

## IMNZ2014 Race Report

New Zealand is spectacular, and a large part of the attraction to Ironman New Zealand was to tour the country. Two weeks were spent on the North Island preparing for and completing the race, and three weeks touring the South Island.

Training for Ironman New Zealand was a unique experience for me, as I have never before trained for an Ironman race during the winter. The 16 week training program started in November. Our 2013-14 winter was particularly severe, with snow and cold temperatures. The last open water swim I had done was July, and I had not biked outdoors since the fall. I was able to complete the full training schedule with only one winter cold, and no injuries (excepting frost nipped toes), although training substantially indoors on my own was not as effective as training outdoors with others. Equally, training in -20C weather did not translate well to a +20C race day. I did arrive in Auckland 10 days prior to race day feeling fit and ready, though.

All of my swim training was in a pool, bike training in my basement (watching too many movies) and run training outdoors, running circuits around the adjacent cemetery. So I missed practicing swimming with a wet suit, road riding hills. Running was with many layers of clothing and a face mask. So much for training specificity.

The 24 hours of travel to Auckland went remarkably quickly. I managed on this trip to pack all I needed in my one checked soft sided bike bag, one carry-on bag, plus a small day pack, avoiding excess luggage charges (except Air Canada's \$50 surcharge for the bike) All arrived safely at the Auckland airport.

New Zealand officials are hyper about travellers arriving with foreign substances. I had scrupulously cleaned my shoes, but had not consumed the cinnamon raisin bagel with cream cheese, which I duly declared to customs. The bagel declaration resulted in a 20 minute delay while I described my intended breakfast to 3 customs officers, the most senior accepting that I was not likely to cause national environmental damage and let me through, bagel intact. Triathletes be forewarned!

Although New Zealand is famed to be the bungee jumping capital of the world, the truly scary local activity is driving on the left side of narrow highways at 100kph. At 6am, having traveled continuously for 24 hours, in the predawn light, I loaded my luggage into a rental Toyota Corolla, with right hand drive, and set off at the start of Auckland's rush hour for my first experience of New Zealand driving. The speedometer even had a large label cautioning "keep left". That's to say nothing about negotiating roundabouts.

My plan was to travel north for 3 hours to a small town of Paihia, where I hoped to see a bit of the North Island and escape the bustle of Auckland. The weather was warm and sunny. Travelling cheaply I had arranged to stay at hostels, and that worked fine. Upon arrival, I immediately assembled my bike, and set out for my first outdoor ride in many months. I found that bike riding in New Zealand is really hazardous, with narrow or unpaved shoulders, and vehicles (read oversized trucks) whizzing past 2 feet from my right elbow. It was another week before I felt comfortable using my aero bars. The initial short ride was followed by a swim in the salt water bay of the Pacific Ocean. Although there was a swell, the

buoyancy of the salt water was quite nice compared with the chlorinated pools of Toronto. Each day I would store my bike in the back of the car, and felt totally secure doing this. The week progressed with more swim, bike and run training (shorts and tee shirt weather) and a bit of local site seeing.

New Zealand is very compact compared with Canada. Driving an hour takes one through a variety of terrain, from mountains to ocean. Narrow two lane "highways" with 100km speed limits would include 15kph hairpin turns, and signs warning "high crash zone" and "slippery when frosty". Gas (petrol) is twice as expensive as in Canada, and my conservative driving speeds resulted in excellent fuel economy.

My second stop was a night in Auckland, to briefly see the city, and then a Sunday morning, predawn attempt to leave the city before the traffic congestion. The morning's drive got me to Taupo, the race location. I bought some CO2 cartridges for tire inflation, checked into the hostel, and this being a recovery day, drove the bike course. This was a 2 loop ride of 90km, so a single drive around the course was adequate to remind myself that riding 180km outdoors is a long way. It was a pleasant drive, with enough ups and downs to keep it interesting.

Race week proceeded as planned, with swim, bike and run training, It was nice to remember how much buoyancy a wet suit provides, and the water of Lake Taupo is pristine. Race registration and the welcome dinner were Ironman standard. Linda arrived in Taupo Thursday of race week.

One new aspect of this race for me was the use of race number decals. Rather than a volunteer marking your race number and age on race morning, the competitor received a decal which you apply the night before the race. This worked well. Also, rather than having your age on your calf, age groups were letters, mine being "U". You could probably guess that the younger competitors started with "A". Pretty discreet I would say.

I was also pleased to find that my bike would be racked in a row immediately adjacent to the change tents, so there would be no running up and down rows of bikes searching for my own. Having racked my bike, and left my transition bags, it was just a matter of relaxing the remainder of the day.

Race day dawned cold. 5 degrees C is the coldest I'd ever started a triathlon. I left the hotel after breakfast at 4:40am, wearing a down jacket and hat. Only a few minutes from the hotel, another competitor offered me a ride to the race site, which I gratefully accepted. It did get me there 10 minutes before the transition area opened so I joined others in the queue. Pre-race was very relaxed. Lots of time to have the tires inflated, stow food, check gear, and put on my wetsuit. The walk to the lake took about 15 minutes, and the start area was quite busy with competitors and spectators milling about. The pros started at 6:45, and after consuming a gel and water, I entered the lake, which in spite of the cold air temperature was comfortable.

I had watched all of the race videos from past years, and determined that my better starting position would be along the buoy line, for this single loop swim, roughly 1700m out, around two turn buoys and 1700m back with another turn to the swim exit 3.8km total. There is a current in this lake as the start/exit location is adjacent to the lake's outlet to a river, so I was prepared for some side current as I rounded the final mark, and compensated to avoid being pulled downstream.

