

40 Ironman Bike Tips

A 112-mile ride between a 2.4-mile swim and a 26.2-mile run has the best of us going white. Mark Kleanthous has some pointers to take the pallor away



Mark Kleanthous
(www.ironmate.co.uk)
has 30 Ironmans, two double Irons and one triple Iron under his well-worn tri-suit

1 FOCUS YOUR SIGHTS

When it comes to Ironman, fitness alone is no guarantee of success. Learning your nutrition requirements is the most important thing, especially on the bike where you have more time to eat.

2 NUTRITION MISTAKES

Triathletes know their maximum bike heart rate, power output, average speed for a predicted time... but often don't know how many calories they need per hour during the bike leg. You need to learn how many calories a bar or gel provides. It's easy to be 150cals short an hour, which leaves you a whopping 900cals short by the end of a 6hr bike (whereas 900cals will sustain you to run nine miles).

3 FLUIDS

The maximum amount of fluid that you can efficiently use during the race is based on your physical weight, so learn to consume fluids according to your body size. You need 10ml per kg of body weight. For example, a 70kg athlete should drink 700ml of fluids per hour.

So how do you make sure you drink 700ml an hour? If one squirt from a water bottle is 20ml, you'll need 35 gulps. If you drink once every 10mins, you'll need six squirts every time. If however you drink every 15mins, you'll need nine squirts to drink 700ml in an hour. Calculate how many squirts you need to empty a 750ml bottle. Go on - try it at home tonight.



4 TRAINING VS RACE NUTRITION

Don't forget that you need more in the Ironman bike because you'll be rested and tapered so you'll go faster. Once you've calculated the calories you consume in one hour of training, adjust it for racing. If, for example, you use 400cals an hour in training, you can go an extra 10% to 440 in the race. Remember, too, that you'll be energy deficit from the swim, which again ups the amount of calories you'll need per hour during the bike.

5 CALORIES

It's a fact that you simply can't replace all the calories you'll burn. (At most a tolerant stomach and good feeding strategy will replace 60% of calories burnt.) Hence, what you must do is calculate the

minimum figure (about 35%) and maximum (60%). If you consume less than the minimum, you'll run out of energy. If you consume more than the maximum, you'll experience severe bloating, resulting in either sickness or digestive shutdown.

6 WHEN TO EAT

Every 15mins have food but keep it varied and don't always rely on solids. General advice includes consuming half a banana every hour to combat cramp; drink water; have gels before climbs and solids after, as you can't afford to divert blood from your legs for digestion when demand is high. When tired you'll crave salty (electrolyte) or sweet foods. Satisfy that craving.



7 ATTENTION TO DETAIL

If you use one scoop of carbohydrate powder in a 500ml bottle, use one-and-a-half scoops – not two – in a 750ml one as it's not twice the volume.

8 FEELING DOWN?

Negative thoughts mean it's time to have more calories. Mood is the best indicator of low energy levels.

9 BIKE MENU FOR RACE DAY

- 0-5mins** Nothing bar rinsing your mouth out after a salty sea swim.
- 5-15mins** Water only.
- 15-60mins** Carbohydrate drinks and gels.
- After first hour to last 60mins** Have solids with water and electrolyte drinks.
- Last 60-15mins** Carbohydrate or electrolyte drinks and gels.
- Last 15mins** Nothing.

Preparing your bike



10 THE RIGHT SET-UP

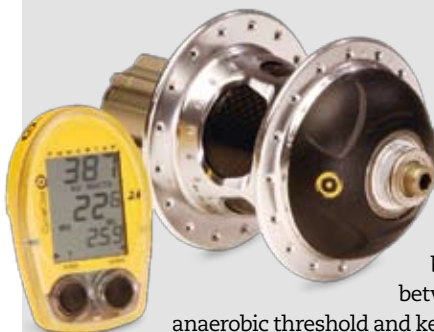
Comfort is key for Ironman racing. Don't change your bike position in the last 16 weeks or 1,000 miles before your race because your body won't adapt to it before the big day. Warning: while elite athletes have been known to change from a road to tri-specific bike six weeks before a race, they'll cover well over 1,000 miles (1,600km) before the starter pistol is fired.

11 CHOOSE YOUR WEAPONS

Make sure your wheels are relevant for the course you're competing on: wind conditions will affect your choice of aero or lightweight wheels. Choice of bars depends on the amount of climbing, descending and flat, straight roads. Standard drop handlebars offer more positions, which is often better for Ironman racing.

12 GEAR SELECTION

People only ever ask about your times, not what gear you use, so don't be ashamed of using a 25-toothed sprocket or more, or a compact chainset. The key is to use your fitness not your strength, and having easier gears than you think you need helps you to do that. Ploughing up hills and into headwinds in a big gear depletes strength, so having a cassette with the right gearing for the terrain is important.



