Ironman 70.3 Timberman 2016

Race report by Jernej Turnsek

Summary
On Sunday - Aug 21, 2016 - I fulfilled one of my 2016 goals - to participate in and successfully finish a Half Iron (also called Half Ironman or Ironman 70.3) triathlon race. I started this journey on Mar 7, 2016, when I signed up for Ironman 70.3 Timberman taking place at the beautiful Lake Winnipesaukee in New Hampshire. This report gives a summary of my athletic background, includes information about my training to prepare for the race and provides lessons learnt during the race itself. I will use it as a reference for my future development as a (long course) triathlete and I hope other aspiring triathletes will find it useful as they prepare for a similar race. If you have any questions, comments and suggestions, please send them to jerjej.turnsek.slo@gmail.com.

(Tri)athlete ID
Jernej Turnsek | Slovenian | Age: 29 | Height: 6’ 2” (188 cm) | Weight: ~176 lbs (~80 kg) | Occupation: Marine microbiology PhD student at Harvard University and University of California, San Diego.

Sports background
Competitive basketball player until 23. Turned to running and CrossFit in 2011 and 2012.

1. Swimming
Semester-long swimming program in college. | ~2 months of intensive swimming sessions with 3ksport, a triathlon team in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in summer 2012. | Occasional pool swims in Boston between 2012 and 2015.

2. Cycling

3. Running
5k, 10k, 1/2 marathon and marathon finisher. PRs as follows: 18’ 56” (5k, 07/16’), 40’ 20” (10k, 06/15’), 1h 26’ 30” (1/2 marathon, 05/13’), 3h 30’ 55” (marathon, 10/13’).

4. Triathlon
1 sprint (05/16’) and 2 Olympic distance races (09/14’, 07/16’). PRs as follows: 1h 4’ 12” (sprint), 2h 17’ 24” (Olympic).

Training
I used this “super simple Ironman 70.3 training plan” as my “skeleton” around which I planned my training sessions. My preparations for the race started in the beginning of May and lasted 16 weeks which coincided perfectly with my race day (Note: I ran a 1/2 marathon, 5k and 10k in February, March and April, respectively, so I had a somewhat good base fitness entering this Ironman plan). I averaged ~2-3 swim/bike/run sessions per week (find my practice sheets here). Did most of my workouts in the morning. Trained Tue-Sun, Monday was rest day. Would occasionally run to laboratory and back. ~6 miles round trip. On days I didn’t run to work, I cycled (Note: I cycled ~30 miles a week just by going to work). Usually woke up at ~5:30, had a quick breakfast: oatmeal + water, maybe a cup of coffee. 2nd breakfast after workouts. On Tue track workout with the MIT Triathlon Club (usually
some kind of interval training), on Wed open water swim in the Upper Mystic Lake + ~15 mile bike, again with the MIT Triathlon Club. Weekends were reserved for long bike rides, 50+ miles, usually followed by short transition run at faster than race pace, and long runs (~7-11 miles). I threw in short mobility/strength/core circuits here and there (usually immediately after swim or run session). Overall kept it simple, fun and dynamic.

Few additional things to note about my training:
1. I always tried to do a short transition run after my bike rides and would take advantage of the days I felt particularly strong by doing more than "prescribed".
2. I didn’t use any tech gadgets to aid my training; only my sports watch to measure time and intuition about what it takes to improve based on my knowledge about my body, my weaknesses in all 3 disciplines and my past performances.
3. My only continuous >1 mile swims happened in the open water. The longest continuous pool swims never exceeded 500 meters.
4. I started cycling with aerobars attached to my road bike ~1.5 months before the race and had zero problems getting used to the aero position. It just immediately felt very natural and fast to me. (Note: I had never used them before.)
5. I did most of my long runs in the middle of the day to mimic the anticipated race day heat (I am glad I did).
6. Foam roller is a great stretching/recovery tool.
7. I trained with Gatorade Endurance Formula Powder, Lemon Lime, Hammer Nutrition Perpetuum (tried a bunch of flavors, settled on chocolate) and tested a variety of bars and gels (settled on CLIF bars and CLIF shot blocks).
8. I never went to a bike store to get a professional bike fit. Tested and tweaked my position during trainer sessions.
9. I don’t know what my exact sweat and calorie/hour consumption rates are, something to figure out in the future.

