

Beating the Post-Race Blues

After the highs of finishing an Ironman, there's a chance that the lows will follow. **Mark Kleanthous** shows you how to regain that special feeling



Mark Kleanthous has completed 29 Ironmans, two double Ironmans and one triple Ironman... to date

So you've finally done it. Months, even years of training, complete and utter dedication to the cause (to the exclusion of the rest of your life), and, finally, the sheer, exhausting agony of the gruelling race itself. Now you've completed your long-distance challenge. You've never had an endorphin rush like it. So why do you feel so utterly rubbish once the initial post-race euphoria has worn off?

Competing in an Ironman race is one of the most physically and mentally demanding challenges of the sporting world. But many

Ironman athletes report a period after the race where they feel absolutely awful, and the phenomenon has been dubbed the 'post-Ironman blues'. So what is the basis for it and, more importantly, what can you do to avoid it?

Psychological upheaval

Preparing for an Ironman is all-consuming, both physically and, crucially, psychologically. Once the goal you've been working so hard for is achieved, motivated athletes no longer have a target and the feeling is overwhelmingly, 'Where do I go from here?' The longer and harder you train for an event, the greater the trough after you've done it – and the Ironman is the hardest of the lot.

Post-race blues are even worse if things didn't go according to plan on race day. Dr Victor Thompson, a sports psychologist and Ironman finisher, lists not achieving your race goals, judging your performance badly and not actually enjoying your race as three reasons that'll heighten the blues.

While the main problem is a feeling there's something missing in your life, a host of other symptoms also characterise the blues. Grumpiness, boredom, restlessness, sudden mood swings, overeating and problems with sleep, such as waking up early, sleeping too much and feeling tired even after sleeping, are all common complaints. Other lows include poor memory, not thinking clearly and unusual behaviour.

"Your understandable physical exhaustion after the race has an impact on your emotions," says Thompson. "This is similar to how your emotional state can be affected by having the flu or bad toothache."

Interestingly, many of these symptoms are also features of depression.

Slowly does it

So what can you do to knock these pesky problems on the head? The important thing is not to rush things. After the Ironman, especially if it was your first time or you hit your goals, you'll want to replicate that same euphoric feeling again, but recovery takes longer than most age-groupers accept – and every single person will recover differently for every single long-distance finish.

Even after the soreness has disappeared, microdamage continues in your muscles. If you start formal training too soon, it'll compromise your recovery, both mentally and physically. Stick to gentle exercise and graze on healthy foods. If you feel hungry even though you're eating well, consider adding variety. Your body is telling you it needs something different, a certain type of mineral, nutrient or more protein to fully repair broken-down muscles.

