



ROYAL AIR FORCE TRIATHLON ASSOCIATION

23 Jul 06

IRONMAN GERMANY 06 – RACE REPORT

The training was done, the bags were packed, and on a bright July morning Jonny Briggs and I set off for Frankfurt to race in the 2006 Ironman European Championships in Frankfurt.

Things got off to a bad start when those nice people the baggage handlers gave our luggage a good kicking and delivered it with axles sticking through the sides of the boxes. Fortunately, no damage was done. Race brief was on Friday and, for me, things went downhill massively when the Race Director announced that due to the water temperature wetsuits would not be permitted at all. This announcement was met with stunned silence; clearly I was not the only person unhappy about this. This was Number 1 on my list of "What is the Worse Thing That Could Happen" so some positive mental thinking over the next few hours was necessary (thanks guys) to put me in a more positive frame of mind. I adjusted my race plan to allow for this and to ensure I would find clear water in the swim, although this would no doubt result in losing a few minutes in the water.

The bikes had to be racked on the Saturday and were supposedly to be done by race number. Most of the RAF Team went in the morning due to their low race numbers (and for the umpteenth time my race number of 1787 was not the year I was born!) and came back with tales of slick German efficiency. It was late afternoon before Mike Potts and I joined the queue for the bike transport down to the lake and the weather was looking stormy. Once on the coach, it began to rain. By the time we got to the lake it was absolutely lashing down and slick German efficiency was beginning to crack. With bike check-in temporarily suspended due to the monsoon, the athletes took cover wherever they could. Unfortunately, the buses kept arriving with more athletes and their bikes and pretty soon it was chaos. Mike and I had somehow ended up at the front of the queue so when things did get started again it didn't take us long to be checked in, rack our bikes and get on our way again.

So race day came and after a carbo-rich breakfast we headed down to the lake, some 10km outside of Frankfurt. The weather was overcast although the forecast was for another scorcher. After checking tyre pressures and the inevitable trip to the toilet I was able to relax and enjoy the build-up to the event. Apparently, there were some 10,000 spectators at the lake, and they made a very impressive sight.

At the start, I applied my revised race strategy and stayed where I was for a minute or so to let the other 2,099 or so starters get going until there was some clear water ahead of me, and I set off at a very comfortable pace. Although this was far below the pace I could have achieved with a wetsuit it was right for me on the day. After the first turn my goggles started to steam up, but after the initial out-and-back we had to get out of the lake for 20m or so and I took the opportunity to clean the lenses. After this, they were fine. There was a little bit of bumping and barging at the turns but generally speaking I was happy with the way things had progressed and exited the swim after 1 hour 38 minutes. More importantly, I was still in one piece and very relaxed and stress free.

After an equally leisurely T1 (10 minutes!!!) and a banana I set about the 180km bike course. The first part is a 12km cruise into Frankfurt before 2 laps of an 84km loop. After half an hour or so I approached the first major hill and felt the first spots of rain. As I started the climb the heavens opened and the rain lashed down by the bucket load. Well at least it kept us cool, and as I climbed I passed countless cyclists spinning gently up the hill, clearly watching their heart-rates. Wimps! The rain lasted for an hour or so before easing off, but the roads were awash and I passed several

riders changing tubs/tubes. It was still raining as I came to the cobbled section which appeared before me sooner than I expected and I found myself on the big ring trying to climb when I could barely see and was somewhat reluctant to take my hands off the bars to reach the gear-shifter on the tribar. I did manage it, though, and smiled to myself at the situation I found myself in. A little later the rain had eased off I found myself hammering down a hill at some 75kmh tucked on my tribars with the road surface now resembling a small river. At times like this you just have to trust your equipment and your bike handling skills. The last hill on the course is known as The Hell and is mobbed by spectators Tour de France style, leaving the riders with just a narrow gap, barely the width of the bike, to ride up. This is a fabulous experience, and all my IM training HR zones went completely out the window here as I honked up the hill, trying to put on a good show for the supporters - HR of 175+ is not IM pacing for a 42 year old! The crowds on the bike course were just awesome, generating massive amounts of noise through cheering, loudspeakers, rattles (the old-style football ones, not baby ones) and those plastic things they bang together. As our race numbers had our names on, they would even shout your name out. Wonderfully motivating stuff. I completed the first lap in 3 hours and set off on the second lap. Worryingly, I had not seen any of the other RAF Tri mates. With some 40km to go I eventually saw Debs. She had had a great swim and was wearing one of the biggest smiles I saw all day - clearly she was loving the whole IM experience. After a short chat I went on my way, and managed to catch Mike and Jonny before the end of the bike. 180km in 5 hrs 48 mins at an average speed of 31kmh - very happy with that.

Another leisurely transition and I was out on the run. By this time the sun was blazing and I am told the temperature reached a painfully hot 34 degrees. My plan was to run between aid stations and then walk the aid stations, ensuring I was able to take on sufficient fluids. The first 10.5km lap (of 4) went to plan but on lap 2 my heart rate was getting worryingly high, so between aid stations I would run until the HR got too high, and then walked until it had recovered. This seemed to work in keeping things under control. On lap 3 my hips started to hurt, then my knees, hamstrings, quads and feet, especially my feet. The sun was blazing and discretion was definitely the better part of valour - running now became the exception with walking the norm. Having short conversations with fellow athletes as you passed them or they passed you was normal. When one of those conversations starts with "Do you know Brad", the short conversation became a long one that lasted almost all of the last 15 km. I hope your knees are better Paula (Sevenoaks Tri Club). With about one km to go, I could see Mike getting to within about 50m of me and I knew Jonny was not too far behind either; it was therefore time to try and run. Surprisingly I found I could, and passed several people as I approached the finish. Showing my four wristbands to the marshals I was filtered off into Victory Lane. I could hear the music and the crowd and I rounded the corner onto the red carpet. In front of me were 2 other athletes, each having a family reunion with all their children. Obviously the finishing chute is no place for such sentiment so these were pushed aside and I sprinted to the line, arms raised in triumph. I was an IRONMAN!

My marathon time of 5 hrs 11 mins gave me a finishing time of 12:54:45. My pre-race plan had a finish time of between 12 and 13 hours so I was well pleased. Nothing spectacular but, for me, it wasn't about the time, it was about taking part and completing the event. After the race, it was great to catch up with the other guys and swap stories. The general consensus was that it had been a fantastic experience and the post-race feeling of achievement was like nothing I had experienced before. After a shower and a massage, Jonny and I headed out to watch the final few minutes up to the cut-off time of 16 hours, and found myself shouting at one of the last competitors to finish to stop kissing his children and cuddling his wife as he only had 30 seconds to go to the 16 hour cut-off. It was that sort of occasion.

For me, the whole IM experience was just awesome. The hotel was excellent (thanks Debs), the mutual support from those that raced was superb, and the support from back home was massive (thanks to all RAF Tri members that texted, posted on the forum, phoned etc, it was very much appreciated). A mention must be made of Martin Ball's marathon time that was faster than some of the pros - unbelievable.

Big thanks also to the Sports Lottery, and the P Ed O at RAF Brampton/Wyton for financial support.

Would I do it again? I've said "no" but ...

Final Point. A few weeks before this race, there was the small matter of an Olympic distance race that took part at Rutland Water. 6 of the 7 club members racing at IM Frankfurt competed in this race. The irony of team members from the RAF wearing Dambuster t-shirts whilst in Germany was not lost on us!