**Nutrition**

It’s no secret nutrition is of utmost importance to improve as an (tri)athlete and perform well come race day. Period. No big science, no shortcuts. Eat well + train well = perform well. I remember I wasn’t in that kind of mindset even ~5 years ago, but have become increasingly interested in nutrition over past few years and in particular during my Ironman preparation period. I signed up for my first [CSA program](#) which I built my meals around: a lot of diverse vegetables (beans!), fruits (cherries and berries), good fats (avocado, nuts, olive oil), eggs almost every day, carbohydrates in moderation, oatmeal multiple times a week, peanut and almond butter. I was taking a multivitamin supplement daily for the peace of mind (i.e. to account for any potential undernutrition from training and diet). One thing that needs improvement is daily hydration. Plain simple: I need to drink more water while at work. More about my race day nutrition below.

**Race week**

My last long session was 1 week and 1 day before the race. I did a ~35 mile bike ride followed by almost a full 1/2 marathon. I had no particular problems executing this which gave me the final boost of confidence before the race. I tapered during my last week which for me meant reducing the volume and intensity to ~1/4 of an average training week. I did some short swim/bike/run sessions from Monday to Wednesday, had Thursday and Friday completely off and “check my gear” the day before the race (i.e. 5 min swim, 10 min bike, 5 min run).
Race day gear

1. Swim
- one-piece sleeveless trisuit
- MT Blueseventy Fusion Full wetsuit
- Body Glide anti-chafing stick
- purple swim cap provided on the race
- ROKA X1 Dark Grey Mirror goggles
- JAWS Quick Spit antifog spray (spit probably works just fine, but I find this antifog spray out of this world phenomenal so I think I will just stick to it down the road)

2. Bike
- Specialized Allez Comp Smartweld road bicycle with Tiagra groupset
- Hutchinson Fusion 3 Kevlar Pro Tech Road Tires
- Thompson Elite Road Seatpost with a setback (I reversed it for better aero position)
- Profile Design T2+ aluminium aerobars (I added bar tape for cushioning and better grip)
- GIRO aero helmet
- Shimano triathlon cycling shoes
- XLAB Stealth Pocket 100 Frame Aerodynamic Bag
- Lezyne Side Load Flow bottle cage (right) placed between aerobars with nylon cable ties (totally DIY <$10 solution that works amazingly well - in my naive opinion better and simpler than any other fancy ~$100 aero bottle system)
- VeloChampion Tornado multisport sunglasses (an absolute steal for <$20)

3. Run
- New Balance Vazee Rush with elastic laces for quick(er) transition
- white running visor (it makes a noticeable difference on a hot day)
- VeloChampion Tornado multisport sunglasses (again: this is a great product for the $)

Race

Nutrition during the race week
Despite some debate around it, I decided to go with good old carbo loading approach. Basically I made Bolognese pasta every single day of the week while somewhat cutting down fats, protein, vegetable/fiber intake. Paid more attention to staying hydrated at all times (i.e. I drank more water than I normally would).

Nutrition the day before the race
I kept it light and simple. Oatmeal for breakfast, grilled chicken sandwich with some potato and vegetables for lunch and Bolognese pasta (topped with lots of parm!) with asparagus for dinner.

Race day morning
My alarm went off at ~3:30. I ate a larger than usual (my swim wave was only at 7:44!) bowl of oatmeal with banana, Nutella and brown sugar (my pre-workout, pre-race go to). Had a glass of iced water and a cup of coffee on a side. Collected my gear (bike had already been checked in in the transition area the evening before) and headed to the race start at around 4:45. We stayed only a mile away and decided to walk, but our phone flashlights were soon noticed by a local triathlete, a seasoned Timberman, who offered us a lift and told us a bit about the race history. Very nice! I had my transition area ready by ~6 and headed to the swim start with my
wetsuit, Body Glide, purple swim cap, goggles, antifog spray, a CLIF shot blok cube and a bite of a CLIF bar all in a plastic bag. The transition area closed by 6:15 and my wave was only at 7:44, so there was no reason to put a wetsuit on so early. I waited until the pro wave start at 6:30, then did a few warm up strides and stretches on the grass next to the lake shore, ate my CLIF shot block cube, had a sip of fellow triathlete’s sports drink, put my wetsuit on by ~7:15, applied my antifog magic to my goggles and did a warm up swim to get a feel for the water and properly adjust and secure my timing chip.

