

A Rookie's Ironman – Austrian Style

I'm here because a year ago someone said I couldn't do it.

Standing on the shores of the most beautiful, milky blue lake I've ever seen, behind rows and rows of black wetsuits and white swim caps, I am convinced they were right after all. The crowds are vast, the lake is vast, I can't even see the first turning point, and having snivelled through most of the 'Athletes Brief' the day before (absolute terror had struck by then) I can't remember what it is about the swim I'm meant to pay attention to. Is it the right bank of the canal I am to aim for, or the left?

Unbelievably, with all the thousands of people milling around, it turns out I'm hiding just in front of my Brian and our dear friends, John and Dorothy, who are standing just behind the spectator's barrier. Tears are welling up. It's simply too big – even for a stropky, stubborn Yorkshire lass, who turns out to be a bit of an old girl, and a mere mortal at that.

Brian sees me, and tells me later, he just wanted to lift me over the barrier and tell me I didn't have to do it after all. Too late – the klaxon blares and the wetsuits disappear. Milky blue turns into boiling white water with black 'turtle limbs' flailing and white blobs bobbing. As a spectator, it's pretty impressive stuff and although I'm in theory a competitor, I'm rooted to the spot. It's a while before I look round again, and now Brian is urgently indicating I should join in on the washing machine fun. So, with a bit of clear water to descend into, and a few last deep breaths, the beginning of the end of my first Ironman journey starts.

It's beautiful! I am almost instantly into my rhythm, keeping my arms long and my hips high. Sighting regularly, I'm swimming straight into the throng, whilst attempting to pick a swimmer-free line. Blimey, it would be a lot easier if the others here could swim in a straight line – what IS this guy doing weaving across me continually? I pull a bit harder to clear his path and stay out of trouble.

I am sighting more than I've ever had to before. There are kicking feet everywhere ahead and looking back, there are arms advancing. I push on, forcing my breathing to stay calm. I am strong, I am UN-STOP-A-BLE, I am Ironman, I am smiling as I'm swimming – is it OK for Ironman to be this much fun? I see a blue buoy – fantastic! Made it to the first marker. No, wait – I can see the orange turning buoy –

I've FLOWN PAST the first marker and I'm in sight of the first turn – IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PACK! Holy shamolly! Not good. We advance en masse. Feeling anyone touch me, I push and kick frantically to get them off. Somehow, goodness only knows how, we all make the turn and I kick hard to get away and into some clearer water. 1400m done. The left-hand 'weaver' is back in my space – is he *following* me? Not having this dude spoil my swim, so I pull harder and make my get-away. Feeling STRONG. Loving this feeling. I'm going to make it after all!

Oh no - I'm on the inside line for the next orange turning buoy. I look across to see if there's any space. In my dreams! With my left shoulder jammed up against the buoy, and swimmers as far as the eye can see to my right, I doggy-paddle around it. *Sooooo NOT IRONMAN*. Got to sort my positioning out before the dreaded canal. I vaguely remember the brief saying it will be the fastest 900m we've ever swum, but only if you don't beach yourself on the left. Or was it the right. O God. This is not the time to have my usual lack of recall.

OK – made a decision. I'm committing to the right. The swim pack seems to have dispersed somewhat. We are all swimming to our own rhythms, but I need to get over a bit. I have absolutely no idea where I am, but pick a safety boat over on the right to parallel – he must know where he's going ...

Good plan – the PA system is now audible and the water has turned brown and mucky. I'm in the canal on the right bank, and there's plenty of room for my arms to do their swimming thing. It's fast. It's really really fast! Musing, I'm half wondering if I can keep up this speed, and snatch a quick look over my shoulder. The answer is there, in volume. Swim fast or get mown down by the swimmers swimming fast behind!

The spectators are making huge noise. I've never swum and been able to hear anything except my breathing before! I'm smiling at the wonderful people who have come to view these mad people swimming down the canal – wondering if they can see me smiling behind my goggles. Daft girl – they're tinted!

We're going fast, but where's the end? This canal is going on forever, and – oh no – I'm losing my swim cap. This is no ordinary swim cap. This is a Trophy Ironman Austria Swim Cap. Should I risk losing my rhythm and try to catch it and stuff it up my wetsuit leg? Maybe down my neck? Too late. It's gone. Bugger. Ooo but the water's lovely and cool over my head – nice.



There are red crew T-shirts ahead. It's the end. 2.4 miles is swum. I've done it! I've conquered the industrial-sized washing machine and my fears, and lived to tell the tale. The guy reaches for my hand and I'm already checking my watch. 1.22 I screech at him! **1.22 – IT'S A PB!** I can't quite believe it and I'm screeching it at everyone. I see Brian – he's meant to be on his way to the hill at Egg – what's he doing here? '1.22' I screech at him. 'Get on with it', he yells! I'm so excited I'm doing everything except make my way to transition. I start following the throng and hear the beep as I pass over the timing mats. Hurrah – the swim is done – I'm on my way ...

