

## A Vancouver Ironman race report

by Harry Jerome regular swimmer Darren Franko.

First, a little bit about my background. It seems that amongst the Ironman crowd that there are two types of competitors: those that do them year after year or even multiple times per year, and those that do them once and move on. I'm between those two points. My stated goal was always to complete an Ironman race every 10 years for as long as I can (I'm 58 now). My first was 2003 at Penticton (all have been in Penticton). For those that remember, that was the year of the Okanagan Mountain Park fire that burned 250+ homes just days before the race. It was really the first time that wildfires and smoke threatened to cancel a race. I was back 10 years later when the race was known as Challenge Penticton, but it was really the exact same course and excellent volunteer group making it happen. No wildfire threat that year. So now it is 2023 and time to return to Penticton where the Ironman brand was back after a run in Whistler. But now wildfires and smoke are much more probable, and we've all been affected by it virtually every other summer. Right from the first week of training in February I knew that the race could be cancelled or at least seriously affected by smoke like it was 20 years ago. Sure enough, the forest fires started all over Canada in 2023 and caused the cancellation of the Mont Tremblant 70.3 race. Fast forward to August when the tapering had begun, I was up in Kelowna on August 12th at my 40th high school reunion. Things were looking okay - the valley had been spared the smoke and fires affecting other regions. Just 2 weeks to go! But then disaster struck on August 15<sup>th</sup> with the McDougall Creek Fire and I knew the Ironman Canada race was in serious jeopardy. I felt then that I had to complete the distances somewhere that weekend - I was not interested in coming back the next year or finding an event somewhere else later in the calendar. So when Ironman Canada was officially cancelled on August 19th, I chose to take the refund and started planning my event:

Swim: 28 lengths of Kits pool

Bike: ride over to and around Stanley Park Drive 18 times.

Run: 3 laps of the Stanley Park portion of the seawall then run home via Bridle Path trail over Lions Gate Bridge.

Second Beach pool parking lot was where my wife set up an excellent aid station in the back of our SUV.

Starting just after the pool opened at 7am would give me about 13.5 hours until darkness fell, after which the course would not be as safe and convenient on roads open to the public. The 'race' was initially planned for Friday the 25th but the smoke

rolled in from interior late that week, sending the air quality numbers clearly into the "*stay indoors and avoid exertion*" zone.

Monday 28 was plan B as the weekend was ruled out since Kits pool opened later at 9. The air quality was better but not great, about a 4 or 5 on the scale, much like it had been 20 years ago in Penticton.

The day started of course without any of hype and fanfare of an actual Ironman, which made it easier on the nerves (and digestive system). You are just another ordinary person going for a swim. Less stress and anxiety when there aren't 100s of athletes around you yelling over top of the pumped in music and commentary.

The swim was completed with 90 seconds to spare; I totally forgot about that 8:30 cutoff when I started at 7:18. Since it was quite busy for the first half of the swim, I felt like I had the genuine open water experience with rougher wave action and tighter spacing amongst swimmers.

Then it was on to Stanley Park, the jewel of Vancouver's parks. I thought naively that it would be less busy on a Monday. The first laps were indeed fairly quiet with lots of cyclists (even for a Monday).

Then the tourists arrived in cars and buses (again, remarkable, for a Monday)

The bike course hazards were many: no-look jaywalking, vehicle lane drift, sudden unsignalled turns, bikers and roller-bladers going the wrong direction. I truly expected to see an ambulance callout at some point. I must also make a special mention about the trail of horse manure for about a 1/3rd of the park drive, courtesy of the horse-drawn carriage. As traffic picked up and safety prevailed, the lap times started increasing. Finally, after the 18th lap and checking my computer, it was time to pull in for T2. I felt pretty good: the legs and back enjoyed the constantly changing cycling positions.

Reflecting back on the run segment, I recall that many endurance athletes will tell you that it is important not to contemplate how much further you have to go to finish, and to break things down into small moments. This is easier to do when the event is on a strange course where you can't visualize things and all you have are signs indicating each 5km. So when I was nearly finished running the second seawall lap, I experienced probably the lowest point when I realized it would still be **another** trip around the seawall and then I could start for home. But I never got the urge to walk once. Strange how this has happened for every other marathon and Ironman I've been in, but not this one. Just a steady 6 minute/kilometre pace.

After 6pm the Seawall was quiet again as the tourists had gone home. Only a few runners out -- mostly people walking the seawall getting ready to enjoy the sunset. I was thinking mainly about the special needs stash I left in the bushes behind Second Beach pool. Red Bull and beef jerky for me. To my great disappointment, someone 'removed' it so I was left to carry on with only water. I did have a back up stash at the north end of LGB.

It is still amazing to me how 600ml of Pepsi can energize an athlete at the late stages of a race. I even ran with the large bag of BBQ chips until 2km to go — I just couldn't let them go to waste. At this point my watch and phone were all losing battery charge. I sent a final text to my wife to say I would be finishing in 10 minutes at Shaketown Brewing with more than 42.2 km completed. What's an extra 1.3 kilometre anyway? At this point you begin to realize you will finish well and strong and clear headed. It is the best feeling because it rarely happens. Usually you are physically spent and mentally depleted and probably fighting off some serious cramping.

With 150m to go the cheers began and I managed a near full sprint. My celebratory beer was only seconds away!! The most memorable part of this day was that I could greet friends and family at the end. At the actual race you finish amongst strangers and then try to find your partner.

The Ironman chapter is over for another 10 years. I'm certainly thinking it will be at a location with the lowest statistical chance of cancellation!

The numbers:

Swim	Bike	Run	Total S/B/R	Total incl T1, T2	non-S/B/R time
1:11:23	7:15:59	4:23:54	12:51:16	13:30.48	0:39:32

- The run was my best marathon time of the three Ironman courses completed.
- The T1/T2 times were brutal due to the non-closed nature of the course.