

A taste of Kona

Here I am at the start of another triathlon season. I feel refreshed and motivated and ready to start racing after two months base training in Arroyo Grande, California (which is near San Luis Obispo). I find myself returning back to Kona, Hawaii after DNFing at the Ironman World Championships last October. That was the first time in all the races I have ever done where I registered the big DNF in the results. It wasn't a great feeling but I still don't regret pulling out. Coincidentally I am starting off my season where I was unable to finish it off last year.

The Lavaman Triathlon, is an Olympic distance triathlon in its 6th year running. Race director Gerry Rott has organized a wonderful event with the laid back atmosphere synonymous with Hawaii. It is a great event to kick off the race season for a couple of reasons:

1. It is a chance for a tropical spring break holiday to escape the last bit of BC winter.
2. Celebrity guests include Greg Welch and Scott Tinley. I went to a workshop hosted by Greg and Scott that only 7 other people attended. Talk about a great chance to pick the brains of to very experienced retired pro triathletes.
3. The Lavaman is an awesome chance to experience some of the magic of the Hawaii Ironman without investing all the time required to prepare for an Ironman. It is also a lot less painful than the Ironman!

The beautiful scenery aside, I was here to test my fitness and also get a race under my belt before heading over to Ishigaki Japan for the first World cup of the season. I was definitely nervous the day before and morning of the race. You never really know how your training has gone until you put it to the test by competing in a race.

The race started promptly at 7:30 Am, the swim took place in the A-bay at the Waikoloa Resort. I love swimming in water this clear because you can spend a lot of your time looking at fish (ok maybe not that much time). Gerry, the race director allowed Jo Lawn (2003 Ironman New Zealand Champ) and I to start in the men's wave. This was very nice of her because it made for a much easier swim as we didn't have to worry about swimming over the more casual male swimmers from the men's wave who would otherwise have started ahead of us.

It was actually a conch shell that sounded the start! I quickly moved to the front of the pack and made a bee-line to follow the lead kayak. Having a lead kayak to follow made for very efficient sighting. At the end of the 2nd loop and just as we were catching the tail end of the second wave of swimmers I emerged from the water and sprinted to my bike. I was determined to have a fast transition because this is a necessity in ITU racing. One quick look behind me and there was no one in sight.

Spectators were pretty excited to see a female emerge from the water first and fly through transition without a male in sight for about 20 seconds. That didn't last too long though as we headed out on to the Queen K highway the men quickly took up their position at the front of the race. I was riding well considering I had brought my "draft legal" racing bike. It is set up for pack riding and not quite as aerodynamic for a time trial style of racing. It only has little nubby aerobars which aren't quite as comfortable. None the less every time a guy passed me I would try to keep my rhythm and kept pushing through the pain. The course was smooth and had a couple of long rolling hills. It was an out and back and it gave me a chance to see who else was close behind. On the way back I just kept looking to the top of each hill. In all my races I usually focus on a distinct feature that lay ahead within sight and focus to work hard to that point. When I reach that feature (i.e. the top of hill or light post, etc) then I look for another feature on the horizon or closer, preferably. This seems to get me to the finish line faster than if I were to just think about the end of the race. Over the last hill top on the bike course and it is along straight away that is slightly downhill. Just up ahead you can see the turn off to the Waikoloa resort. That was a refreshing sight for me because the turn off meant the bike portion was almost finished and I could get out onto the run; my favourite part. About 10 men had passed me on the bike so I hadn't fallen too far behind but I was hoping to make up a couple of places on the run.

In transition from the bike to run, I worked on having another fast transition. The run portion of the race showed me why they chose name Lavaman for the race. The first couple hundred meters on the run is over lava on a little trail. You must be very careful of your footing especially with jello legs after the bike ride. The run loops itself around the resort on the main road then proceeds onto more lava rock trails and then through the Hilton Waikoloa grounds past the pools, lagoon and dolphins to the finish line on the beach in the A-bay where we had started the swim. People staying at the hotel were wondering who these crazy people were running by at 8:30 am in the morning. I felt pretty good throughout the run and just made sure to watch my footing, with about 2 or 3 km left I really just turned it on to cruise control hoping to maybe save some energy for the next weekend in Japan. The true test of the Lavaman is approximately 4 km of the run course are on lava trail or sand. The last kilometer was along the beach back to the A-bay where if you happened to have a second to glance out towards the ocean you might have been lucky enough to see some playful whales breaching or a few sea turtles floating around in the rock pools.

After finishing the grueling but scenic run portion of the triathlon and crossing the finish line right on the beach I headed straight to the massage tent. Depending on your priorities you may want to head straight to the kegs of beer supplied by Kona Brewery. I ended up finishing 5th overall so I did catch a few men on the run. I was pleased with this first fitness test event and felt like I am in a good position for this time of the year. The awards party/picnic on the beach afterwards was a blast. They had a live band and more beer. Being back in Kona really made me realize how much I like that area, and I look forward to returning again for the Lavaman and eventually for another go at the Hawaii Ironman.