

# A Dream Come True!

## My Hawaiian Ironman experience

It was April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008, I was sitting on my couch eating some ice cream watching the 2007 Ironman 70.3 World Championship that I had recorded on my DVR. Halfway through the program there was a one minute segment on the 2008 Ironman World Championship Lottery selection. I watched intently as the names scrolled on to the screen, but also realized that my chances of actually winning a lottery spot were very slim. So as the names continued across the screen in alphabetical order it was getting close; the M's, N's, O's and then the P's and there it was at the top of the screen, Rich Propst, Plattsmouth, NE. I had actually won. I immediately turned to my wife who was not watching and I told her, "We're going to Hawaii!" Her response was, "Yeah right!" So I replayed it and sure enough, there was my name. We then checked the Ironman Web site and confirmed I had been selected. At that moment I was both excited and panicked. It wasn't until two days later that I received the coveted e-mail from Ironman that I, in fact, had been selected to race in the Ironman World Championship, in Kona, Hawaii. The next day, I began contacting people I had met in the Ironman community, asking them for advice for training and preparation for this race. I ended up going with the famed coach Paul Huddle, former pro and husband of the infamous Paula Newby Fraser. I told Paul, I just wanted to make sure I was both physically and mentally ready to complete this event and not finishing was not an option as this may be the only time in my life I may have the opportunity to compete at this event. He guaranteed me that he would get me ready and I would finish with a smile on my face.

### Arrival in Hawaii

After six months of training we are finally here, Hawaii. As I look out of the planes window on our approach into Kona, it is just like they described, lava as far as you can see. Amazing desolates, some even compare this part of the Island to the Moon. I wouldn't go that far but it is amazing you can see vast stretches maybe 20 or 30 miles with nothing but black and blackish brown lava, no trees, grass or roads, quite amazing. After we land, I step out of the aircraft and am greeted with the intense heat of Hawaii, hot and humid. This was the kind of heat that causes you to almost break out into a sweat immediately. Ah, this is going to be fun and neat.

### The Interview

Prior to our departure I was contacted by NBC Sports, they asked for my story of how I got to the Ironman and then asked for an Interview once we arrived in Hawaii.

Thursday morning, we drive down to The Outrigger Hotel, after completing the underpants run, a requirement for all competitors. When I arrive I greet the lady from NBC Sports, she guides me and my wife and kids through the hotel to a conference room that is set up like TV studio. There is a camera, lights, microphones, computers and a background. This was a little unexpected as I thought they would first get to know me and then decide if I would be a likely candidate for their production, I am glad I shaved! They get me a drink and lead me to my seat in front of the camera, with the microphone over head and the backdrop right behind you. We engage in some small talk about our accommodations and the event and then they give me some brief instructions about the interview and then the turn all the lights off and leave only the spot lights on me on. At this point you can barely see the camera and the interviewer. He asked me some very direct questions and I answer them as plainly as I could trying to

forget about the other people in the room and the camera and what this is all for. I get emotional during some of the interview concerning my parents and what this race means to me but I am able to maintain my composure for the most part and finish the interview. They seemed to like it and then invite me and the family out to the back lawn by the ocean for some other camera shots. We spend about 30 minutes taking shots of me, the family, and the kids. After that they ask my wife to go in for an interview. About 20 minutes later Lisa comes out and we are done with the interview.

### Gear check-in

After a week of training on different parts of the course it is gear check-in day (the day before the race). If you are lucky enough to race in this event I highly suggest going to Hawaii early and training on all segments of the course. These should be easy workouts and shorter as you will be in the final week of your taper and any fatigue you gain now will affect your race performance. By training on all parts of the course you will get a feel of what to expect on race day and not go into race day blind folded which can be very detrimental. Gear check-in was very neat but this is the point that my nervousness about the race started. Like the race there were crowds of spectators there behind the course fencing watching all the athletes go in and some wishing you good luck. Many of them are checking out your gear (bike) and looking for Pros for autograph/photos opportunities. The volunteer checked my bike, helmet and then sent me to another volunteer which showed me to my bike station area. I racked my bike and got orientated as to its location. I was then shown to the Bike gear bag racks and then the Run gear bag racks. All of this time the volunteer is showing me the transition area and the route I will take during the race. Once satisfied I am free to leave. If you do this race and have any questions the volunteers are great and will get you any answers you need. It is important to ask them now, because race morning you will either forget or it will be hard to find a volunteer to help you. I go back to my condo for my last meal prior to race day. My coach calls me and asks me how I am doing? I tell him I am a little nervous, he tells me I should be because tomorrow I am going to die, jokingly. He assured me the nerves are natural and to eat my last meal and get to bed and try and sleep. I follow his instructions and hit the sack about 7:30pm.

