IRONMAN NEW ZEALAND 2014 RACE REPORT:

So the 30th Anniversary of Ironman New Zealand is now done and dusted. It’s great to see this event start to re-establish itself after a few lean years and this year turned on brilliant conditions for its biggest field yet. The pro race is reflective of this trend and with a larger field creates less certainty around the favourites. This leads to much more exciting racing and we all love to watch the pros go at it! It’s great to have Cam, Terenzo, Bevan, Gina and Candice fly the flag at the front and although not this year, I’m sure more Kiwi wins are just around the corner. Outstanding performances from Marko Albert and Meredith Kessler in their victories and they’re worthy Champions.

The age group race would also be keenly contested given the numbers towing the start line and, for everyone entered, there is a race within a race. Time goals, age group placings, beating your training partners are all part of the day. This is no different for me and I had some clear goals for this event with the primary one being to correct the mistake I had made with last year’s DNF.

A DNF in its own right seems like a major issue and I had been pretty vocal pre IMNZ 2013 about my preparation for that race with my focus on metabolic efficiency and a High Fat Low Carb (LCHF) diet. It turned out that the only mistake I made last year was actually race day nutrition rather than the day to day LCHF diet so I felt it was a very simple mistake to correct for the 2014 event. I’ve basically eaten a wholefood/high fat diet for the last 18 months and enjoy the benefits it brings to my general health as well as sports performance.

Leading up to race day I therefore felt pretty confident of what I could do and the earlier season races (9th at Taupo Half Ironman and 1st overall at the Challenge Wanaka Half) had allowed me to fine tune my race day nutrition strategy.

I’ve done enough of these events now to not be overly focussed on time goals (although it would be great to have done something 59 seconds faster on Saturday!) and I tend to focus on other areas as motivators. I know that I’m at a level that would mean I’d be towards the very front of the race and I intended on being a factor in who would be the first age grouper home. I was fairly familiar with my main rivals for that position and I knew which of those felt they were in with the same chance. In an event this big I know most of the other elite NZ competitors but you never know who might have come from overseas or maybe there’s a new young athlete to have to contend with.

So on entering Lake Taupo on Saturday morning my plan was simple:

- To swim well in order to minimise the time gap to the first athletes out of the water (I only wanted to be 2-3 mins down at best)
- Get into the lead on the bike and either have someone to ride with or alternatively go solo
- Run strongly and let the others try and catch me.

I know it sounds simple but it’s a strategy I’ve used in most of the races I’ve had success in and (it may be a mental affliction) but I’m more than happy to race these events like an individual time trial and probably prefer it that way (or do I have a social disorder 😊)

The only really issues I was slightly uncertain about were that I was wearing a brand new wetsuit and, I was riding a brand new sponsored Cervelo P3 bike that I’d only ridden once before race day. As a coach I would discourage this kind of behaviour but I’m not always known for practise what I preach
(please block your ears to all my athletes)! On this note however I must thank my sponsors 2XU and Kiwivelo as I felt like I’d been using the gear all my life and had no issues whatsoever.

**THE SWIM:**

I always position myself at the very front and close to the straightest line down the course. As a swim coach I know the anxiety of the swim start but I’m one of the 1% who actually love the crash and bash. I also swim much better in open water than in the pool and had done a great 8 weeks swim training so was confident in what I wanted to do.

I had a clean start and had dedicated at least 200-300m of hard swimming to ensure I found a suitable group, which I did. A few occasions on the way down the first leg I sneaked a look further ahead of our group and could see there weren’t a lot of swimmers in front of us which increased my confidence.

It always seems that around the 1-1.5km mark you’ll find someone who’s gone out too hard and, surely enough, the guy I was swimming beside started to drop off a bit so I just started to lengthen my stroke and without any real effort I bridged across to a smaller group in front of me.

When we got to the turnaround there were only about 4 or 5 of us and I was last in the line. Heading back up on the final leg I stayed in this position and was very quickly reminded of how much benefit there is in the draft! I have never felt so comfortable for the 2nd half of the swim. I was hardly working as the group towed me along. It was a little disconcerting at times as I thought that maybe I’d got it wrong and this was just a slow group but on reaching the shore and seeing 51m 50s on the clock I knew I was where I wanted to be.

On reaching transition I was even happier to hear the names of Kris Dender, Tony Edmonds and John Newsom over the loud speaker as these were some of the athletes I had expected to be 2-4 mins behind so I realised then I was going to see them very soon on the bike.

**THE BIKE:**

As I exited transition I was already starting to think about riding solo and seeing if there was a chance to build a lead. I hadn’t expected to be so close to the likes of Tony Edmonds and John Newsom who I considered better runners, so the opportunity to build a lead on them from the start would be too big an opportunity to waste. I also knew that there were some great bikers like Josh Harrison and Justin Kerr who would be slower out of the swim so I wanted to get to the first turnaround at 45km with a lead that might discourage too many people chasing me.