2175, 2175 ... I'm staring at thousands of bags, and 2175 is not staring back. I memorised this yesterday and again this morning between several loo visits. Why is 801 there? Think, Helen, think. OK – wrong row. Success - I've got my bag and trot through the naked men part of the transition tent in order to reach the curtained off naked ladies area. And yes – there are naked men! How mad is that? Only at Ironman!

Bugger – it's the wrong bag! Back past naked men, faff trying to find 2175 hook to re-house run bag, trot past naked men again to other side of transition tent, to stare at thousands more bags – the bike ones. Mmmmmm – actually *not that many bags left here* – better get my skates on.

It's steamy in the enclosed girls area – and my wetsuit doesn't want to come off. In my carefully OCD-packed (and repacked, very many times) bag I find everything I need – except that one most crucial of items following a swim ... my towel. My Buff headband is no substitute it turns out. I dress wet and get majorly tangled in my tight Asics Inner Muscle vest. I'm re-enacting a Comedy of Errors here.

All done, and I'm raring to go. Hook up my bag ... but what's this mountain of bags I'm passing now? O God – the used bags go here?

Nobody told me this – what is this – ‘hold back the rookie’ time? Back to the bag rack – having a ‘mare. T1 ... 16 minutes.

OK – one last pit stop seeing as the loos are close – where it’s all coming from heaven only knows. I got up this morning an hour before everyone else, just to make sure my superfood porridge aka 00runningfuel had exited in a posh loo!

I’ve got the collection of the bike bit memorised All the way down, to the beginning of the second blue carpet, turn left, there she is ... Miss Austria, my beautiful Look 576, waiting for me. ‘Be nice to me Miss Austria’, I whisper, as I pat the top tube. A sedate walk to the mounting area, as befits the occasion, and then we’re rolling together past the crowds. I spot Brian, Dorothy and John and wave madly – ‘Concentrate’, Brian yells (he’s always so helpful!)



Out of the Ironman Village park and onto the roads, we find a good spinning speed to get the old pins going, and I find I DO have to concentrate to follow the directions. Yes, I know it’s a straight line - I just don’t want to make any mistakes! The beautiful lake is on my right side – blimey, I was just in that! Swimming my Ironman swim! I AM IRONMAN, I AM IRONMAN ... why is that motorbike pillion rider staring at me? Oh, back up a little, it’s a marshaller, and I’m close to the bike ahead. How long is a bus again? Phew, he’s easing away, that was a close one. I pass a few cyclists and shout hello – but perhaps that’s not very Ironman, as I get no response.

It’s a gentle gradient and I’m being passed, but not with speed. I’m in my rhythm, but a wheel is right in front of me, and there’s ANOTHER marshaller! There’s not enough road for all these Ironman wannabies. Gotta brake to make space, and lose my rhythm. Bugger. These rules are pants.

The countryside is as everyone said it would be. Stunning. There’s so much to look at, enjoy and admire. Through chocolate box villages with people partying al fresco, and shouting encouragement as we pass. ‘Hola’ I yell to everyone. ‘Hello Helen’ they shout back. This is

good – this is fun, but why I have turned into a Portuguese nutter I'm not quite sure. I throw in a few 'Gruss Got' to be polite, but my default greeting continues to be 'Hola'!

The crowds are getting really dense now, and I've been climbing for a while. The noise is deafening, with klackers, a DJ, a boom box, and everyone shouting 'super' with a wonderful accent – sounds like 'soup-air'! This must be 'Egg' ... one of the climbs. 'Danke', 'Hola', 'Danke', I gasp, searching the roadside for Brian, Dorothy and John. Nothing! I've missed them – damn. It's quiet on the downhill side, and I'm disproportionately gutted not to have seen them.

Miss Austria is running so smoothly today – I love her, and am telling her a lot so she knows. We are pushing hard, I'm maintaining an average of 17mph, I'm dipping my head to drink from my Speedfil regularly and I'm onto my second square of pinole energy bar. But it's not going down easily. No matter. My diet has been perfect for the last 3 weeks – I am NOT going to get nausea today. Look at the views Helen.

Miles and miles of beautiful countryside, happy people by the side of the road, wonderful volunteers manning the aid stations. I feel bad refusing their many offerings – but I'm carrying nutrition plan



Q, and all I need is water. Actually, it's a lot hotter than I expected, so I grab an extra water bottle and chuck it over my head through my helmet. Nice.