### Race Day

3:00 a.m. Hawaiian time, I lay in bed unable to sleep any more, thinking about the events of the coming day. Am I rested, am I ready, will the weather be okay, will it be hot, and will the legendary winds be blowing on the bike? 3:30 am I get up, unable to lay there and think any more, I get my race suit on, I go to the kitchen and eat a bowl of Oatmeal, a banana and a glass of CarboPro - my last chance to top off my glycogen stores prior to the start. I prepare my food bottles for the race, and special needs bags. 4:20 a.m. I wake up Lisa and tell her it is time to go. We kiss good bye and I walk to the shuttle bus pick up where the other athletes are waiting. On the bus, it is abnormally quite, everyone is thinking about the day ahead, nervous about the task that lay ahead of us.

Once we arrive at the King Kam, we are directed behind the hotel where the special needs bag drop sites are located. I drop off the bags and head to the back parking lot to body marking. There I am greeted by a race official that pulls me aside and arranges for a NBC Sports Camera man to follow me. At the time they are all busy but they are told to follow me. I get my numbers marked by the volunteers, first my age on my right calve then my bib number on each arm. This is serious as they use big stamps so that your number is easily visible from a distance and on the swim. We are then directed around to the side of the hotel nearest the pier where the transition area is located. I proceed past a

check point into the transition area and head for my bike which had been staged the day before. I first pass the Pro racks where all the professionals are checking their bikes and readying them for the race. It's easy to spot the favorites as there are camera men surrounding and filming them. I continue to my bike. When I arrive, I notice that I too was being followed by a camera man. At first I am startled but I try to ignore them and go on about my business. I put my food and water bottles on and then proceed to check my bike out. I then ask a volunteer for a pump and they direct a man to bring me a pump. I am left waiting for about 5 minutes. When the pump arrives I get my bike out and inflate the tires to about 120 psi, which should allow for a little cushion when they heat up under the hot sun and friction from the road. Note I am doing all of this while the camera man is nearly on my shoulder filming my every move. When I finish, I rack my bike and note that I have generated a small crowd of onlookers wondering why I am being followed by the camera.

At this point I am done with my bike inspection and proceed to the bathroom line. I stand in line for about 15 minutes talking with other athletes and a Pro in line right in front of me. He is very courteous and has nothing but accolades about the age group athletes. Prior to his turn, I wish him luck and he returns the gesture. I am later told that that was Thomas Hellriegel, a former champion at Kona and annual favorite to win. Again, just another occasion where you have to remind yourself that this is real. Business is now taken care of and it is only 1 hour until the start.

It is starting to finally get light and I can see that we are going to be blessed with a beautiful, clear day. I go over to the area near the swim entry just to wait, stretch and kill time. As I stand there I watch the Navy Seals parachute into the waters to start the festivities. I have the luck of recognizing Dave Scott, another Ironman legend and talked with him briefly about the race and he wishes me good luck. I then see Chrissie Wellington, 2007 Ladies Pro winner, and some other Pro ladies that set up camp next to me to stretch and get ready for the start. 6:30 a.m., people are moving toward the water at this point, I decide I can't wait any longer and need to calm my nerves by getting in the water. I proceeded down the steps to the beach and calming my nerves was not accomplished. I am now standing in ankle deep water with hundreds of others, while being surrounded by 1000's of spectators, banners, music, and the announcer in the background giving instructions and informing us all of the time remaining until the start.