13 POWER METERS

You'd be amazed at how little power you generate down a hill and how much you overuse your power riding uphill. A power meter allows you to measure your effort (in watts), and is great for correctly pacing your ride as heart rate only provides part of the picture. Your target range for an Ironman bike is between 78-85%. You can still cross-reference between keeping your heart rate below your anaerobic threshold and keeping your watts in the Ironman zone.

14 GET DOWN

Learn to ride aero for long periods of time; many triathletes ride for hours but fail to do it in the aero position. Key is to be comfortable. Get that right and you'll reduce the stress on your body, cruising along with every pedal stroke; get it wrong – for example, bars too low – and you'll experience loss of power, breathing rate and ability to digest food. One final point: riding aero in a group isn't safe, which is why a large percentage of your riding must be done solo.

15 KEEP IT IN CONTEXT

No one can 'nail' the bike; even two-time Ironman Hawaii Champ Normann Stadler doesn't nail the bike. He isn't going as hard as he can; he's holding back on purpose and he has good reason. Remember: you're a triathlete not a pure cyclist. You still have to run a marathon once you've finished riding.

16 AN EYE ON THE CLOCK

Training by time is more productive for Ironman athletes than training by miles. Don't worry about speed; as your fitness improves, your average speed will increase.

17 BURN THE RIGHT FUEL

A better race performance and fitness improvements come through effective fat burning. Train your body to metabolise stored fat from the muscle cells. This type of training is constant, sustainable power from a combination of steady-state endurance and race-pace efforts.

18 BE CONSISTENT

Your training must be progressive. The best fitness gains come from consistent and progressive training over a period of six months. So increase a small part of the demands, such as distance, hills and heart rate, every two weeks. Given adequate time for recovery your body will adapt to the next level. Repeating the same ride at the same effort can actually get you nowhere. While the first few sessions create a training effect, the repeated workouts have no benefit apart from getting you out for some fresh air.

19 CRUISE CONTROL

On race day you must lock into your own pace, confident that you're able to go quicker at any time. Always ride in a gear that feels comfortable; a gear that needs no pressure and that may feel too easy. This is the right gear for Ironman as you're not creating resistance or fatigue. Even riding with just a little resistance will cause your cycling muscles to tighten later in the ride. Stay relaxed with easy, strong, deep breathing, and change your position briefly every 15mins.

20 GIVE YOUR LEGS A CHANCE

You'll feel tired after exiting the water but you'll find your cycling legs within the first hour. As you've rested up and tapered, you'll feel invincible and will want to go faster. Don't. You still have more than 80% of the bike leg to ride. Also, don't fall into the trap of going extra hard at the end of the bike to reach a particular bike split, as you don't want to ruin your marathon run before it's even started.

Ironman bike courses

Wherever it is in the world, you name the event and Mark has probably completed it. Here he gives the lowdown of what to expect at this summer's six big European competitions...



21 AUSTRIA 13 July

A good, uncomplicated three-lap course that allows you to plan your drinking and eating. It's a fast road, which keeps you aero for long periods, so you'll need to stretch. Aim to stretch at least twice an hour for 5-10secs. You can spin and stretch as you slow down and approach feed stations.

Which bike? A time-trial bike is a good choice for this event.

22 FRANCE 22 June

One of the most difficult bike courses around with over 5,000ft of climbing. The hills are long, featuring even gradients and fast, technical descents. Eating on the climbs has to be practised – doing a long turbo ride with the front wheel raised will give you an idea. Descending is also a skill needed for the long downhills. Nutrition affects reaction times. You'll need quick reflexes for the descents so get it right.

Which bike? Choose a lighter road bike rather than aero TT. You'll gain more time by having standard drop handlebars for climbing by being able to change hand positions and descend safely.



23 GERMANY 6 July

Three laps with three hills per loop. Fast bike with hills that require out-of-the-saddle efforts to keep your heart rate below your threshold. Stay loose and relax to go fast on the flat sections. Remain focused on your rehearsed race nutrition on the closed roads because the 400,000 cheering crowds can distract you. Prepare in training with a good mix of hills and flat. This event attracts a competitive pro field so don't be fooled by fast elite times.

Which bike? A time-trial bike is acceptable. Check out the cobbled section to determine your tyre pressure.

24 LANZAROTE 24 May

Normal limits don't apply here because there's 2,551m of steep climbing. It's unquestionably the toughest bike course on the circuit, with one large lap around the island on rough surfaces with rolling hills and leg-sapping climbs. No Ironman bike is easy but this one is made worse by hot winds that cause your body temperature to rise. Turbo training at Ironman pace after a warm shower or run will help you get used to a high core temperature for race day.

Which bike? Go for light but comfortable. Wheels need as few spokes as possible and be wary of using deep-section rims. A 39/27t gear ratio will enable you to spin up the early hills to save strength needed on the tougher climbs after half way. Otherwise, you'll be too tired to benefit in the fast last section where you may make up time.