I was pleased to see my swim time being almost 10 minutes faster than my last ironman swim. The run to T1 is longer than typical, including ascending a ramp and stairs before arriving in the transition area. This gave adequate time to remove the top of the wetsuit, but involved some congestion by faster swimmers who couldn't run. My swim to bike transition time was right on target. I was feeling good.

I was concerned that starting the bike ride in the cool morning temperatures and while still wet from the swim would be too chilling, so I opted to wear my triathlon club jacket for the first portion of the ride. IMNZ has a nice feature of providing a discard area for unneeded clothing at 35km into the bike (a volunteer collects your discard, labels a bag and the clothing returned the following morning) and this worked well for me. By the first turn around (45km) the day had warmed up, and I was on target. The morning continued to go well. I was eating and drinking to plan, and my power and speed on the bike as intended. The wind started to become a factor, with a tail wind going out to the turn around, and a head wind (and uphills) for the ride back to town. I was trading positions with another Mr. "U" but did not know my overall position with respect to others in my age group. By the finish of the first loop all was good.

Some unique aspects of the IMNZ bike ride include the rough paved surface compared with the smoother North American roadways, riding on the left side of the lane with all aid stations being accessed with the left hand, and the use of a colored cloth bracelet which you collect as you ride through certain aid stations to mark having followed the course. All new to me.

The second bike loop started well, but I was delayed at the special needs area, when a volunteer could not find my food bag. After a number of long minutes it was found, and I set off again on an uphill ride. I started to tire by the second turn around and the combination of wind and hills really slowed me down. I was still eating and drinking well, and so don't really know why, although the culprit could be a combination of indoor winter training for an outdoor summer race. Around 160km into the ride I was stung by a bee on my forearm. I kept looking at the spot, expecting a reaction, but there was no swelling. It must have had some negative effect because a race marshal on a motorcycle rode adjacent to me and asked if I was feeling ok. At this point I had another 20 km of uphill and wind, and finally the turn and descent to town and T2.

As nice as the ride is I was happy to enter the town and take the right hand turn back to the transition zone, where a volunteer caught my bike for return to the bike rack, and I proceeded to pick up my bike to run transition bag and into the change tent. No bike issues, no flat tires. Transition went quickly, and I was off on the run.

Within the first few kilometers running I passed a couple of other Mr. "U's" My swim and bike had gone to plan, and I started the run well, but suddenly I felt like I had no energy. This was too early in the run for that to happen and it was quite a surprise. I tell myself quitting is not an option. Then brain says "I've got to get in more nutrition" and stomach replies "Sorry, Bud, I'm a little busy right now, so have some water and a salt pill, and get back to me in an hour or so". Brain was not very pleased with this lack of cooperation. The only option was to keep moving and start counting down the distance. "40 kilometers to go, oh sure, I've run 40 kilometers before, lots of times". The IMNZ run is deceptive. Although mostly

adjacent to the lake shore, it has lots of discouraging hills. These are the kind of uphill where everyone else seems to be going faster. The run course is 3 loops of 14km each. The first loop familiarizes you with what is ahead. The second loop confirms it. The last loop, well, only 14km to go, and I've run 14km lots of times.

As if to make up for the bike special needs issue, a very polite volunteer, approached me before the run special needs with my can of red bull, opened and ready for me to consume, and he walked along side as I drank the contents so I could give him the empty can when I was done. That was really appreciated.

By the last loop it was time for the appointment between my brain and stomach. Stomach wasn't so busy now and was getting a little hungry, so some gels, water and coke were consumed. It was getting darker, and I was given the dreaded glow stick, a sign to me that my hopes and dreams for a good run were just hopes and dreams. It's funny what happens at these times. A guy in his 20's started running beside me. He said that he wasn't racing, just trying to run one lap and if he were successful he'd stop smoking. I wished him luck. Shortly thereafter, with about 5 km to go, and now on the flatter section of the course I was joined by a guy in the 60-64 age group ("S"?). I figure if he's 5 years younger and we are running together at this point things could not be all bad. So we maintained a steady pace until the last few hundred meters, and picked it up for the finish.

And so it finished. I was "caught" by volunteers and escorted to be weighed, receive my finisher's medal and tee shirt, and then something to eat, and sit for a few minutes before heading back to the hotel. It now was cold and dark, so I struggled out of my sweat soaked race top, and into warm dry clothing from the morning. Then out of the finish tent meet up with Linda, who was worried as I was at least an hour longer than I had hoped and a walk back to the hotel.

IMNZ has a nice feature of maintaining security for the transition zone and allowing competitors to leave their bike and transition bags for pick up the following morning. That seemed to be a good choice for me.

Although I did not have the race of my life, I did move from 8<sup>th</sup> position following the bike, to 5<sup>th</sup> position for my age group after the run. That was the second best finish position in my ironman racing, and my third fastest finish time. The first four finishers were all from the Asia-Pacific region, and I was the top northern hemisphere racer in my age group.

The following 3 weeks were spent touring New Zealand, and enjoying lots of hiking. Near Taupo is the Tongariro Crossing, followed by a couple of days in Wellington, the ferry to the South Island and some thousands of kilometers of driving, and day walks at Nelson, Abel Tasman, Greymouth, Franz Josef, Wanaka, Queenstown, Te Anau and the Milford Sound, Mount Cook and finally Christchurch and the flight back to winter. Air New Zealand did not charge extra for the bike. Bonus!