Now I am really getting nervous. Then the music is interrupted by a Hawaiian blowing a conch horn to get people's attention. It is preceded by a Hawaiian drum corps and singer in Hawaiian singing a song and asking the Hawaiian Gods to give us good weather and to wish us luck on our endeavor. This was then followed by the National Anthem. Minutes later, "Boom", the Pros start. Now my nerves and pulse were going. In exactly 15 minutes we would start. I slowly waded into the water, got my cap and goggles on and ready. I waded out until I finally pushed off the bottom and started to swim out to the start line. I positioned myself in the middle of the pack and about 5 rows back from the front. The media helicopter positioned itself over the pack and then "BOOM", we were off!

In an instant, complete pandemonium had broken loose. Arms and legs were flying everywhere! My main concern now was trying to find clear water and avoid getting hit, or worse, kicked. This chaos continued for what seemed like forever. I kept waiting and hoping for the pack to spread out so that I could find open water. We passed the first buoy, second buoy, third buoy and it was still crowded. At this point I tried to start working my way toward the outside of the group which helped, but it was still very crowded. Finally we reached the catamaran at the turn around. We made the turn for home and I swung out wide and finally found open water. The trip home was much smoother. As I approached the pier, I saw the Kona Royal Hotel - half way there. Then I saw the church steeple - almost there. Then on

our left, the pier, now only about 200 meters. As I swam the length of the pier, I passed over two scuba divers with cameras filming us - how cool, just a reminder of where we are, Kona, The Ironman.

I reached the sandy beach and then got up and ran for the stairs. Once up the stairs, we were directed to the showers where I rinsed off. I then proceeded to the "Swim to Bike" transition bag rack, grabbed my bag and headed for the changing tent. I sat down and tried to remain calm, so I wouldn't forget anything. Methodically I got ready and then left my bag with a volunteer that would hang it back on the rack. I then proceeded out of the changing tent where they had volunteers slathering suntan lotion on anyone wanting any. After being covered with slick suntan lotion, and looking like a greased pig I proceeded to my bike.

I put my shoes on, grabbed my bike and ran it to the mounting area. I mounted my bike and I was off. The first six miles of the course is a figure 8 loop in the city of Kona. This was the most technical part of the course, but could prove to be critical given the number of other bikers on the course. The coolest part of this first six miles was the climb out to the Queen K Highway up Palani Street. This was about a quarter of a mile at a 10% grade, but it was lined with spectators yelling for you and the path up the hill was about 7 to 10 feet wide and resembled the climbs in the Tour de France. Once to the Queen K we were now heading north for our long ride to the city Hawi on the north-end of the island. The only thing now between us and Hawi was lots of lava and lots of wind.

The first 20 miles went smooth, quick and fun. After that the winds changed direction on us. Instead of a slight tail wind, we were now getting a gusting crossing head wind. Nothing to panic about, this was Hawaii and the bike portion was notorious for winds. It was also at this point that I started to notice the heat building. Eighteen miles later we were in the town of Kawaihae where we started our 18 mile climb up to Hawi. The good news was that I still had not seen the leaders heading back from Hawi. The bad news was that the winds started to pick up. The climb to Hawi is not a difficult one; it is just a series of stair-step climbs. What made this climb difficult today were the relentless winds and the gusts. Finally about half way up the road to Hawi I saw the lead car and the Pro leaders. How cool to see this in person! A comforting note is that I can tell that they too are having difficulty with the wind which has now turned into a very hard cross wind, probably 25-35 mph. Once on the way up a gust caught me by surprise and I about got blown off my bike. Later I was reaching for my feed bottle and dropped it. I immediately stopped and picked it up as I didn't want to get DQ'd for littering.

The final 5 miles of this road to Hawi turns directly north and directly into the wind. This was slow going, but comforting that I would be turning around to get a tail wind. Hawi, the turnaround, is in the center of the city and the special needs bag pickup is just after the turn around. I switched out my feed bottle and grabbed the extra salt tabs in case I needed them on the ride home. I had now completed 60 miles of bike course. The tail wind was a nice break from the last 36 miles of crossing head winds. It is at this time that I should note that a gusting cross wind is much easier to deal with at slower speeds. As the road started to turn south toward Kawaihae the gusting cross wind became treacherous as I was heading down hill at a greater rate of speed. This time I had two gusts that almost ended my race. My friend that had warned me about the winds was right - I had never experienced anything like this even on a windy day in Nebraska. After the race I learned that there were quite a few people that actually did get blown over or blown off their bike, I was lucky.

