swollen, tight cycle shoes and the heat. I resolve to stick them in ice when I get back and every day between now and Saturday. Apart from that, I feel good. My chest has definitely cleared. It's hot and windy but that's expected.

Putting the feet in ice has worked wonders, but I am back on them immediately after for the Parade of Nations. We have been asked to line up behind our national flags. Because of administration errors I was the only Irish competitor registered. New Zealand, Germany, Australia, USA and others had teams of thirty or so. I didn't think the organisers would bother with a flag for a team of one. "You can jump into the UK team" is what I expected. But of course they had an Irish flag. There are two other Irish athletes racing, Paul O'Dwyer based in California and Declan Doyle who came over from London. Myself and Declan fall in beside Paul who has the honour of carrying the tricolour (he was first here) and we march down Alii Drive behind the Hungarian team to the official opening of the race Expo. Large crowds have come out to cheer us on and of course some stereotypical Irish comments come our way, but it is all in good fun. Unfortunately neither Eimear nor my family are here to witness my Olympic-esque moment. They will be arriving tomorrow.

It's very quiet. Nobody is talking. We are directed through the long corridors of the King Kamehaameha's Hotel, out the back, through the warm down area and past the medical area. All the race infrastructure it seems has been parachuted into place overnight. Transition had just about been set up when myself and Eimear dropped the bike off yesterday. Now a small village and amphitheatre are in place. A large banner announces the heart re-starting area. A whole tent dedicated to one organ! I tactfully suggest to a steward standing underneath the banner, that perhaps they should cover it until we have all passed. He laughs. So do I, but I was serious. I am glad it's there all the same. A number of very cheerful women brand me on both arms and a leg with ink stamps. I am now 989, it looks good and I wander off topless to my bike in transition. It's six o'clock in the morning and still dark but already warm and humid. The grey shadow of the officially still active volcano Mt. Hualalai can now just be seen looming over the town and the bay (It last erupted in 1801). In a little under an hour the sun will rise from behind the volcano and we will be on our way. My plan for today is to race the 140.6 miles and the sun, hopefully crossing the line on Alii Drive before it completes its work and dips below the horizon.

Transition is still relatively empty so I start the portaloos ritual before the queues build up. It doesn't take long to put my food and drinks on the bike and the usual fumble trying to put air in the tyres. I don't know why but I have never been able to pump my tyres to the desired level before any race. I try a few different pumps provided by the volunteers with little success. I leave it, the sun and hot road surface will expand the air inside – they will be grand. I am ready to go and there is just under an hour to kick off. I kill time by hanging around the business end of transition watching the professionals set up under the glare of the large media spotlight. Obviously the buzz in the pits and all year is the show down between Norman Stadler and Chris McCormack. I haven't seen Stadler all week. Of all the stars here, he is the only one who hasn't been hanging around the Expo giving interviews and signing autographs. His bike however has been everywhere. No sign of it's owner though. It wasn't until last night's media conference when Norman finally showed, but no Macca, so unfortunately no Don King fireworks either. I hoped to catch up with the other Irish lads before the start but no sign of them. I did spy Declan's bike and noted he is going old school with bits of energy bars stuck to the crossbar. I am sticking to my Lion Bar in crossbar pouch approach. I expect its going to get messy in the heat but less chewing is always good.

Slowly transition begins to empty out as people make their way down to the water. The professionals are already in threading water, waiting for their early start. It's hard to describe what goes through your mind at this point. I suppose it's fear. All the excitement and nervous energy of the build up is replaced by fear. There is no going back now; it's like waiting outside the Principal's office or the dentist and you chastise yourself for getting into this position in the first place. A round of applause breaks out as some of the challenged athletes are lowered into the water. Scott Rigsby is attempting this race on two artificial legs (well actually four – different prosthetics are used for the bike and the run) and aims to be the first double amputee to finish an Ironman. I move aside to let him into the water. The professionals are go and I walk down the steps suddenly oblivious to everything around me. I feel like the loneliest person in the world. Out there, amongst the thousands of spectators there are people who know me and I would give anything to spot them now and get an encouraging wave. The water is warm (obviously) and reassuring. The sun sneaks above the

volcano. My fear and that of everyone around me seems to dissipate, this is familiar territory for most of us now. The 2.4 mile swim course is straight out, swim around a boat and back. The out and back sections are separated by about 50 meters of no mans land marked by widely spaced buoys.