Blimey – this is a bit of a climb! Looking up ahead, I see specks of riders still climbing and turning round a corner. Do I hear the faint callings of a maniac Austrian DJ? Is THIS it? Is this the hill the driver failed to show us on the bike tour because he took the wrong turning (or he didn't want to scare us?!)? IS THIS RUPERTSBERG? Before I

know it, I'm into my Granny Gear, and pulling hard on my tri extensions. The crowds are mad, funnelling inwards so there's only just room to ride through. It's so intense I feel my throat constrict and the tears well. 'Danke', 'Hola', 'Danke' I'm still gasping, and they are roaring me up the steepest bit. There are so many people, I can't even see how far I've got to keep this level of effort up! I SEE YOU HILL, ATTACK ATTACK (thanks Matt – needed that one!) ... UN-STOP-A-BLE ... RIDE-OV-THE-HILL (thanks David)... YOU ARE IRON-MAN ... my hill-climbing mantras are rolling through my head, and the crowds are willing me on. I think of Alli and laugh in my head ... yes, it's a bastard hill and I'm giving it some 'wellie'!

It's suddenly quiet, and effortless, and I'm cruising down the other side. Miss Austria – we have DONE it! The dreaded Rupertsberg is conquered and it's downhill to the turning point – well apart from this little incline here ... here ... oh, and another one here ... who said the Ironman Austria course is flat? Try saying that to my face now!

My 3rd inch-square piece of pinole energy bar is not going down at all. Only 50 miles under my belt and the nausea has started. OH NO ☹ this is really bad. Try not to think about it Helen. Just keep drinking your 'Elete' electrolyte water. We were all so hopeful that plan Q would work. So many miles ridden during training, with nausea so bad I couldn't swallow my own spit. So many suggestions tried, so many concoctions attempted. So many miles of misery ... followed by the 'bonk'. 100 miles? 110 miles? Who knows? But the 'wall' will arrive and I will fall off my bike, because that's what happens when you can't put the fuel in whilst exercising for hours and hours, isn't it? That's what's always happened.

3 weeks of perfect nutrition courtesy of the wonderfully supportive Mike and Alison at 00RunningFuel, who still can't believe I'm attempting this challenge with only a half marathon managed THIS YEAR so far! It wasn't *really* long enough to sort me out, but we left for Austria with hope that 'Superfood' would work for me. I spot my pink bracelet from my son Sam on my right wrist – it's OK, I'll be fine Sammy, I can do it, I am IronMum.

Gutted, gutted, gutted. I'm going to have a hypo and I'm going to fall off my bike. But – oh dear – now there's a more immediate problem to solve. I need a loo – like, NOW. Pushing hard now, as the road seems to be flat to slightly downhill, scanning the way ahead for somewhere, anywhere, to stop. Ah, there's an aid station – they'll be a portaloos there. I hop off Miss Austria, only to find a queue. Can't wait. Back on my beautiful steed and away to find another

opportunity. Ah, a lay-by, I unclip and brake ... no, a driveway ... blast. Another lay-by, unclip, brake, no, another driveway. Ah, seeing the beginnings of an urbanised area – I must be coming into Klagenfurt again, the crowds are starting to build up, lining the main roads. No chance of a pit-stop now! Pushing the problem aside, I focus on where the hell I'm going. There's a great big something

ahead, and is that a dead-end? What's going on? That lady in a red IM crew shirt is gesturing madly at me. The turning point is a blockade in the middle of the road?? OMG!!! Braking wildly I wheel round – so THAT'S why I saw all those riders coming towards me on the other side. Should have listened in the brief ...



Amazingly, I remember to clock my split time – 3 hours 35 min. Yes, go girl! I'm ON TRACK for a 7.5 hour bike split! Mike, my 68 year old, ex-racing pro, coach and friend, will be so proud of me if I can do it! Come on Helen, you CAN do it.



But I need a loo – so desperately! Too open here – the lake is on one side (I could do with a dip right now – it's boiling) and houses on the other – no cover for a squat. Big drops of rain start falling – excellent - could do with a cooling shower. But where is there a bush, or a picnic spot or a ... what is HE doing? There's an Ironman Austria

competitor hiding under a tree! Can't see a puncture, maybe he's got my worst nightmare – some kind of catastrophic mechanical failure and he's waiting for the race mechanic to sort him out? Poor lad. Still I've got an Ironman to complete and more importantly, right at this moment, my guts are cramping badly and I need to attend to them. EUREKA! I see a huge sign, sent to me from heaven, saying **WC**. I CANNOT BELIEVE MY LUCK! Park my bike against the wall, race inside, porcelain loo, toilet paper, porcelain sink, soap and towel, clean and spacious, bigger than my bathroom at home! It's wonderful. Oh God – that really is wonderful! ... Probably should get going again ... oh, maybe not ... a little bit longer then ... and again ... right – now - finally, dare I leave, will my guts calm down enough for me to make my exit? ... Oh god, I've been here so long will my bike still be there?