1. Swim (1.2 miles, 40’ 49", 2:06/100m)
My wave (25-29 Male) had to be the largest as we were split in 2 smaller waves based on alphabetical order. We walked in a procession to the start line which was in water, but shallow enough to stand. I offered the front of the pack position to a fellow triathlete, but he somehow concluded I am fast, so I ended up right in the front on the far right, the closest to buoys marking the course. Bang! And off we go. Starting in front somehow turned out to be a great decision even though I am at best an average swimmer. Faster swimmers overtook me on my left while I was able to maintain a nice and quite optimal line towards the first turn. I had some close encounters with other swimmers early on, but was in control and in my own rhythm pretty much from the start - something I was very happy about as I had struggled with the craze at the swim start in my 2 other triathlons this season. We were probably 5 or so swimmers simultaneously trying to get around the first turn - by monitoring other swimmers’ moves, I came out of the turn pretty smoothly in one piece and with my goggles in place. There was A LOT of sun glare between turn 1 and turn 2, but my shaded goggles kept me going in a nice line, so optimal in fact that I once hit a safety kayak with my right hand. I’m pretty sure I heard the person in kayak asking me if I am all right, but I had not more time than to think to myself “I am fine” and swim on. Anyway, I came to the second turn solo which was awesome and with the finish line in sight even better. I was going strong and I believe upping my pace a bit as I was getting closer and closer to the shore. I could have dolphin dived the last 50 meters or so, but I felt so good I just swam almost all the way to the beach. Jumped on my feet, walked fast out of the water, placed my goggles on my forehead (zero fogging!) and started undressing my wetsuit as I was running to my bike. I took advantage of the strippers just before the transition area who helped me strip off my wetsuit. Overall I felt incredibly comfortable and safe throughout my swim. There were buoys probably every 100 or so meters and numerous kayaks keeping a close eye on all of us Ironmen and Ironwomen. Crystal clear lake water made the swim a great intro to the rest of the race!

*T1 (3’ 30”)
This was actually pretty hilarious to be honest and was not sure if I even wanted to share it with you. Here I go: so what happened is I lost a minute or so standing in front of a wrong bike and being upset because “my gear was not there” anymore. As soon as my wetsuit had been stripped off, I glanced over the bikes (my bike was super close to the swim exit which was good for T1 but not as great for T2) and confidently located “mine”, ran to it only to realize none of my stuff is there. I thought someone must had swapped it or something, I murmured to myself a few times “Where is my gear??”, heard some giggling in the back, then looked back and found my perfectly intact transition area right behind me. “OK, great, I’m still in!” Lesson: better spend 5 seconds more to undoubtedly locate a bike rack with your bib number, than a minute being upset in front of a wrong bike. Anyway, after throwing away a minute of precious transition time, I dumped my wetsuit, put on my socks, cycling shoes, helmet and sunglasses, dismounted my bike from the rack and ran to the bike start. My girlfriend was right there cheering me on as I jumped on my bike and ventured out into the New Hampshire wilderness. Woohoo!
2. Bike (56 miles, 2h 49’ 46”, 19.79 mph)
The course was very dynamic and definitely more hilly than expected (I needed to use my small ring quite a few times). I averaged >21 mph in my first 30 miles and <19 mph in my last 26 and I will get to why this speed drop shortly. I want to first describe my bike nutrition strategy. Bike part of any long course triathlon is the time to fuel and thus prepare for the running part (while hammering your way at ~20+ mph) which is what I kept in my mind throughout. I initially wanted to race completely on liquid calories, but decided to mix it up with some easy to chew solids just because they make me feel more sated. Here is what I did: I sliced 2 CLIF bars, each into 8 bite size pieces, lined the interior of my top tube nutrition bag with aluminium foil and essentially stuffed the bag with them along with approximately the same amount of CLIF shot block cubes (containing 25mg caffeine). This allowed me to access my food super quickly by just grabbing pieces out of the bag (the different texture made it easy to pick one of each without looking away from the road). So basically I took a CLIF bar bite + CLIF shot block cube combo every ~20 min and flushed it with some liquids. When it comes to liquids I had 3 water bottles: 1 with Gatorade I had been using in training, 1 with plain water and 1 (aero bottle) with Hammer Perpetuum. I threw away one of the water bottles (the one filled with water) just before the third aid station where I replaced it with Gatorade Endurance Formula Powder, Orange. I repeated the exercise on the last aid station. I drank close to a gallon of liquids and consumed a total of ~1000 calories on the bike. Now back to the drop in my speed average in the second half of my bike leg. I noticed early onset of cramping during some climbs which I rode out of saddle. When I straightened my legs, a cramp would begin, however it went away as soon as I sat back. That’s where I started drinking even more and that’s the reason why I grabbed more Gatorade on aid stations 3 and 4 to add some extra electrolytes. With the run still ahead of me, I decided to back up just a little. I guess one lesson learnt here could be: it’s not a good idea to forget about a half marathon waiting for you at the end and go all out on the bike. Pacing, patience and listening to your body are key.

*T2 (1’ 43”)*
Somewhat long T2 transition time here is mostly because I needed to run to the most remote corner of the transition area after dismounting from my bike. Everything else went really smoothly: I first racked my bike, took off my helmet, swapped shoes, grabbed my running visor and belt with my bib and left the transition for a half marathon. I used my short run across the transition area to strap my belt. Note about T1 and T2: I didn’t bother about flying mount and dismount, something I still need to learn, practice and execute on the race day.