I don't think I am a bad swimmer. I'm comfortable and confident in the water (With much help from the staff of the Waterfront Leisure Centre in Enniscorthy). But something is missing and I don't know what it is. Every race I do I try to convince myself to go to the front, mix it with the big boys and girls, get a tow from the pack and be pulled around to a sub one hour swim. Every time I chicken out at the last minute and move back down the field. It doesn't make a difference; I still get swamped and pummelled by hoards of the ugliest looking swimmers as they streak ahead.

This time I am up front again. This time it's going to be different. Mike Riley is keeping order over the tannoy. The Navy Seals have landed, the Hawaiian Gods have been appeased and we are just about to be sent on our way – I am fired up, a couple around me talk about breaking nine hours – I chicken out and doggy paddle over to the edge of the pack. Besides there is a better line from here straight out along the buoys to the turn. We are off and the mayhem ensues. As 1800 people head for the first buoy, those of us on the edge get squeezed into no mans land. The canoeists have a hard job trying to shepherd us back into the proper channel. Needless to say we are adding distance to an already long swim and have to be careful not to miss a buoy. I have to fight my way around each one right on the inside and every time I pass I get pushed back out into no mans land. Looking to my left as I breathe, the sea of humanity seems to be moving as one organism. An amoeba, pouring itself forward through a growing pseudopod. The cytoplasm streams forward fastest in the middle and those of us on the edge may be getting an easier swim of it but we are definitely moving slower. I should be in there in the middle getting knocked about – next time.

It seems like an age when we turn at the boat. The amoeba has reproduced a number of times by now and the pressure at the edges has eased. We take our bearings from the two towers of the King Kamehameha Hotel. I feel I am swimming well now. Those around me look like good swimmers and I am slowly overtaking a number of them while still managing to get the occasional tow of faster swimmers. The water, the light and the fish are all beautiful and I am enjoying it tremendously.

Soon the coral ends and it's time to stand up. Out of the water and up the green carpeted steps without a wobble, I still feel good. I catch a glimpse of the time 1 hour 12 minutes; it's a lot slower than I was hoping for. I think I am going to have to get used to slower times all day. Forget about it and move on. One of the many thousand volunteers has my bag ready and hands it to me with out any fuss as I pass. Gear on, a spray of sun block from another volunteer and I am running for the bike. I am very slow and careful getting on, I always am – more people come a cropper at this point in an Ironman race than anywhere else. Immediately we are faced with a little climb and a sharp right turn to begin a short loop south before hitting the Queen Kaahumanu Highway and the long trek north. I catch a glimpse of my travelling supporters for the first time. Surprised to see some of them up this early, it gives me a great boost and I head up the hill in good spirits. I am out of the saddle on the hill to get blood back into the legs after the swim and suddenly thud- I loose one of my drinks bottles. I

could go back, but the stop and start would probably upset me at this point. But if another one drops I could be stuffed. I have been losing bottles all over the place recently. I thought I had it sorted, but obviously not. Could I be penalised for littering if I don't pick it up? – I take a chance and push on. I should have enough fluid on board to get me to the first aid station where I can reload.

Very quickly and very much to my surprise I start to overtake a lot of people. It's actually quite unsettling. I know I am well back after the swim but still. Most of these people are top age groupers having qualified from all over the world and not all are geriatrics like me. Do they know something I don't? Am I going too fast at this early stage? – But it feels fine. It does play on my mind, I'm sure they are looking at me and "tut tutting", but I have to race my own race. I remember Dave Scott's words of advice to me "if you feel good on the bike you may as well go for it..." What the hell.

