

7th April 2019

IM SOUTH AFRICA 2019 RACE REPORT



Sleep? Who needs sleep before spending 12 hours on the go? I can't talk for Mike but I was awake from 4.30 and the mind turning over with all the usual pre race nerves and thoughts. These never go away no matter how many races I do. I think they just become amplified as in the most part I've been lucky with mechanicals, injury and the like.....how long will the luck hold? Going long adds to these thoughts as the opportunities for these things to happen increases with distance.

Pre race porridge and a cuppa are the order of the day as we finish the last minute fuff. With the last checks done it's out the door with the wetsuits, goggles and hat and a thankfully short walk to transition where our bikes are ready and waiting for last minute checks and adding bottles of our chosen refreshment for the ride.

It happens quite quickly after this with suits on, the (multiple) inevitable nervous trips to the loos and final slaps on the back for luck. It's during one of these trips that Mike tells me the news that they've chopped the swim to 1.6k which we presume to be due to the sea conditions although from the beach it doesn't appear to rough and I've swum in worse at Weymouth and Wales. There is mixed feeling on my part I'm disappointed for Mike but also secretly pleased as I wasn't looking forward to an hour of swell.

The start is so much different to my first race back in 2012. Gone are the mass starts and the washing machine hurly burly of arms and legs desperately seeking clear water and kicking regardless of what you're kicking against. We have now the rolling start which has been further sanitised with 10 athletes being allowed into the water at a time. I understand the reasons but sometimes hanker after the old days as I think it favours the stronger, slightly cruel swimmer.

Last, final, final slap on the back and into the water we go and heading to the first buoy although the first 100 metres or so is running as the water is still not deep enough to get in and get really going but then it's waves crashing over and we are truly underway. The usual concerns about breathing, stroke, clean water and the like apply and the choppy sea, oh the choppy sea. Out to the first turning buoy and around, feels steady but I'm hoping things will speed up after this although I'm having troubles with my sighting and pausing to look up but this is nothing compared to the chap I pass at the second buoy where 4 athletes are helping to haul a swimmer onto the back of a boat and shouting have you got him? The swim continues in much the same vein as before with swim, sight, pause to check and plough on with that horrible salty feeling in the mouth and a feeling of nausea permeating the core. Around the last marker and it's past shark rock pier and in. Run up the beach shedding the wetsuit as we go and time to try something new for me.....the wetsuit stripper. Seriously if you can't get the suit off or choose not to there are volunteers who will help you out of your neoprene. I took the decision to take advantage of this thing and in a few seconds I'm free of my black cladding and into T1 grabbing the bike bag as we go, change and drop the bag and over to the FELT and get ready to spend some serious time on my wheels. Made some changes recently to aero position and still not sure that it as comfortable as it could be but too late now and off we go and down on the bars straight away in the first few yards. The first 10 miles are flat and so I flew past everything with lots of shouts of 'on yer right' as a number of

the fellow competitors clearly struggled with rules of the road and basic etiquette. One of the key things to remember on an IM is nutrition and so start regular sips of three bottles I have with me and a nibble of those chocolate dates Mike provides us with. NICE. The good progress continued throughout that first 20 miles despite the unruly rabble and I approach the turn point at Maitland. The hills aren't significant compared to Wales and I was grateful for this but there was a sting in the tail as there is a 10 mile steady incline that goes on and on just at the wrong gradient for most and on this particular day we have a wicked headwind that doesn't abate all the way back into PE and reduces the average speed considerably. It's on this long stretch that we see the Elite men are coming back the other way on their second lap. The bikes and their riders are truly flying and look stunning and are an amazing spectacle as anyone seeing the footage would probably agree. We drop back down into the beach front area and into Summerstrand and the second lap commences with a repeat and to be perfectly honest I'm not looking forward to the incline once more but it's the same for all and bike is generally considered to be my best suit. More passing but for the first time a few TT bikes start to come up along side and some small tustles start as I'm quicker on the ups and they are belting down the downs. Flats are a bit of everything depending on the rider but I more than hold my own. It's hot, windy and keeps going up but eventually second lap is nearly over but marred by cramping in the last 10 miles and my feet are killing me. I struggle into T2 and walk over to rack the bike and am almost transcended by the relief of kicking the cycling shoes off. Note, I've not seen Mike since 6.50 this morning.

So.....What's left? Oh that bloody run. On with the nice big, padded, heavy but comfy Hokas, sun hat, sun screen and away. As you all know I hate running and especially off the bike which isn't good for a triathlete really. The course is predominantly flat with a couple of minor uphill spurs but again nothing like Wales and I was hopeful that if the nutrition had been anything close to good I'd manage a 4 hour marathon. What do I know really as even after 7 years of doing this stuff my judgement is still lacking in some areas and this is one of those. Steady start running 8 min 30 mile pace but telling myself to ease off, only need 9s to make it a good day but I didn't reckon on the wind and relative heat. It's really blowing on that first 2.5k out to the turn point, well that's my excuse and as no-one else was there I cannot be argued with. Turn and down the far end and back to make 10k in total and we've one of four in the bag. I have already started walk running and so its going to be a real struggle to make anything close to 4 hours. The pattern of loops is repeated with some good sections, some bad but always moving forward. The spirits are lifted a little as on the third loop I realise that marmite sarnies are on offer at the third aid station.....I'm suddenly smiling but there is still a long way still to go and finally I spot Mike in the yellow and black heading my way. A cheery greeting and a question in my mind.....how many laps has he done? Long story short he's catching me and I've nothing left really. At the last turning point with some 4k to go Mike goes by with a slap on the back to push him along and the suggestion I run with him. I politely decline. He looked strong and clearly his running heritage paid off. I try and pick it up but carry on shuffling behind. BUT the end is nearly in sight and so it's home we go. The relief of coming down the segregated lane towards the finish chute rather going round again is huge. A sneaky look around and I'm my own and so take my

time and milk the last 100m or so and the words are uttered again.....Mark Milsom you are an ironman and made more special by the MC being a South African, Paul Kaye who saw me over the line in my first full distance race in 2012.

Through to the medals, water and the finisher shirt. The race is done and all that remains is the wincing and post mortem and a few beers before the next part of this triathlon centric trip to the sun begins. A great lead up to the day, great experience whilst there and an opportunity to meet some lovely people AND that selfie with Lucy.

Just finishing up with paying tribute to Mike for his kindness and support during all the planning and preparation to be there on Hobie beach at 6.30 watching the sun rise over the Indian Ocean. A great athlete and kind companion to share the experience with.