25 SWITZERLAND 13 July

You need to concentrate because this three-lap course is one of the most beautiful on the Ironman circuit. The first part is fast, before you climb up the hills from Lake Zurich. You can't fail to be filled with emotion at the view below of the lake you swam in earlier. The hills are more demanding than first appears; be prepared to eat on the climbs. Avoid pushing hard on the flat – inexperienced riders hammer the flat sections then struggle on the climbs.

Which bike? Standard drop handlebars should be your preferred choice. Superb smooth road surface allows for lighter tyres.

26 UK 7 September

The Dorset hills are up and down, making it difficult to get into a rhythm. The large chip tarmac makes the going difficult and slow. Another pitfall is that it's difficult to plan your nutrition by time as you may be climbing. Be flexible, look ahead and eat well before a climb rather than waiting until you're over the top... or you could be carrying your food back to T2.

Which bike? A difficult choice as you need a bike for the whole course, which has everything from steep up hills and fast descents to some sections on the flat. Comfort is important on the poor road surface.



27 MIMIC RACE DAY

Train with everything you plan to carry in the race: food, spares, two or three large bottles... A bike feels and handles very differently with extra weight. If you're not used to this, it'll have a negative effect on you come race day as the bike will feel slow and unresponsive.

28 DRAGON BREATH

Learn to breathe correctly on the bike. It's no coincidence that the very best racing cyclists occasionally look fat in photos: they're using their diaphragms to pull air into the bottom of their lungs, making their stomach expand. Breathing deeply can be improved. And it's worth it because becoming more efficient with each breath will increase the amount of oxygen available, lowering your heart rate for the same intensity. This allows you to work harder by removing carbon dioxide effectively.

29 ELITE ENVY

Never look at the first or fastest Ironman bike split and think that this course is fast. When comparing results, look at third-10th place splits. These will be more representative of the conditions of that day. Every winner has had the race of the day.

30 KNOW YOUR ENEMY

There's detailed information about every Ironman bike course available on each race's website. You can also get up through friends' experiences and, of course, 220 Triathlon magazine and the 220triathlon.com forum. The information is out there so use it.

Special needs bags

31

KNOW THE DRILL

Every race is different when it comes to special needs bags.

Organisers vary where you need to leave it and where it will be given out, so listen carefully at the race briefing where you'll be told whether the bags will be handed out or if you have to find it yourself. Never rely on getting your special needs bag!

32

MARK IT CLEARLY

Use the sticky number supplied to mark your bag where you can see it. Put it at the bottom as, when you pull up the drawstrings, the top and middle become a mess of packed creases, making it impossible to see your number.

33

GET SPOTTED

As you approach the special needs area, a spotter will call out your number to someone ahead, who'll pick up your bag and hand it to you. This is often up a hill, at a turnaround – when you're at your slowest. Be prepared to get your bag yourself if you're with a bunch as the helpers can't keep up with demand.

34

TREAT YOURSELF

Have a treat in your bag to look forward to. Salty or sugary snacks and a favourite drink will pick you up physically and mentally. You're usually only allowed food and drink in your special needs bags, but the rules differ from race to race and they can change at the last minute. Be prepared to stop at the aid station to spin your legs and stretch as you slow down.



35

RIDE TO WORK

Cycling daily to work is excellent for muscle memory and muscle recruitment, and it will also add to your total training volume. How often would you do two rides in a day if it weren't for cycling to and from work?

Spin easy to work in the mornings or get up early and have a longer ride when the roads are quiet. On the way home you could incorporate a time trial or hill efforts. You may also find you recover much better from two shorter rides than from one longer one. Use panniers and a rack to carry what you need in preference to a rucksack. This will prevent you getting a sweaty back and backache.



36

RESTRAIN YOUR EGO

Don't be competitive on the bike. Those that are rarely succeed at Ironman. They get a great bike split followed by a disappointing and painful run split. You're riding at your Ironman pace so, if someone passes you, don't speed up to go with them. Every time you work that little bit harder than you should, you burn one more of your matches; very soon the box will be empty.

37

LOOK AROUND YOU

Aim to drive the bike course and familiarise yourself no later than Wednesday on race week. Cycle up to two hours steady and no more. Pick out the technical parts for special attention; anyone can ride the straights. Be prepared to put the bike in and out of the car to ride the parts that concern you, such as

technical descents, blind corners and hills, so you'll know what gears to select on the day.

38

CHECKING IN

The check-in takes place the day before you race. It's tiresome and takes time. Know exactly what time you are expected to check in. Take ample food and drink as you may be queuing for a long time. Make sure you know what you can and can't leave with your bike.

39

MENTAL ATTITUDE

Stay calm and in control to improve mental toughness. Concentrating for long periods of time is essential during your Ironman bike. Even small lapses result in forgetting to eat and drink at the right time. Focus on your race plan and controlling your effort.

40

TRAIN HEAVY, RACE LIGHT

Training with heavy 32-spoke wheels and 23mm bombproof tyres makes cycling tougher, and is better than weight training since it's sport specific. Occasional off-road riding is also beneficial as it shakes and fatigues your body much more than a ride twice as long on the road. 