

RACE REPORT: TRIATHLON - IRONMAN AUSTRIA 8 JULY 2007

Bill Murphy

I stood up on the ferry deck looking out over Hull as we pulled out of port contemplating the fact that it had done nothing but rain in Yorkshire for the last month and the last time I had cycled anything over 70 miles was April. Equally I was contemplating the fact that I had been injured for the last 6 months and been acutely injured in the last 7 days. I had driven through a serious thunderstorm to get to the ferry and was thinking “well, even if I can’t start, I could do with a holiday. After all, southern Europe was getting such hot weather...”

That was “southern Europe” i.e. south of the Alps, Pyrenees and around the Adriatic. I was heading for Klagenfurt, in southern Austria. Anyone with a cursory knowledge of geography would be distinctly one step ahead of me at this point. That cursory knowledge would make them think “Austria – north of the Alps, west of the Adriatic”; they may even think “Austria – home of walking boots and Lederhosen” or even they may think “Austria – home of House of Habsburg¹ and one of the great centres of European culture” but you probably don’t think “Austria – great place for sunbathing²”. However, undeterred, I was on my way and not going to let such matters as geography get in the way – after all, it was almost 1000 mile drive south and east!

Racing or not. I had all the usual kit with me. The normal tri related stuff that I managed to pack; bike; wetsuit; goggles; running shoes; T-shirts; sunglasses etc³. I thought the damage to the calf on my right leg would mean that I could do some open water swim training and it would allow me to do some gentle riding. All useful, given that I still had the horror of Ironman UK in August. Add to that I had an extra bike as I was picking up one of my friends from North Yorkshire Police Tri at Frankfurt airport (NYP Tri⁴). So to cut a long story short on day 1 I drove from Rotterdam to Frankfurt in my own personalised thunderstorm that seemed to move with me from Arnham to Frankfurt where I picked up Simon Hill and we stayed the night near the airport. On day 2 I collected my personalized thunderstorm and drove from Frankfurt to Klagenfurt. It is safe to say that the driving conditions were some of the worst I have experienced. However, we arrived in Klagenfurt and found our Hotel – the Hotel Weidenhoff and had some dinner and a beer⁵. There was a crowd of NYP Tri people staying at the Weidenhoff and a few more staying about 200m down the road. There were also UK athletes from Derby; Southampton and London: as ever, a good crowd.

¹ Ok, it’s a bit more complex than this and it all relates to the Holy Roman Empire which Napoleon I dissolved in 1806 when he re-organized Germany in the widest sense. The then Emperor Francis II, declared himself Hereditary emperor of Austria, but this is a race report – not a history lesson

² in fact you may think “Austria – great for skiing”; great for mountaineering. Sunbathing might be good only after a couple of million years of global warming*.

* Actually, the last time Austria had anything approaching sea front property was about 56 million years ago when T-rex had glanced at the skyline and muttered “what’s that heading towards the earth....”

³ Note to self: next time remember to pack underwear – this is no way to make friends and influence people....well, influence people; yes. Make friends? No.

⁴ You would be surprised how many people thought this was New York Police. I always get confused between Ripon and New York. It is obvious mistake to make. After all, they both have...erm... cathedrals?

⁵ Well, I had a beer. After all I was injured, on holiday and not racing. Simon’s body is a temple – he doesn’t ruin it with alcohol. My body also has some temple like qualities: it is run down, decaying and somewhere nobody wants to visit...

By the time we had emerged from our respective rooms to break fast on Thursday morning there was the usual range of things to do. The first was register. Ironman Austria has a good range of race freebies⁶ and I had every intention of collecting them. And who could miss the opportunity of having an immediately identifiable wrist band that proclaimed you as a complete nutcase⁷. Registration done, I collected my free (???) hat and cycling jersey had a light lunch (costing almost 15 quid!) and put my feet up inside the food tent to watch the latest torrential thunderstorm sweep in. At a convenient break in the rain, Simon and I strolled back to the hotel for a siesta⁸. All the NYP Tri gang were meeting for dinner that night, and by this time I was considered as an honorary⁹ NYP triathlete. I even got included in the team photo – possibly for blackmail purposes later should embarrass myself on the course. More good food was eaten; more good beer was drunk and I had to admit that so far this was the best Ironman ever. There was however, some nagging doubt in my mind to ruin all this...I wasn't going to be able to start.

Friday involved more eating and drinking and the customary suspension of economic sense that happens on walking into the Expo¹⁰. I went for a ride with the NYP Tri folk which was a pleasant way to justify lunch and a beer just after mid-day. It also kept me out of the alternating baking sun and thunderstorms that continued to plague the region. With the idea of racing still far from my mind this was shaping up to be by far the best way to “do Ironman”. In the evening I joined some of the Derby Tri club¹¹ people from the hotel and went to the pasta party. The food was ok, but the seafood pasta was generally avoided by most people for fear of repercussions.