Soon I reach the turnaround and head back to town turning right up Palani and out on to the highway. It's a beautiful day with a cloudless sky. Now the fun will start. Thankfully the bottles have settled down and the aid stations come and go. I manage to stay down in the tri bars in the gusts. I am always a lot braver in a race. I continue to overtake a constant stream of cyclists, but there is an unending line of them in front of me. I have raced in bigger fields before but I have never seen so many cyclists in front of me. But then I have never raced on such straight roads before. I pick a point off in the distance, be it a rider or a landmark and then put my head down and grind it out until I have caught them or reach it. Then I start again. I continue to work my way through the field this way staying pretty much on the left in the overtaking zone. There is quite a bit of drafting going on which is disappointing and the larger packs do hold me up, but the marshals are pulling people for it. Unlike in previous races I make a decision not to get involved in discussing the parentage of drafters with them. I will need every ounce of energy I have to get around the course today. One nasty consequence of staying left in a cross wind that is coming from the right and passing an unending stream of Ironman cyclists, is that it makes me vulnerable to the ultimate punishment befitting of all drafters – the dreaded warm spray from in front. More than once I let off a few expletives as I overtake and forcibly suggest a bit more care and consideration. Neither the men nor the women seemed too concerned with my plight.

And then we hit the real cross winds. There are stories of tyres rolling off hubs because of shear forces. I am a little worried about this. I have never glued tubs to wheels before and can't be sure if I have done it right. I have to take one hand off the tribars and try and man handle the bike back to the correct side of the road. It's frustrating but I can only laugh. The cross winds are always worse up here in the north of the Island. They are caused by the trade winds hitting the island. The same winds that were used by the old time mariners to circumnavigate the Globe. I like the idea of battling these winds on my bike. Captain Cook used these winds to chart the South Seas. Mind you he was killed here on the big Island by the natives. There is a monument to the man at the very spot on the shore just south of Kailua Town where he was slain. It's very near to the first turnaround on the marathon course. Apparently the monument sits on what is officially British soil.

As I begin the long climb up to Hawi the leaders start to come by in the opposite direction. The only bike I recognise in the main group is Macca's. No sign of the green Norminator, nor one of the other pre race favourites, the Speedo'd Faris Al Sultan which is surprising. The tyres stay on and after what seemed an endless battle with the wind and gradient; I make it to the top of the climb at Hawi. Not having left any treats, I zip past the special needs station at the turnaround and brace myself for the long descent back into the cross wind.

The gears click smoothly into the eleven and with the fifty four up front my speed picks up quickly. I have been steadily overtaking people all day, but now for some reason I seem to be leaving them for dead. I am very nervous, but force myself to ignore my better judgement and stay low and push. Today is the World Championships and I know there are no turns ahead for ten miles so I go for it. Still my heart pops into my mouth as the wind catches the front wheel, but unlike on the way up my speed/momentum helps to hold the bike on a straighter line - something like a gyroscope I suppose. That's not to say I am not scared sh**less but I am getting quite a thrill from it, I am even a little giddy. I have never ridden a bike this fast. I can't believe how easily I am overtaking the P3C's. Occasionally I spin out of gears and tuck myself in tight making myself as small as possible and enjoy the brief rest. Every muscle fibre and sinew is rigid. My eyes are focused absolutely on the road ahead. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't bring myself to look at the speedo. It's only after the race I check it out. It topped out at 93kmph. Not sure if I believe it but it certainly felt that fast!

Coming down off the north end of the island the winds decrease again but are now more head on. It's a hard slog trying to keep the legs spinning. Occasionally I get out of the saddle going up the small hills just to stretch them out. At this stage the line of people ahead has broken up a little but there are still groups of cyclists stretching far into the distance. Aid stations come often now and are a welcome break on an otherwise barren landscape. I have managed my nutrition well. I know what I am drinking and always have at least one full bottle on board when reaching an aid station. I don't need to restock every time but they are long enough and organised enough to allow me to be selective in my choice of imbuelement when I do. Occasionally I will just take on water to which I add salt tablets. Although I am still going with my usual Lion Bar fuelling strategy, I have added some more sensible elements to it. It was a hot race in Austria and my legs cramped up badly during the run there - I think because of salt depletion. Hence the salt tablets and also for the first time I am taking a few salty gels on the bike as well. I have actually developed quite a liking for the Power Bar gel, except the Vanilla which for some reason is revolting. I feel the refined refuelling strategy is working and although I am obviously tiring there are no signs of nausea or cramp in the legs at this time.