She is – thank the Lord! Jump on, get into rhythm, feeling fantastic now. The rain is quite steady – that's nice. Not too much to soak the roads, just enough to cool my hard working body. Nasty black sky though – THAT doesn't look promising. *Fork lightning?* OK – that's not good. My helmet must surely be all plastic stuff. Are my Continental All-Season (hopefully) puncture-resistant tyres earthing me? What are the rules for riding in a thunderstorm with fork lightning? Well, the wonderful volunteers at the aid station might look like drowned rats, but they're still cheering and handing out drinks, so I guess 'cracking on' is the order of the day. Right 'crack on' then Helen – everyone else seems to be! But no – more competitors standing by the side of the road? Are they sheltering??????? Don't they know this is a race?

Good grief ... this is CRAZY! The rain is so heavy, it's bouncing off the road in bubbles! Tricky to see through my shades – shall I take them off and wear them tucked in my helmet, TdF style? Wobble, wobble, oops, no, maybe not. Keep your hands on your hoods Helen – this is no time for party tricks.

Spooky. The roads are so quiet now. All the spectators have gone. All the competitors have gone! Where is everybody? Oh My God – have I gone the wrong way? Where am I? Good grief girl – get a grip of yourself. Look – there's a roundabout with a man on it looking like he's part of this performance – and he's still smiling in the rain. Darn it! Barry Manilow's 'She Made It Through The Rain' is now stuck in my head – but I only know the chorus. Quick Helen – think of another rain song – ANYTHING except Barry Manilow ... 'kept my world protected' ... 'she made it through the rain' – ah well, just go with Barry then – he'll keep me amused for a while.

For an HOUR!!! Did someone sabotage my Sidi tri shoes? I thought they were meant to have drain holes in them? My feet are swimming in a pool of water! But at least the storm seems to have abated. The roads are steaming – hey, the guy cycling ahead is steaming! Cool – maybe I’m steaming too. Is this Egg? It looks so different without all the crowds. UN-STOP-A-BLE, UN-STOP-A-BLE Not so bad a climb, just keep grinding Helen. HEY!!! There’s Brian! Oh My God, how fantastic to see his face – it’s JUST like TdF ... he’s trotting alongside – bugger – must try a little harder! ‘Concentrate’, he yells as I crawl past him at snail’s pace!

Well, that’s buoyed me up no end, but Barry’s back even though the sun’s now shining ... yes, she made it through the rain Barry, so you can shut up now! Give me another one to sing ...

Ooops – chain’s jammed. Bad bad Helen. Amateur!! No pause between changing down at the front as well as the back. Totally,



totally amateur. OK – keep calm – just hop off and fix it, deep breath now. OK – I didn’t practise this. Practised 4 punctures, with the boys sneaking in a dodgy tube to see if I’d spot my repair wasn’t working ... with a stop-watch ... nice one! How do you hold the bike up,

turn the crank AND fiddle the chain back on, with only one pair of hands and wobbly legs? Answer – you can’t. Try again, and again, and ... OK, one last time. Thank goodness.

I recognise that noise – I must be near the last big climb – the boom-box bass is drifting down the hill. Do I have enough energy to make the climb? Can I eat anything? No! OK, hill, I see you, and I’m attacking you. You can’t escape. If I pull any harder on my tri bars they might come off in my hands. If I pull any harder on my handlebars I might lift the front wheel off the still-steaming road! God this is hard. OK Helen, lean over the front wheel, pull on the handlebars whilst pushing on the pedals – good, that’s working. No,

no, don't look up yet – there's still too far to go to the top. Head down, give it some wellie! Aahh, some lovely cyclist nutter is still here encouraging the stragglers up the painful last section. 'Hola'! Gasp. 'Danke'! 'Soup-air Helen' 'Soup-air'!! Nice man. I LIKE the Austrians!

Cruise control – only faster please Helen. Your average has dipped now to just below 15mph. Got to get it back up again in order to make that 7½ hours. Come on – push big gears on the slight downward slope – push, push. Need the loo. *Again? Are you sure?* OK – for questioning me, I will add extreme urgency to the situation. Picnic spot – that'll do. Mmmm, vertical drop in woodland behind picnic spot is not particularly easy to manage. O BLIMEY, CRAMP IN HAMSTRING FROM DIGGING HEEL INTO SLOPE ... and ... falling over – go sideways Helen, go sideways!!!! Well, that's just great isn't it? I'm now soaked, steaming AND muddy. This isn't Tropical Tough Guy, is it? Have I taken a wrong turn and ended up in the wrong event? Good job I have *another complete change of clothes* waiting for me. Not very Ironman, but this is *nasty!*



