

Three Years

Nigel J Wall

Then - 1st Dec 2010

I can't swim more than a few feet in what I would call 'holiday' mode. You know that time when you jump in the hotel pool and do a few random strokes then stop, stand on the bottom and look for the steps so you can chill with the next beer/rum punch/pina colada (delete as appropriate). So, agreeing to do a Triathlon in support of Team Hope¹ was, on the surface (pun intended) a pretty crazy thing to do. It was not just the team thing but also a nagging issue I had with water that I truly wanted to overcome so the goal was set that gave me 6 months to learn to swim so I could complete the sprint distance Triathlon at the Rainbow Cup in Tobago in May 2011.

750m seemed a very long way at the time, especially after the first visit to our training pool, a full 50m Olympic distance. Even one lap might as well have been to the moon and back at the time and thankfully after our first assessment myself and a few beginners were sent to the kids pool for swimming basics class. During that time I developed my affirmation to support my cause; 'I am a swimming monster' was my chosen rant and whenever I got in the pool or had a tough session I would be heard quietly and, eventually loudly, making the declaration. I got some odd looks and shaking heads, but eventually through hard work, skilled coaching and team support it started to become the truth! The next few months flipped by and before long I actually looked forward to the swim sessions. Just a few more laps, just a few seconds longer and with just 2 weeks to go I passed my swim test at full distance. It wasn't elegant, but I passed!!

I came out of the water with the last couple of swimmers in the May Triathlon and hit the cycling and running hard to do my first ever Triathlon in 1:36 and was in the top 50% (just) of finishers! Goal achieved; well the first one. Next was Olympic distance the following year with a massive 1500m swim. Back to basics in the pool and harder work and more focus on technique. The following June I managed my Olympic distance Triathlon, but disappointed with the time and clocked a lowly 3:36. I was almost last out of the water, but also had a poor ride and run. I was so focused on swimming that I had forgotten that it was a Triathlon. I rebalanced the training and on my first Triathlon outside the Island I managed a massive personal best of 2:49 in Barbados and won my age group. I truly had become a competitive Triathlete!

As 2012 rolled on I heard more and more about the ultimate Triathlon, Ironman, something I had first encountered when I met Rajesh Durbal, a triple amputee who had done a number of Ironman races. Before I knew it I had added it to my list and I was searching for suitable places to race. I saw IM Cozumel² and it won hands down. Warm, flat and in a place I had never visited, so the day the entry process opened at the end of November I signed up for 1st Dec 2013 and paid my fees. Now it was simply a matter of building up to swimming 4000m, riding 112 miles and then running a full 26.2 mile marathon. Back to the pool, onto the bike and into the running shoes for a solid 12 months IM training - game on!

Now - 1st Dec 2013

3:30am alarm goes off although I am already awake. Thank goodness for the previous nights solid nine hours sleep. My pre-race night was full of images and experiences of the race and if I got more than three or four hours sleep I would be amazed. Still, time to get the prep going. Bathroom, banana #1 and water. I am not going into a 13 plus hour day dehydrated or hungry. 15th and final check on the race day gear, yes, it is still all there. Downstairs at the hotel to get coffee and find many other athletes pacing around reception with still almost an hour before the 5am busses come to take us to the start. Back to do one more final gear check and eat bananas #2 and #3 and even more water. It eventually gets to 4:45 and we head to get on the busses to head to the start area where I will be reunited with the Razor (nickname for my Felt DA4 race bike) to do some final checks on tyres, juice, gels and get the Garmin sorted.

The 30 minute bus ride to Chankanaab park gives me time to relax and realize that I am not the only one who has some nerves. I found out at the mass briefing that more than half of this year's racers were IM virgins and so I was in good company. Finally get off the bus and head into the bike transition area where I find the Razor racked and ready to rock. Final checks that all is in order and head to get body markings from the marshal's. Final farewell to my wife, Lark, then back to the busses at 6am to be taken up the coast to the start. The course has been modified for safety reasons due to big seas and a strong North wind that has the regular course as almost impossible. We still have a tough swim, but I am confident, the 'swimming monster' affirmation is still rattling in my head and we all cast our glances to the choppy seas on our left as we head to the start. Off loading at the new start location and I realize what over 2500 people look like for the first time.

The beach is packed with bodies of all shape, size, age, creed and colour. The sight is both awe inspiring and petrifying. Imagine what this start is going to be like in 30 minutes. We get start instructions over the PA and what I hear is good news. The start line is actually about

75 metres out from the beach and we have the choice from 6:45 to swim to the line and tread water or stay on or near the beach and start from there. Easy choice for me, there is no way I am going to waste energy treading water for 15 minutes in the middle of 2000 other swimmers, so myself and probably around one third of the racers opt to stay in waist deep water until the start.