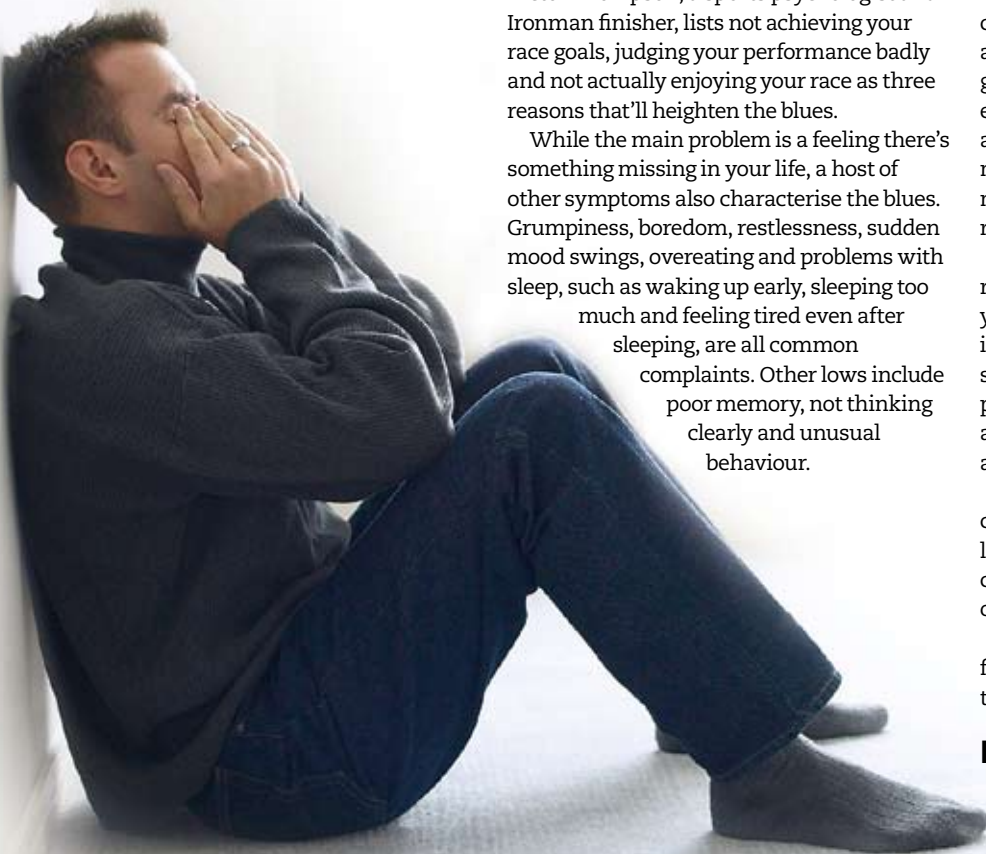
Write down all that happened during the race to use it next time. What food and drink you had and when, what effect it had instantly, and later on in the event? You'll soon forget the effect food had on your performance unless you record it shortly after. This will allow you to focus on Ironman again without actually restarting training.

Fill up your time with things that you had chosen to put aside in your Ironman build-up, like outings, movies, jobs around the home, catching up with friends or meeting up with other Ironman finishers.

If you really can't cope without a physical fix, consider long walks or a hobby you used to do before Ironman took over your life.

Back in the fray

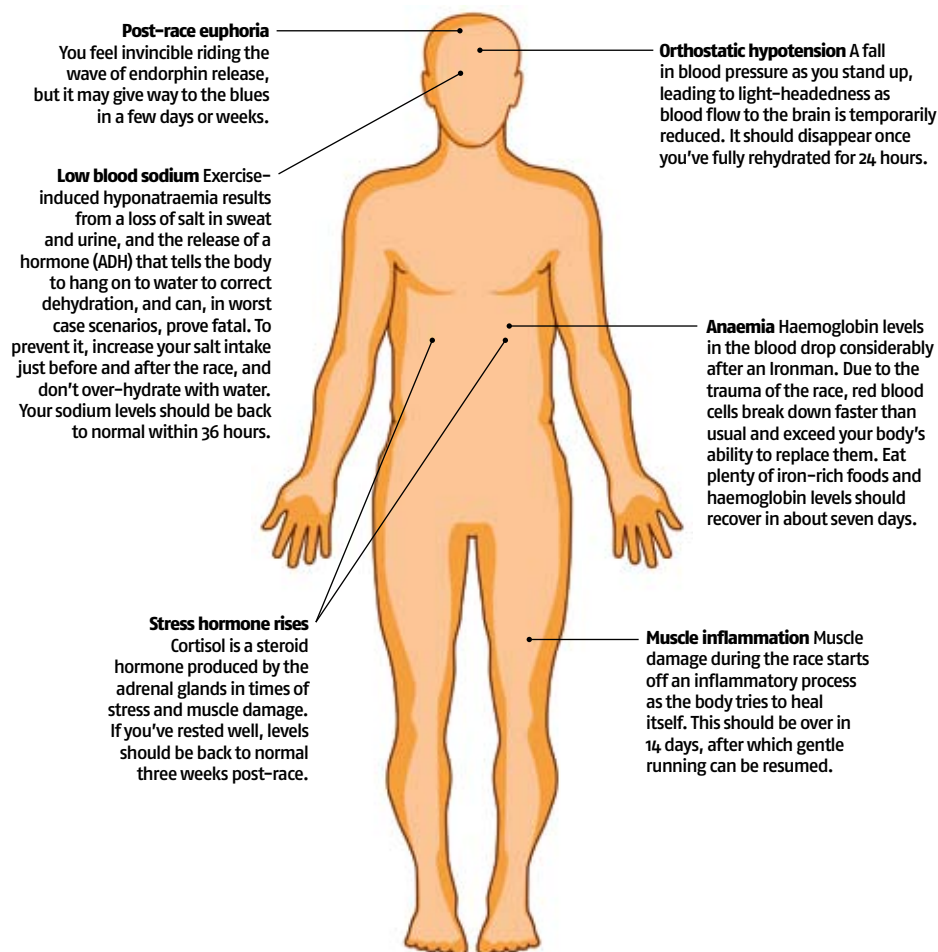
You'll probably feel invincible after completing an Ironman and be mad keen