100 miles. Any minute now I'll fall off my bike. Any minute now, I'll feel the beginnings of the 'hypo' attack and all energy will dissipate from my body. But I see people, and buildings, and traffic being held up. Goodness, can I make it in sub 7 hours? Come on, push, breath, push. 110 miles. I'm still on my bike and I feel great, and I'm nearly there. Come on Helen! Come on! Where's the end? Round this corner? Round this one? Ah – there it is - the Ironman Village – I've done it. OMG, OMG I've done it I've done it I've done it. I see Brian behind the barrier – 'Hey! I've done it'. 'Concentrate', he yells as I wobble and try and detach a foot. Yes, yes, I'm dismounting, 'hola' 'danke', yes, I know you're pointing over there, but I'm just

trying to get my legs to work. Don't you know I've just cycled 112 miles, only stopping to use the bathrooms – man-made and natural? In 7 hours and 11 minutes!!!! 2 PBs in a row. I AM IRONMAN!

Hey – who's parked in my space? And where are my coffee cups I left here neatly 7 hours 11 minutes ago? Is nothing sacrosanct? Trotting past the portaloos, having hung up the wonderful 'Miss Austria', I'm struggling to find a loo I can actually enter. It would appear I'm not the only one with 'exploding gastric syndrome'. Yuk. Right – off to find my bag in the RUN section – I'm a quick learner and they can't catch me out twice. Humph, not many left – so that'll be 2175 staring at me loud and clear, all by itself! Into the transition tent, where one of the girls is having her shoulders massaged by one of the IM crew! Cool. OK – nice and calm Helen – lay your kit out – peel off your sodden bike gear – crikey, my feet have been soaked for so long I look like I've got trench foot. Not good – wet, wrinkly feet prior to running a marathon. Operation 'dry foot thoroughly before taping critical areas'. Dress first. Mmmm – lots of girls still only just coming in – so I'm not at the back then ...

Snack? No, can't face it. But I'd better get out of here, it's suddenly claustrophobically hot and steamy. Clock my T2 split – what's that? 28 minutes! How on earth did that happen? I wonder if that's a record? I wonder if Brian's still there 'Where have you been?', a well-known voice yells ... 'get going'.... 'concentrate'!!

Right – off I jolly well go to 'barefoot' run a marathon in my Fivefingers then! Just the thing to do at tea-time after a bit of a swim and a bit of a cycle ride. The route is mad. There are spectators everywhere, competitors everywhere, are we circling, are we zig-zagging? Ah, this way, out along some dirt track alongside the railway ... typical triathlon – lovely swim, lovely ride, uninspiring run route. OK, well I'll have to amuse myself. Hola! Hola! Mad Portuguese/Stubborn Yorkshire Pink Fivefingers wearer coming through, carrying 'Williams Fund' penguin mascot in running belt!

9 minutes running, 1 minute walking. That's the brief. Only 5 minutes gone? Can't run anymore, I feel way too nauseous. OK – new brief (flexibility is the key to air power) 5 minutes running, 1 minute walking. Better. Although I'm feeling sick, by the looks of those limping in the opposite direction, at least I feel stronger than many. Still not much to look at scenery-wise, but what's that – watermelon slices at the aid station? Maybe that will help? One juicy cool wonderful bite ... no, that won't help AT ALL. Bad decision. Can't swallow my own saliva. Run, walk, spit, run, walk, spit, run, walk,

spit, walk, walk, spit. Ugh. This is horrible. But hey – looking on the bright side, the hypo hasn't come yet. Next aid station coming up ... ah, coke. The pros do flat coke. The gen I remember is once you start flat coke, that's it, you stay on it. Well I can't feel any worse, so I might as well start here. Better stand still or I'll get it everywhere – big glup ... *FIZZY?????* Fizzy coke? That's not right! And it hasn't helped at all. God I feel *really* sick now.

Focussing on feeling icky isn't getting me anywhere. Diversions are necessary. *THERE'S ROBIN!!!! Hey – fellow Ten-Point Ironman Wannabee! Looking good!* How interesting that a moment of interaction with a friendly face, a known human being in this sea of strangers, can be so uplifting for so long. The psyche is so strong it can ... carry you happily through several more aid stations, without you really feeling how sick you are, even though you still can't swallow your spit!

Half-way! And there's Brian, John ... where's Dorothy? Tucked behind with a sling on! What's that all about? Plenty of time to ponder as I launch off on the last leg, the last figure of 8, the last 20km, the last 13 miles. There are the boys from Nirvana Europe, still stuck behind the metal barriers as if they're locked behind bars, shouting encouragement and generally being their lovely selves as we weave round the wiggly tracks in and around the Ironman Village. Blimey, there are people picking up their bikes in transition, with medals round their necks – looking really smug ... or isn't it more like I'm gutted I'm still at it and they're not! Yep – Helen – get a grip, it's not their fault they were faster than you!