The minutes tick away and the elite racers head off at 6:40 with us all cheering them on. Just 20 minutes to go to the biggest day of my sporting life and I am as pumped up as it is possible to be. In the next few minutes I am rechecking my goggles and sharing a few bits of nervous chatter with surrounding IM virgins who constitute the majority of the 'beach' starters. In no time at all the starter horn goes and I launch myself forward into a mass of swimmers all heading for open water. Even towards the back there are arms and legs everywhere and I get kicked, elbowed and generally knocked about for three or four minutes until we turn slightly left and head down the coast. Sighting is almost unnecessary and I am surrounded by swimmers all heading in the same direction. I do look up every couple of minutes to confirm the large buoys are in the right place then head down again. The water is warm and crystal clear so I just settle into a relaxed, but pushing pace. I will not be in the last few to get out of the water, decision made. This is a race and I am ready to compete so I push and push, even overtaking a few swimmers as we move past halfway. The seabed motion has slowed though and I suspect the current is now head on. No let off in pace though and I push on doing more sighting than before. Soon I can see the last yellow bouy and also the distinctive roof line of the Chankanaab park and know the end of leg one is close. Movement on the sea bed catches my attention and I see safety divers laid on the bottom giving us the OK signs, we are getting close!! Final left turn and I am now swimming towards the steps and before I know it I am out and on the 100m boardwalk run towards the bike transition. I glance at the Garmin as I hit the lap button and see 1:09, wow, fastest ever swim in my life!

Lark is shouting and cheering as I head to transition and I take a moment for a 'swimming monster' picture smiling from ear to ear. First leg done!

Quick transition and run to the Razor to go and nail this ride. Out on the road and the start of the three laps around the south of the island. The southern leg is down/cross wind and so I tuck in for an easy 20/21 mph average knowing that the north ride is going to be more of a challenge. Right side of the road is for cruising and move left to overtake, those are the race rules. Before long I realize I am only on the left overtaking mile after mile of riders. I wasn't counting but must have been two to three hundred by the time we hit the southern turn to head north on the very windy east coast. This is where I get my payback on all of the training. After the down island ride the headwind sets in and I'm soon tucked in, head down

and struggling to keep at 15mph, this is going to hurt. Still passing many, many cyclists and nobody coming past me, so I push on. Eventually the left turn and timing mat are into view and we finally get respite from the headwind and start the cross island leg to town and the end of the first lap. Already decided to use this as the main refueling point and glug down Gatorade and couple of gels and get ready to grab a refill of my water at the next 'drive through'.

Easy ride into town and now we see the first of the cheering crowds out to support us: 'vamos, vamos, vamos' and the sounds of kids rattling stones in tin cans and plastic bottles everywhere and hearts are lifted by the crowds and noise all around us. Into the zigzag section in town and I make note of the transition exit ready for the end of lap 3 just before I see, or rather hear, Lark shouting to me 'go baby go, looking good'. OK lap 2 starts and I know the form now so head down and go. Same pace south and still passing other riders but gradually in among riders of my own pace. The winds on the east coast have if anything strengthened so it is head down and grit it on the ride North, speed rarely getting above 14mph. Eventually see the timing mat and left curve to cross the island for the second time and per my plan I stay right and grab my water bottle to get some hydration. I have just pulled the back water bottle out and sat up when I hear a scream from behind "oh God, oh God, No!!!!". Bang!! The next thing I remember is lying in a heap on the road with the Razor on my right side and another bike and rider partly over me.

Stunned, I gradually get myself from under the bike to find a young female rider in shock staring at the mess of bikes. She is apologizing and shaking like a leaf. Obviously I check my bike first ;) and find that other than the chain off the big ring it is OK. I spend a few minutes calming the girl down and getting her bike sorted for her so we can get on our way. I finally look down and wonder why there is blood all over my bike frame and realize I have skinned my elbow, forearm, knee and shin on my left side. It wasn't until I saw the injuries that I realized how much it f@#\$%ing (use your imagination) hurt. Still the race is on and I may be shaken but the bike works so the race continues! Back on the bike and a shaky few miles gets me back into town for the third lap. The bike is riding ok, but I think the rear shifter got a knock as I can't get the lowest gear, but what the hell, I was looking to push up the pace on the last lap!