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The long caravan of cyclists has finally broken up as I near the end of the cycle. There are even some moments when I am actually on my own on the road. The temperature is still rising and I can feel my shoulders begin to bake. My sweat has dissolved a set of aluminium handle bars in the past - a little spray of sun cream never stood a chance. As I pass the airport, the happy thought occurs to me that I have to run back out here later this afternoon. With that I treat myself to a palm full of what remains of

my Lion Bar soup and a swig of warm Coke (grabbed at an aid station 20 miles back by mistake) and surprisingly it's all finger licking good.

At one twenty in the afternoon, just as 181.7 Km's appears on the speedo and five hours seven minutes after getting on this damn bike I am back in civilization amongst the cheering crowds. Sliding gently off (well it's more of an ooze) the bike is taken from me and I am away on the usual hot coal dance around transition to the changing tent and my running gear. Coming out of transition I am again hit by a wall of heat - now without a breeze. About this time every day, since I arrived on the island, clouds have rolled down the slopes of Mt. Hualalai and brought some relief to the town. Occasionally even a shower or two. Before I pull my hat down as far as I can over my eyes and make my self as small as possible underneath it. I look up at the slopes of the volcano - no clouds today. It's going to be a long afternoon and with the high humidity I am entering into unknown territory.

Immediately I decide on caution. Usually it's just run and see what happens. My legs feel ok but I know I have pushed them hard on the bike and I can't be sure what's left. I have seen some horrific pictures of top athletes collapsing and crawling along Alii Drive just yards from the finish line. Even Chris McCormack has blown up on the run here in the past and has had to pull out. That was when he was leading the race! People start to overtake immediately - lots of them. It's hard to take after the bike and I fight the urge to try and stay with them. Even if I wanted to, there is little chance I could. If I can hold on or even pick up the pace towards the end, perhaps I will see some of them coming back to me later on. A couple of waiflike female professionals I remember passing near the end of the bike shoot past. I won't be seeing them again for sure. Neil O'Brien from 3D Dublin always runs his Ironman marathons holding back at the start, no matter how good he feels. It takes discipline. He talks about a button being pressed at about ten miles to go and everybody just goes into reverse. I hope he is right. Some people do however start to walk a lot earlier than I would have expected. But many more are just floating by me at unbelievable speed, it's incredible to watch.

Like the bike course there is again a short loop south for about eight miles. The leaders have already finished this loop by the time I start the run. Once back into town it's up the steep hill on Palani Road and back out onto to the highway going as far as the mythical wasteland that's the Natural Energy Lab where we are to turn.

Eight miles in and I see my travelling party again on the hill. At this stage you can tell the heat is also getting to the crowd but they are still in good voice. Thankfully I am feeling ok and even pick off a few places going up the hill. No matter how bad you might feel you have to give the impression that everything is grand. My parents will always support me in everything I do, though they don't always get it. As I suspect with most mothers mine has a genetic disposition to feeding me up. Going into this race she has been concerned that I have been looking a bit too skinny for her liking. I have tried to explain why, but to no avail. As I pass I make every effort to look anything but in discomfort. I know she would really start to fret and I will no doubt be in for a lecture on not eating properly when I finish. Eimear who has had to endure three Ironman races before has long since stopped worrying. She also knows how much I eat.

Once over the top of the hill I settle into a rhythm again and am beginning to hold my own. I don't think I am running any faster, but those around me are definitely going slower. The first of the leaders start coming back the other way. McCormack is leading by at least a minute and is flying. He is not going to be caught at this stage. This is his fifth attempt and I am pleased for him, he deserves it.