Saturday involved a certain amount of running about and racking of bikes. I had decided to go through this process as free bike covers had been given away in previous years – so I was told by Simon, and again, I was at this stage out to recoup my losses on my race entry fee¹². It also involved the pre-race briefing where competitors went to be patronized by the organizers¹³. There remained only a Spartan pre-race dinner with NYP Tri and off for an early night so that the competitors would be rested. So, at about 11pm several mildly inebriated triathletes and rather well fed triathletes adjourned for bed – so much for an early night. However, I was unconcerned. I would arise at leisure. Have breakfast; sit on the terrace and watch the race go by while having breakfast. I was relaxed and soon asleep. This style of Ironman was growing on me....

⁶ I use the word “freebies” in loosest possible sense of the word. At £240 race entry fee there is nothing “free” you have just paid for it up front.

⁷ Well...it actually said something like “Ironman competitor” but the effect is much the same.

⁸ That's if you could sleep through the thunderclaps and sound of rain beating off the roof as if somewhat was trying to hammer a small animal to death against a roof tile.

⁹ Obviously did not know me or they would have said “dis-honorary” member.

¹⁰ In a new first for me I only bought 2 T shirts and a polo shirt. How could I resist such value for money? A T-shirt for only 50 euros!? Why did I spend £35 on a T shirt I asked myself – especially given the way I wash T-shirts....

¹¹ It is worth noting that I was the only Leeds-Bradford Triathlete out of 2500 race entrants. LBT members generally work on the basis that any race I am entered in is best avoided for fear of guilt by association.

¹² Of course this made no economic sense at all. In order to accumulate c. £40 worth of freebies I had to spend several hundred pounds on petrol; food and hotel accommodation. I refer you back to footnote 7 in many respects.

¹³ I had by this time done 5 of these. I didn't have to be told to wear my timing chip underneath my wetsuit**.

** Although one poor competitor was last seen by me hopping around transition trying to get his wetsuit off while his chip was firmly fastening his suit to his left leg...

The starting gun went and I rather found myself wondering how I had come to this¹⁴. I had gone from “I’m not doing this, I’ll do some gentle training while collecting freebies” to the frantic melee of a mass, deep water start¹⁵ with 3.8 km of manic splashing ahead of me¹⁶. The course was simple: 1500m out; 1500m back and 800m down a canal. The last time I did this race I subtitled my race report “Bunfight at the Klagenfurt Canal”. Nothing had changed with 2500 competitors all trying to get into a 20 m wide canal chaos reigned¹⁷. Needless to say I got lost and zig-zagged my way around the course but emerged from the water 80 minutes after I actually started – still slightly confused about how I got there. As I changed into my bike kit – Simon Hill zipped in and out of transition and I saw several NYP Tri guys go in and out. However, in short order I was wheeling my bike out of T1 and heading for the 180 km bike course.

The bike course had changed from 2004. Instead of a three lap course it was now a larger loop but only two laps. This made the course tougher as it put in some more hills and meant that the 20 km descent from Rupertiburg to Klagenfurt was only done twice instead of three times. However, I felt strangely elated after the swim as it didn’t hurt and I went off on the bike feeling good. The first 60 km flew by. I passed the first third of the bike course in slightly less than 2 hours. I was out the saddle climbing, sat down hard and broke the clamp holding the saddle to the seat pin¹⁸. This left my saddle with the front pointing upwards at an angle of about 5-10 degrees: uncomfortable¹⁹ but hardly catastrophic I thought. Of course the fact that it was going to be uncomfortable for 120 km had not at this stage entered into my mind. Shortly thereafter that fact changed. As the climb up to Rupertiburg began in earnest I realised I was sliding backward off the bike. I also realised I was having to overwork the hamstrings and that this was having a highly detrimental effect on my ankles. I also realised that at this point, there was 120 km still to go. It was also clear that I almost could not get onto the tri bars on the bike. This was not good. Yet again I found myself wondering “Why am I here and not in the hotel with a beer???”

However I was soon back at, if not in, the hotel as it was on the bike course and I found myself looking at people sitting on the terrace with beer and lunch with a certain degree of longing. The second lap of the bike course was worse than the first and I ground out the remaining 90 km in considerable discomfort having my own individual race with an Aussie competitor with whom I swapped places at least half a dozen times²⁰ in the last 20 km down into Klagenfurt. However; 6 hours 34 minutes and a small number of seconds after leaving a sun baked transition, I returned to, a sun-baked transition area.