Nutrition. Oatcakes used to work with nausea, and I have a 'kamut wrap', donated by the nutrition guys at 00 Running Fuel, in my Special Needs bag. Maybe that will soak up all the spit? Apparently not - it will just get stuck to the roof of my mouth. Who'd have thought?

Good – a portaloo. A loo stop has been in the back of my mind for a while now, and seeing the portaloo, it's suddenly right there at the front, with urgency! In fact, they'll only be just enough time to drop my shorts I reckon. LOCKED? What, I am the LAST athlete? Do only the fast athletes need the loo? Maybe they think that if you're still out there after 13 hours, you're so dehydrated you probably won't need a loo again? Oh god, now I'm *really* in trouble. The girl next to me looks as panicked as I feel. But there's a guy gesturing at us – 'WC?' 'Toiletten?' What is the Austrian for loo? The lake-side park, which on the first loop was full of people enjoying the 36* sunshine whilst 2500 sweat-soaked, hose-drenched triathletes staggered between the

towels and frizzbies, is now empty. There's not even the usual trash and detritus you'll usually see in the aftermath of a family day out in the sun – it's just empty and almost unrecognisable. But it's definitely an established venue, and yes, he's lifting up the barrier tape and we're ducking under, and into ... proper loos!!! How lucky have I been today? *Another* porcelain loo with toilet paper, soap and water. I could sit here for hours ... what a nice feeling. Just being still.

I really can't make it last any longer – the other girl has long gone. But which way now? I've come out to a pavement, and there's no-one around. No runners, no walkers, no supporters, no signs ... eeny, meeny, minny, mo! Right for the canal ... left for the next timing mat? Well, we'll find out eventually.

Good call – kinda recognise this. Close to the turning point to loop back round towards the Ironman Village – to go through it again, past it again, and away from it again. Am I going to make it? I'm going so slow now – the aid stations every 2km seem to be getting further and further apart ... will I make the cut-off? Think, Helen. FOCUS on all the people who have helped you get here. You owe it to them to keep going. Sammy – 'Pain is temporary. Quitting lasts forever'. Josh – 'Go Mum' (helpfully, from Oz!). Family Verrinder – 'you are UN-STOP-A-BLE'. Alli – 'Give it sum wellie'. Mike, oh Mike, the faith of the man who kept me on the bike all winter. William's mum, Johanna – 'Just think of what William went through – the surgeries, the chemo, the sickness, the pain – and **you** get to live at the end of it'. It's so emotional – I'm squeezing Williams penguin mascot so hard the 'quack' is getting throttled. It's only nausea Helen – it won't kill you. John and Dorothy have come all the way out to Austria to BE THERE when you cross the finish line. Their strength and love is right here for you to draw on! Helen – you HAVE to keep going. Brian – 'if you don't finish, don't bother coming home!' HAH!!! Reverse psychology?? Right – get that foot in front of the other one, and stop whining. It's getting dark now. Only 27km completed. OH MY GOD I'M GOING TO BE UUUUURRRRRRGGGHHHHHHHHH!

WOW! THAT'S better! I feel *fantastic*! Why on earth didn't I just stick my finger down my throat earlier? If I had known I'd feel this good, I could have done that hours and hours ago. Barefoot running never felt so good. 'Hola Everyone!' Helen's back on track! Come on twinkle-toes ... we've got some running to do!

Flying? There's 15km to go. I've been at it for 13-odd hours, and I'm flying? Where's my wall? I'm dying of thirst now I've been sick, but I'm full of energy – hurrah – Helen Privett, you are going to be

Ironman!!! Body check ... feet? tick, both comfortable, relaxed, soft and enjoying themselves in their pink Fivefingers ... legs? tick, long and dangly, turning over happily at a 'persistent hunting trot' cadence (Barefoot Ted would be proud of me) ... upper body? tick, relaxed, no tension ... bracelet from Sammy? tick, on wrist, I'm gonna do it Sammy, nearly there ... penguin? tick, still in race belt, doing the journey with me – William will be watching, probably wondering why I'm taking so long ... head? tick, still, not bouncing, and full of positive vibes from all the good karma coming my way ... tummy? tick, no nausea, feeling good, does it want food? No, just water thanks, don't tempt a revolt!!