3. Run (13.1 miles, time: 1h 48’ 14”, 8:15/mile)
Now the run. 2 ~6.5 mile loops in what I believe was mid-80s. (Note: right after the start of my first loop it was the only time I used a Porta John). In short: it felt very very hot out there with the sun blazing at us relentlessly. To top it off, the run course was also quite hilly in my opinion. I packed some BASE salts with me and licked them here and there during my run. I had received a running-friendly tube with some of these salts the day before the race in the Ironman Village and had decided to include them to my run nutrition plan. I had the tube secured on my left quad under my trisuit. I also had 8 CLIF shot block cubes with me as an “emergency” (all with 50mg caffeine) and eventually didn’t use any (still not sure if this was OK). The loop began with a gradual, ~ 1 mile long uphill and approximately 2/3 into the loop there was this really steep section where most people walked. What was absolutely amazing about the run were the aid stations every 1 mile or so. With all the sun and heat, I took full advantage of them and grabbed iced water and ice at pretty much every single one. I had a few sips of Gatorade and I think exactly one sip of Red Bull, otherwise copious amounts of water and ice were my close friend. I actually want to share a trick that worked (at least for me) beautifully. What I figured out early in my first loop is that throwing ice cubes directly under the back of my trisuit cools me down immediately. So what I did at most stations is I grabbed a cup of ice, threw most cubes under my trisuit and slowly melted one in my mouth. Perfect! I felt cool until I repeated the exercise at the next stop. I was a bit afraid of leg cramps on my run after I had felt them.
surfacing during my bike leg, but after about 3 miles and a few licks of BASE salts I settled into a nice ~8 min/mile pace which I was able to maintain until the end. I managed to collect enough energy to jump basketball style through the finish arc and the celebration could begin! The feelings of crossing the line and thereby finishing a months long journey were really special and will stay with me for good.

My total time of 5h 24’ 04” was good enough for 44th place in the 25-29 Male division and top ~23% overall.

**Future steps and thoughts on doing a full Ironman**

I am overall very happy with how the race unfolded. I had my safety goal of 5:35 including transitions and 5:00 as my optimistic goal. I came somewhere in between (5:24) so definitely happy about it. I was particularly happy about my pacing and the fact that I felt strong throughout my race and run in particular. I would even say I was a bit shy of pushing too hard on the run just to prevent possible bonking (as I said it was incredibly hot during the run) but overall the time and performance are a good reflection of my training and current fitness level. It’s obvious my swimming needs to improve dramatically. I need to get some proper coaching to improve my technique and become more efficient in water. I also need to focus more on my core work which will improve my body tautness and alignment in water. My goal is to swim ~35 min in my next Ironman 70.3. In cycling I can improve on many fronts: equipment, fitness and skills. I intend to get a proper bike fit and upgrade to aero wheels before my next race, but more importantly I plan to emphasize hill training more to become an overall stronger cyclist. I believe I should be shooting for a sub 2h 40’ bike leg in my next race. Running (with cycling very close second) is my favorite of all three disciplines. With some more interval and hill training I should be looking at a sub 1h 40’ half marathon next time. In conclusion my next Ironman 70.3 goal is to break the 5h mark. Do I want to try a full Ironman? Yes, but definitely not for another 3 or so years. I simply need to improve in all three disciplines to approach a full Ironman confidently and somewhat competitively.

**TriForOceans**

On my journey to become an Ironman 70.3 finisher I partnered with the Coral Restoration Foundation based in Key West, Florida, and raised $475 to help them preserve coral reefs which are at the heart of global ocean ecosystems and have recently witnessed a sharp decline due to climate change. I hope the momentum will keep going even now that the race is over. I overall intend to use my future triathlon events to further promote the importance of marine science and research either through similar fundraising efforts or through a yet to be identified path.

**Thank you!**

I wouldn’t have been able to adequately prepare and participate in such an event without incredible support of Harvard University Cycling Association, MIT Triathlon Club and Harvard Triathlon Team. I’d also like to thank Quad Bikes for last minute tune up of my 2-wheeled machine which worked flawlessly during the race.

Thank you again to everyone who donated money to help restore coral reefs. We came very close to a somewhat ambitious fundraising goal which is fantastic! I am very proud of this effort.

A big thank you goes to my family who has remotely cheered for me from various parts of Europe.

Last but not least, I feel incredibly fortunate and grateful for my girlfriend Julia who always brings the best out of me and has supported me all along and beyond.

Thank you all and see you at the next Ironman!