Eighteen miles later I was in Kawaihae - 78 miles complete. Now there was a mile climb up from Kawaihae to the Queen K and then we would be on the way back to Kona. When I turned south on the Queen K, I was presented with a surprise. Now the wind was blowing straight into my face, not hard,

but enough to slow my effort and make the gradual hills somewhat challenging. Now the ride was getting challenging and I was getting hot and tired. I kept telling myself only 30 some miles to go and I would be back in Kona. Eighteen miles later I passed the monument I built out of lava rocks to appease the Hawaiian Gods. I then passed the scenic outlook, the Veterans' Cemetery and then I could see Bum hill. This is a hill about 12 miles from Kona that if you look at it at the right angle it looks like someone's backside. I passed the Natural Energy Lab and there were the Pros racing down the Queen K for town and the finish. Wow! They are really fast! Just before town the media helicopter swooped down low next to the road and then pulled up above and was filming the race. What a neat experience!

Once back in Kona I returned to the crowds which were an uplifting and exciting experience. I dismounted from the bike where a volunteer waited to take my bike from me and there was the TV camera man again watching my every move. I seemed to lose him on my run around the transition area to the "Bike to Run" Transition bags. I grabbed my bag and jumped into the changing tent, sat down and there, out of the corner of my eye, was the camera man again watching everything I was doing. I quickly took my helmet off and put my running shoes on. In my haste I had taken my race number off, jumped up and started to run out of the tent when I realized my shoes were not tied. I stopped and tied them and realized I didn't have a racing number. What a disaster! I ran back to the changing tent got my number and then proceeded out of the transition area and onto the run course. Ah! Only 26.2 miles to go!

As I ran the first mile in town I was passed by Craig Alexander (Pro from Australia). I told him congratulations as he was on his way to the finishing stretch and his first win in Hawaii. I, on the other hand, had just started the marathon and had 25 miles to go. The first 10 miles are run on an out and back loop down Ali'i drive. This is a nice run, with very moderate grades right along the ocean front and it is lined with lots of spectators. After this portion, the course winds through town to Palani Street and the infamous hill up to the Queen K highway. This is where the run gets daunting. Once you have cleared this hill, you now have sixteen miles to go in the hot lava fields all alone and you are very tired at this point. At mile 15 I start to have signs of dehydration and running became very painful. For me this seemed to take on the form of a bladder infection, where I felt like I had to urinate even after going and the jarring effect of running hurt. I then decided to drink as much as I could at the aid stations and to eat some oranges. Although this worked and alleviated my issues, it wasn't until mile 20 that I started to be able to run and feel better.

By this time the sun had set and it was very dark. I ran the final 4 miles into town. When I reached the corner of Palani and the Queen K, the magic had started. The route was lined with spectators and they were all clapping and telling me great job. Some even were giving me high fives. Running now seemed to not hurt any more. It was as if I hit my second wind. I turned on Kuakini Highway and then Hualalai Rd., still more spectators, more high fives and accolades. I could see the glow of the finish and hear the announcer and music - I was almost there! I made one final turn on Ali'i Drive and it was as if I entered my own parade. Everyone was clapping and yelling for me and the drive narrowed to the finishers shoot. What a site; lights, deafening cheers, music and then came the resounding announcement over the loud speaker, "All the way from Plattsmouth, Nebraska, 40 year old, ... Richard Propst ..... YOU ARE AN IRONMAN!!!" The words I had dreamt of hearing for years. I then stepped across the finish line to be greeted by camera flashes, TV cameras, a lei and my two catchers which helped me walk back to the recovery area. There I was presented my finishers medal and then I gave an interview to NBC Sports, where I said that I had my wife, kids, and parents to thank for this because without their support and confidence in me, I could have never had done this. I was then reunited with my family where we exchanged hugs and kisses and thanked them for all of their support.