Through the Ironman Village. Next time I see this, it will be to finish. The Nirvana boys are yelling madly – and looking slightly confused ... last time they saw me I was walking, and now I'm flying (well, for 'flying' read 10 minute miles, but hey, I've been at it all day – give me a break!) No Brian? No John or Dorothy? Ah well – they will be at the finish for Robin. I think he damn near lapped me! Get going Helen – you'll see them all soon. Out along the canal towards the town. This is FUN! Getting lots of encouragement from people strolling around for the evening. I think I must look quite odd – everyone else at this late hour is mostly walking, and here I am, hare-ing around, happy as Larry.

Entering Klagenfurt for the last time. It's quite dark now, and it's difficult to see the route ahead, but the policeman is helpfully pointing in an 'over there' direction, so nothing to do but go 'over there'! Nice shopping here – shame I'm leaving tomorrow – with all the lights on it's easier to window-browse now, and there's lots of non-lycra stuff around – a world away from the Ironman Expo ☺ Left, right, over the lights, jump up and clang the bell (bugger – only just – I'm still too short even though I'm nearly Ironman), through the Plaza with everyone onto dessert and espresso now, 'hola' 'hola everyone', to roars of approval and rounds of applause (a runner ... running!!!! And look at her shoes [lots of pointing!!]). This is brilliant fun – I've won, I've won already!!

Back out of town – this is pretty - the candles are lit to show the way under the bridge, with the aid station sat in the gloom. Can't stop – I'm flying! Pitch black now, can't see a damn. At least this bit's a straight line – just need to keep the canal on my left. I-am-Iron-man-I-am-Iron-man, huh, huh-huh, huh, huh-huh. Check tummy – no, don't risk food – just water, I can manage, keep going, nice rhythm, huh, huh-huh, huh, huh-huh.

O – that’s just NOT ON! Ironmen LEAVING the village in their cars with their tri-bikes on the roof. Isn’t that bad manners to leave before the rest have finished? Nearly there, entering the outskirts of the Ironman Village, blimey it’s dark, where are the lights? Where’s the track? SPLAT! Whhaaa? I’m tangled up in something but I can’t see a damn – what IS this? What the hell? I’m the wrong side of the dark blue plastic mesh barrier, wiggling around the park, that separates the spectators from the athletes, and I’m falling over just trying to pick myself up! Feeling my way along the sagging mesh fence, I try to get myself back on the course. It must be along here somewhere. Ah, looking down, the track has a faint lightness to it compared with everything else in the gloom. Off I go again, in a kind of ‘creeping run’ because I’m really not sure where on earth I’m go- SPLAT! Again? Oh, this is ridiculous. There’s no-one around. “Am I going in the right direction?”, I feebly shout out to the darkness. Amazingly, a faint voice replies, “Just keep going”. Helpful? Well, it’ll have to do, and I’ll just have to do it!

I’m running – blind, and without any sense of direction, but it’s got to be here somewhere, and hey – there’s a bit of light over there. Out of the gloom, there’s someone running towards me. Thank God! I must be going in the right direction after all. It’s Brian!!!!!!!!!! I wait for the yell of ‘concentrate’, but instead he wants to kiss me! I try to tell him I’m sweaty, and disgusting and I’ve been sick and he won’t want to go there, but he’s kissing me and hugging me all the same. And now we’re running together, and I see all the lights and commotion we’re running towards. I’ve done it. OMG I’ve actually done it. ‘Go left sweetheart’ he says as he shoves me in the direction of the finish. ‘Concentrate’, I laugh to myself.

He’s gone, and I go left, and this AMAZING sight of the IM gantry, with the time above it, is right there. The final straight – the one I’ve been visualizing for months. And there are dancing ladies! Didn’t expect them! Well, some of them are dancing! Poor souls – they’ve been at it with their ra-ra-ing and their pom-poms for bloody hours. And they must have got soaked too. Shouldn’t complain that a few



don't seem to realise that I've arrived and now I want my piece of the action.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I recognise that my finishing plan was to 'airplane' down the final straight, high-fiving everyone who would join in. The reality of the moment turns out to be much more manic than that. I'm aware of grabbing William's penguin out of my running belt, holding it aloft and generally waving my arms around so madly whilst trying to continue running, that my legs start waving too. Very tricky, and - I suspect - very odd-looking. In an almost 'out of body experience', I see myself go absolutely crazy. I expected to be teary. I am SO not teary. I have gone absolutely, stark, staring bonkers mad!!