The bike is my real strength and so when I got the chance to pass any rival competitors I wanted to do it in such a way that deterred even legal drafting. I knew Tony Edmonds very well and knew he wouldn’t have expected to see me so soon. John Newsom did try to ride with me for a short period but I felt pretty confident that he was at or above his limits and I wanted to separate myself, and also isolate the others, so that it would take a while for them to form a group that could chase me.

By the turnaround it was just myself and Kieran Daly in the lead and a small group had formed about 1min back. Kieran rode very strongly on the return leg and as I watched my power numbers I thought it best to let him go this early and hoped he would mis-pace this leg and I would catch him later in the race.
For the next 100km I rode strongly but within myself as I had the memories of last year in my mind when I was in exactly the same position and leading the race. The difference this year was that I had no cramping and my nutrition plan of consuming 20 gels during the bike leg was working fine. At the last turnaround heading back to Taupo I had built a lead of around 7mins on the chasing group of 4 or 5 riders. I’ll admit at this stage I wondered whether the group with their strength in numbers would start to eat into my lead as the homeward leg, and last 40km, was into the headwind and a gradual uphill. I decided on just maintaining effort and not worrying about what was happening behind me and with the added lift of a bottle of coke at 150kms it turns out I was to gain another couple of minutes on the chasing group, as well as catch up with the leader Kieran Daly, to enter the bike to run transition at the same time.

THE RUN:

A quick change into running shoes and for me the absolute moment of truth. Had I worked out the issues from last year and got the nutrition calculation right? Well within the very first few steps two things become very obvious, Kieran had cooked himself on the bike and I was about to run the best Ironman marathon of my career. My legs felt absolutely brilliant!

At this stage however I was unsure of exactly what lead I had so my initial pacing strategy went out the window and I decided to run on “feel” rather than being dictated to by my Garmin. I knew I had at least a 5min lead and, as I was running at 3hour marathon pace and feeling very much in control, I thought I’d get through the first lap of 14kms and then I’d get an idea on where the rest of the field was.

I not only felt great but I was also running faster than I ever had so the first 14km flew by in under an hour. Making the turnaround in town I tried to keep an eye out for the next athlete as I ran back out again. This isn’t easy to do given the number of people heading out on the course but I estimated it was at least 5 mins when I saw what I thought was 2nd place. It’s hard to start making too many calculations at this point given both my poor mathematical skills and the fuzzy Ironman brain but as my pace wasn’t slowing significantly I made a deal with myself to get the next 14km knocked off in around the 60min mark which would give me a buffer still of at least 5 mins for the last 14km. That meant that even if I was to start blowing up I would have some time to play with. It was during this second 14 km that I started to realise that I was not getting any real signs of slowing. I ran out to the turnaround holding sub 3hr marathon pace so I backed off a bit on the return leg to save myself for a big final 14km. It was then, as I headed out of town on the last lap, that I got my first genuine split on second place and when I heard I had a 14 min lead I couldn’t believe it. I knew I was running well but given that the lead off the bike was more than I realised (and I was now continuing to extend that lead on the run) I was amazed that I was basically performing a solo Ironman time trial and was managing to ride and run away from 1600 other athletes.

It was a great feeling but not a sign to slow down. It wasn’t that I was preoccupied with going under 9hrs it’s just that once in a running rhythm it’s as equally hard sometimes to slow down as it is to speed up and as I hadn’t had a significant flat patch all day there seemed no reason to not continue at this effort.

Coming back into town to finish at Taupo is always a feeling of relief in any Ironman but to win the age group race in the fashion I did and to be so far ahead of second place was a very satisfying moment.
To beat all but 8 of the male professionals is the icing on the cake. To be 59secs off going under 9 hours I can live with - it will be my goal for next year 😊

I was brilliantly supported by my partner, friends and family and to those who sponsor my endeavours. I’d like to make special mention to Kiwivelo who’ve recently become my bike sponsors and considering I’d only ridden the new Cervelo P3 once before race day I can’t thank them enough for the bike, race wheels and set up. Also to 2XU who got me my new V3 wetsuit which fitted like a glove, Balance nutrition who provided the missing link in my race day nutrition and to Shoe Clinic who put the shoes on a 3hr 4min marathon.

Thanks to my other sponsors who helped in my day to day preparations:

- Shakespeare Physiotherapy
- Xendurance
- Training Peaks

At 43 years of age I’m really proud of my performance and the way I was able to learn from my previous mistakes and rectify them. I’m prepared to test and trial new concepts and training approaches on myself as a way to improve what I can do as an athlete and deliver as a coach. I believe that part of this result has a lot to do with my focus on improving my metabolic efficiency via training strategies and primarily a low carbohydrate, high fat diet. I also incorporated some heat adaptation training using the heat chamber at AUT-Millennium Institute during my taper phase which improved my exercise economy but I’ll leave talking about that for another day…………..

Cheers,

Bevan