PHOTOS: PATRIMONIO, VICTOR THOMPSON/DREAMTIME.COM

The Physical Side

An Ironman takes a huge toll on you, so it's no wonder you feel a little peaky as your body tries to restore itself to normal. Here are just some of the changes that take place...



CASE STUDY


Abi Gooch

Race Ironman Switzerland 2007
Time 11:43:52 (target time 13 hours)

After completing Ironman Switzerland in 2007 and smashing her target time, Abi Gooch rode the wave of post-race euphoria for a couple of weeks and even did a duathlon 10 days after the Ironman, before plunging into the post-Ironman blues. Life was dull and her work, which she normally enjoyed, held no interest. Her husband Rob found her to be uncharacteristically moody, although he did manage to persuade her to leave her running shoes behind for their mini-break to Spain, which in hindsight Abi says was a good idea.

"I thought I wasn't doing much training – certainly in comparison to my Ironman training anyway – but I was actually working out most days. Now I realise that I wasn't allowing my body to fully recover.

"The confidence boost from Switzerland meant I was training harder than ever, but I was just training for training's sake. In retrospect, I should have had a three-week clean break."

to get back into training and racing. Once you even feel like competing again, then delay this for at least a month. You should do this to prevent long-term injury and sickness. It's important to fully access your mental and physical side before considering your next challenge as it's rare that both the mental and body functions will recover at the same rate. Don't force things; ease back into training when you feel ready, not when other people tell you to. Many finishers feel much fitter in the weeks after the race. This is due to a huge reduction in training; basically they're not fatigued from training. Enjoy this feeling and don't be in a hurry to lose it. 

Find out more

<http://img1.tapuz.co.il/forums/35730075.pdf>

First-hand account by Jason Shortis, elite Ironman.

www.ironmate.co.uk/post-ironman-blues.htm

More post-race tips from Mark Kleanthous.

The Triathlete's Guide to Mental Training by Jim Taylor and Terri Schneider (Velopress, 2005). ISBN 978-1931382700. How to mentally prepare for racing.

"If you really can't cope without a physical fix after your race, consider long walks or a hobby you used to do before Ironman took over your life"

Five-point plan to dodge the doldrums

1 Tri talk

Reality can bite hard after an Ironman – back to the grind, mortgage repayments... So meet up with friends and share e-mails with others who have recently completed an Ironman. Other finishers will have an understanding of the experience and how you're feeling.

2 Personal best

To give yourself a different challenge, focus on one sport and go for a personal best. Keep the race short: a 10km running event or a 10- or 25-mile time-trial event.

3 Refuel

Eat for England! Right now, nothing is off the menu.



4 Retail therapy

Go shopping. Reward yourself with a new bit of tri gear for your next race. And if you really want a new challenge, go on a Saturday during the sales! You now have the energy and this will definitely help maintain your endurance.

5 Racing

You'll be feeling more self-confident, which can cloud your judgement about when you should resume racing. Your next event is likely to be shorter so you need to be fully rested and then get into light easy training. Try to avoid any emotionally sapping races, such as very short, fast races or conditions that don't suit you.