I forgot to mention that it was bloody hot!²¹.

¹⁴ In fact, I was also wondering why they had said the race would start in 5 minutes and then sounded the starting horn.

¹⁵ Well, a shoreside start given where I was standing when the horn went.

¹⁶ This is by far the best description of my swim style.

¹⁷ Well, it maybe wasn’t a reign of chaos, but certainly a light shower....

¹⁸ The first person to suggest this is telling me something about my weight best be faster than I am.....

¹⁹ Although some people would pay good money for this.

²⁰ I was actually wishing at this point we could swap bikes.

²¹ It was not the 104 degrees F of IM Couer D’Alene the previous year, but the temperature had peaked in the high 90s in direct sunlight on the bike course.

As I stuck more sunblock on my slightly toasted limbs I ran into one of my fellow Weidenhoff residents for whom the temperature had proven too much. He told me that Simon was in front of me by about 10-15 minutes. It was now my task to run him down²² – after all – this is the bit I am good at. I dashed out of T2 and, frankly, ground to a halt, although managed to pass my Aussie foe for the last time before I did.

The damage done by 120 km of bad bike position was telling. My hamstrings hurt; my quads hurt and worst of all, my ankles and Achilles tendons were in a serious mess. The sun was out, it was hot: motivation was zero. I strolled a couple of hundred metres and saw the first aid station. Energy drinks, cold water and some food beckoned and I thought “looks good”. In fact, it looked so good, I trotted a couple of hundred metres to get there. I took on some fluid and thought “I can trot on a bit further” and by the time I reached the next aid station on the westward bound section of the marathon course towards Krumpendorf I was running²³ between aid stations. The ankles were easing off; the hamstrings were loosening with a bit of occasional stretching, I began to think that the only thing keeping me from finishing now was the heat. At this point, the clouds came out, the sun was obscured and the temperature dropped and remained that way for the rest of the day. There were no more excuses.

The marathon course is very flat so I saw Simon in front of me and caught up with him. The fact he was where he was on the course was a major achievement. He had his own injury problems and had managed less training than I. We walked together for a bit and eventually I was ordered off by Simon who suggested I could go faster²⁴. The first lap of the marathon disappeared in a warm, trotting way and the second half faded into a carbohydrate depleted mess²⁵. After what seemed like a long time²⁶ I was eventually coming down the finishers chute running through the cheerleaders and hearing the words “William Murphy from Leeds in the United Kingdom, you are an Ironman” to which I thought....“again” with a certain degree of smug satisfaction.

My thanks for finishing this race however



²² Given that it was his encouraging comments the previous evening that had got me to this stage, and my shoulders ached after hanging onto the handlebars for 4 hours and 30 minutes, I was contemplating just running him down when he was loading the car to leave. Revenge as they say, is a dish best served cold....

²³ I use running in the loosest sense of the word. It might be better to say “shuffling” “shambling” or “trundling” but running....perhaps not. Lets merely say that I was to running was lederhosen is to sensible shorts.

²⁴ At this point I was contemplating suggesting where he could go with his comments....

²⁵ I was so desperate I even tried a raspberry powerbar energy gel. I think the word I would use to describe this was “gopping”. Just to convince myself that it was that bad, I had another one later on and they had not improved in taste.

²⁶ That’s because it was – 4 hrs 37 minutes and 8 seconds is a long time to cover 26.2 miles. Or, with the usual Austrian efficiency 42.195km

must lie firmly with Simon Hill. If it had not been for Simon, I would not have gone to Austria. If he had not urged me to register and see what it was like on the day; I would not have done so. Had Simon not suggested racking my bike and making a decision on the morning, I would not have been in a position to race when I found out I was good to go. The finish time of 12:56:08 is not my best time, but not my worst either. Even the sub 13 hour finish is down to Simon, as if he had not told me to get going²⁷ I would have been content to stroll around the marathon course.

Despite all the problems I enjoyed this race. This was largely down to the crowd of people from NYP Tri that I was with. They are a friendly bunch and dinner the night after the race was one of those nights that involved tears of laughter. I commented that 2008 was going to be an Ironman free year. I was going to reclaim my life and concentrate on running. I will see several of them again at Ironman UK in August.

Less than a week later at the urging of Mark Rees, the Chairman of NYP Tri who had been in Klagenfurt, I had signed up for Ironman France in Nice on 22 June 2008. NYP + 1 LBT = fun times it seems. The maths was simple.

Ironman UK – if it continues raining the Sherborne race may just turn out to be a 140.6 mile swim....

²⁷ Actually he said something along the lines of “sod off you sweaty git, you stink” or words to that effect....