Again aid stations come frequently. The drinks are cold and they have ice – buckets of it. No mean feat in this heat. Ice goes under the hat, down the front and back. My race belt acts as a dam holding it up at the waist where it melts slowly allowing cold water to drip through the important stuff. It makes for a strange rattling noise as I run, but if I get enough in it can last to the next aid station. But still, it's brutal out here. There is absolutely no respite from the sun. By now I have retreated deep inside my head and under my hat. In a strange way I have become removed from everything outside, including the heat and the pain. It's the akin to the inverse of an outer body experience. Everything now works to a rhythm, running, drinking, grabbing ice, refuelling and breathing all are part of the race rhythm. Somewhere deep underneath my cap my subconscious is on autopilot monitoring all that's going on. I am not really a part of it except occasionally when I am yanked from my rhythm by a nasty vanilla flavoured gel that slips through the vetting system.

Turning at the Energy Lab, for the first time all day, I know things are going to be grand. My form and cadence have improved since the start, so much so I decide now to push as hard as I can to the finish - about twelve kilometres away and I began to pick my way back through the field. When coming out of the Energy Lab back onto the Queen K, you pass what is the 'The Ford Motivational Mile'. A large traffic sign flashes up personal messages from supporters as you go by. I was looking forward to this. I knew Eimear had put a message in the system. My only worry was I might get a little emotional and it could upset the rhythm. 989 Alan Ryan "Good Job Pokie" What? What was that? –she has called me many things, but never pokie! I didn't get emotional, unless confusion could be considered, nor motivated but it was a curious distraction. She claims it wasn't her message. I am inclined to believe her but next time I may write my own.

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Running up Alii drive to the finish is singularly the most extraordinary experience of my sporting life. From about two or three kilometres out all pain goes. I am running faster now than at any point during the whole marathon and probably with more comfort than at any time all year. I no longer need the protection of withdrawing into the murky depths of my mind and remove my hat and glasses as a symbol of my return to the outside world. I see and hear everything, even the clock which has not ticked over to ten hours yet. The sun still shines down as I cross the line. Job done. That was good – can I do it again?

I had not seen Paul or Declan at all during the race. I was expecting Declan to pass me on the bike and when he didn't I was sure he would get me on the run but again no sign. I heard afterwards that he crashed early on the bike and despite being in serious discomfort he managed to make it to the finish line.

I first came across Declan at IM Austria in 2005 where he posted a very respectable time around the ten hour forty mark. The following year he was there again and knocked more than an hour off that time, nearly catching me on the finish line. This year he was back in Austria, just for the fun of it, having already qualified for Hawaii in New Zealand. He recorded what I think must be the third fastest time ever by an Irishman coming in just behind Trevor Woods who set a new Irish record on the day. Meeting him here in Hawaii he looked in great shape and was absolutely focused on the race ahead. Like the rest of us he was very taken by the Hawaii experience. Flying into Hawaii he had already decided he wanted to come back next year. I am sure he will and probably do something special.

I didn't see Paul O'Dwyer after the race either. But judging from his finishing video on Ironman Live and he looked very fresh and pleased with himself crossing the line with his son. And rightly so, Paul finished in around 12 and half hours, close to his Austria time which considering the different terrain and conditions is a terrific result.

At about twenty minutes to midnight, Scott Rigsby in what was probably the most emotional moment for everyone on the day, made history.

My last thoughts on the whole Ironman Hawaii experience are – it's an amazing, brutal but fair race. The organisation around the event is extraordinary. I don't know how many are involved, but it must be thousands. Talking to people, I get the impression that an army of Californian pensioners must take their holidays in Kona every year to help out at the World Championships. Every athlete is taken literally by the hand from registration on Tuesday to the post race recovery and party. For that I would like to thank them. I would also like to thank all the spectators out on the course "Good Job", particularly the Irish supporters who knew my name – apologies for not being able to raise a smile. And of course to all my family who travelled and those who couldn't but stayed up late into the early morning watching on the computer, thank you. Thanks to Eimear who got me there and went away as Mrs Ryan. Brave girl.

Anybody who has an interest in Ironman should try and get to Kona some day. If for some reason you can't put all the training in to qualify, do the lottery – I am.