I see John and Dorothy in the crowd – I want to go over and High-5 them, and I veer, but my legs are on a mission to cross that finish line. Screaming success at their lovely faces, I’m trotting past them, and I’M THERE. HELEN PRIVETT, YOU ARE AN IRONMAN. OH MY GOD. I AM IRONMAN. I REALLY **AM** IRONMAN. AND WHERE IS THE FLOOR? O CHRIST THAT RAMP I JUST RAN UP IS DISAPPEARING DOWN AND THERE’S SOMEONE ON THE FLOOR THAT I’M GOING TO FALL OVER IF SOMEONE DOESN’T STOP MY LEGS. IT’S THE PHOTOGRAPHER, AND IT’S TOO LATE TO SMILE, TOO BUSY TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHERE MY LEGS ARE GOING. Thankfully, they come to a stop

and I realise a woman is saying something to me. ‘What?’ She repeats. ‘I’m sorry, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Is that my medal?’ Another lady translates and tells me she’s just trying to wish you congratulations. Ah – good – that’s very nice. Can I have my medal now please? Not one ... but two medals go round my neck. Well that’s nice. One is satisfyingly gold and heavy and shaped like the tattoo I will now have to get, and the other is shaped like a heart with pink stuff on. Bizarre. Where shall I go? Where are my legs?



Brian is there, and he generally takes control of my legs so that I can exit the madness that is behind the IM finish line. John and Dorothy are there too, so now I can High-5 them properly ... but poor Dorothy has acquired a plaster cast and a sling since the start of the race, and, guarding her arm, offers me a tentative cheek instead. I hear she fell over a tree stump whilst spectating, and spent several hours in Klagenfurt A&E ... as did, apparently, quite a few IM competitors who came off their bikes in the thunderstorm! It's been an eventful day. Then I see Robin, who has been waiting nearly 3 hours for me to follow him over the finish line, huddled in a silver blanket and already almost immobile. Hey Robin – we are Ironmans!!! It's unbelievable, but we've actually, actually done it. I'm so proud of us. WE ARE IRONMANS!! IT'S SUCH A GREAT FEELING.

THE IRONMAN AFTERMATH

8 weeks later, we're still waiting for the DOMS to kick in. I was skipping around the next day like a good 'un, to the extent I had to wear my medal continuously (very uncomfortable – horrible scratchy ribbon with a heavy M.dot at the end of it – but I'm Ironman so I could take it), in order not to be mistaken for support crew! The double takes were hilarious – you could see the 'thinks bubble' grow above their weary heads ... my fellow Ironmen, hobbling around, seeing the medal but then clocking I had mobility. The two together, simply didn't compute!

And then there was the total presence of energy – a lot of it. Probably, with hindsight, there was an irritating amount of it. "It'll catch up with you", everyone kept saying, "it always does". Not sure how long it will take.

Of course, Mike at 00 Running Fuel wasn't in the least bit surprised. Surprised maybe that I'd achieved the goal given the injury hiccups prior to the event, but not at all surprised that I hadn't 'hit the wall', I didn't ache AT ALL, and had loads of energy. I called him 3 days later, and asked him how long I should rest for. My legs were itching to get running, my energy was driving everyone mad, and all I wanted to do was race through the woods. "Go for it", he said, "it's the fuelling. We don't 'hit the wall', we don't get DOMS and we don't feel fatigue. We run back-to-back marathons. If you get the fuel right, all this is possible. All we need to do now is figure out WHY you get the nausea".

And, given we raised £2108.82 out of the £5000 target Johanna set us (thank you to everyone who sponsored and supported us!!), I'll have to do ANOTHER ONE anyway. That way, we'll hopefully reach the whopping sum of £5K for Williams Fund sometime in 2011, and finally, I'll be able to have a rest (please, please sponsor me so I can stop this madness!!). And somewhere along the way, we'll find the solution to the awful debilitating nausea. Either that, or I'll learn how to stick my finger down my throat, so that I can enjoy my run ... which will, of course, be in my wonderful Vibram Fivefingers. Since Ironman, the Bikila's have arrived, which if possible, are even more comfortable than my pink Sprints. So, unless I change our team strip, I'll be clashing with gusto at Ironman Lanzarote in my gorgeous bright pink and orange Fivefingers. Oh, and probably 6 weeks later at Ironman Austria too

... and then perhaps I'll retire, unless I've got close to qualifying for Kona! Hey, I can PB just by sitting down for less time in transition ...

Swim	1:23:06
T1	0:15:59
Bike	7:11:08
T2	0:28:20
Run	5:50:03

Are there any **real benefits post-Ironman?**

Yes – the immense satisfaction of fulfilling the expectations of your supporters, who were consistently positive and generally had more belief in me than I had in myself.

Yes – the HUGE satisfaction of achieving what some said I couldn't do!
YES!!!

Yes – cruising up Hastoe Hill with a gear to spare ... in fact, haven't touched the granny gear since being an Ironman (there's time – off to the Pyrenees for some mountain training!).

Yes yes yes – waking up to a six-pack! It didn't last – but it was so good, it's worth going through another one just to get the washboard stomach back (and I'll remember to pack a crop top for the post-Ironman party).

Ironman Austria 2010 **15:08:36** ... It's Been Emotional.