Talking of the last lap, it went very well. I crossed 90 miles in bang on 5 hours and despite the sore arm and leg I ride into transition just outside my goal time of 6:30 by 2 minutes. Jumped off the bike in transition and ran into the change area to grab my run bag and was accosted by medics who saw the blood and fired questions at me to make sure I was not shocked or planning to expire on the course. I encouraged them to clean the areas, slap on

Vaseline to keep any more nasty stuff getting in and still left the transition area in just over 4 minutes.

Next goal - 5 hour marathon!! The weather is still hot. My back is fried from the ride, and this persistent heat is challenging, much of the first 8.7 mile lap is spent making sure I am hydrated. The pace is ok at about 11:10 m/mile and certainly the amazing atmosphere of supporters lining to run route from start to finish takes your mind off the aches and pains. Just as the first lap ends my wishes come true and it starts to rain. Soon I am starting to look forward to the finish, the first time since the race started. Just 17 miles to run may seem odd to some people, but to me at this point it sounds like heaven!! The rain continues for the whole of the next lap and it is so heavy that we are running in 1 inch deep water towards the end of the second lap along the sea front. I do wonder what Lark is doing in the torrential downpour but I soon find out as I head towards the turn at the end of the lap. She is under the ferry terminal cover with hundreds of other supporters cheering like crazy. Her voice rings out over all of the others and I feel that nothing can or will stop me. Round the turn point and it's just a single loop of 8.7 miles to run. I glance at the right exit for the run into the finishing chute that I will soon be running down.

The out leg of 4 miles was increasingly stressful. I had the finish in mind but my steady pace was starting to just plain hurt. By mile 20 marker my legs felt like lead and I was having trouble keeping running. I was walking every aid station, rehydrating and grabbing a couple of gels and banana snacks but nothing was working. The run became a run/walk and eventually a walk. 13 hours and a 5 hour marathon were looking increasingly tough, bordering on impossible. I was nervously glancing at my Garmin and seeing 14 minute mile pace and the minutes were ticking away. I was not alone in my anguish either and it seemed like the world had just moved into slow motion. It was also dark and still raining and although that helped earlier, I had the odd shivering bout and was starting to feel cold. I realized it was something of a vicious cycle now and that unless I got running again my pace was going to stay slow and I would get colder.

A few people were still running and I watched as one guy ran through one of the aid stations just after the turn with just 4 miles to go and gulped down a mixture of Gatorade and Pepsi. What a cocktail; suger, water and caffeine overdose. I thought that I needed something different as my final refuel strategy wasn't working so I tried the same mixture. It was no miracle cure but it sure as heck woke me up and after a few minutes of slow jog/walk my brain had recalibrated and worked out that I could still get the 5 hour marathon and be five minutes inside my best goal time of 13 hours. I basically had to run the last 3 miles, just 5k, in 34 minutes. So, there was the final goal, easy eh! My walk turned into a shuffle and my shuffle into a jog and my jog into a run. I have no idea why but as I passed the 24 mile

marker my eyes welled up and tears flowed. Emotion is an odd thing and I was suddenly overwhelmed and sobbed away for the next 20 minutes as I got closer to the finish.

I could now hear the music and shouts from the crowd at the finish and soon the tarmac surface changed to the patterned concrete that was the run in towards the finish with just a mile to go. I was now running strong and the Garmin said 10 m/mile. The rain had stopped and I was passing many, many people. I untied the Trini flag bandana that I had on my number belt and readied for the last two hundred yards before the left turn and the 25 yard run to the finish and the crowds. The noise coming into the last straight was incredible. Huge crowds at the road side chanting 'Ironman, Ironman', yes and they were looking at me. Finally there it was, the sharp turn left and over the timing mat towards the finish line, the noise is deafening, and see myself on the huge video screen and I hear this over the PA, that will echo in my mind for ever, '....crossing the line - Nigel Wall from Trinidad and Tobago, you ARE an Ironman!' Wow, just wow.

Personal Stats Nigel J Wall

DoB 18/10 55 58 years old

Born in England, Trinidad resident since 2003

Race Stats IM Cozumel 1st Dec 2013

Swim 3,800m 1:09:49

Transition 6:23

Ride 112 miles 6:32:45

Transition 4:47

Run 26.2 miles 5:00:25

Total race time 12:54:09

22nd in age group out of 69

1043rd overall in race out of 2487 finishers

Fastest Ironman by TnT representative (tbc)

Refs

1. *Team Hope* <https://www.facebook.com/groups/53915956000/>
2. *Ironman Cozumel* <http://www.ironmancozumel.com/>
3. *Photographs can be found at*
https://www.facebook.com/nigel.j.wall/media_set?set=a.10151784257682001.1073741826.685202000&type=3