

# Long-Distance Essentials

Taming the Ironman behemoth requires planning, preparation and patience. In other words, you need **Mark Kleanthous' 20 tips**



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

## 1 PLATEAU PERFORMANCE

Triathletes are nothing if not creatures of habit. But if you continually repeat the same training routine week in, week out, your performance will plateau. Yes, it's true that the Ironman is a feat of human endurance, but you won't fulfil your potential if you just do the same type of training for six to 10 months. Divide training into phases of 60% base, 30% race specific and 10% taper.

## 2 TRAINING ZONES

Too many triathletes train in the wrong zones for an Ironman. They have a good standard of fitness and are used to training for sprint, Olympic and



To complete an Ironman, you'll need to alter your training to mimic Ironman pace

middle distance but fail to alter their training to mimic Ironman pace. They train far too hard, starting too fast then slowing down, in the belief that this will help them find race pace easy. As a result, they find it awkward to lock into an even pace.

## 3 CORRECT PROGRESSION

Know yourself. By scheduling gradual increases you'll learn much more and give yourself a better understanding of your own unique physiology. If you get tired after a long session, is it because you're tired before the session? Have you eaten haphazardly over the last 24 hours? Or are you just not ready for this type of session?

## 4 FOOD FOCUS

Learn and understand the effect food has on your training and heart rate. When will the calories you consume help you? In five, 10, 15 minutes or longer? What types of nutrition help and when? How does caffeine affect you? Practise training with a full stomach during all three disciplines because, when it comes to race day, at some point you'll have difficulty digesting food and drink (bloated stomachs aren't uncommon!). Remember: races have sponsored nutrition – train with it so that your body becomes accustomed.

## 5 RACE-SPECIFIC TRAINING

Only consider race-specific pace in the last 16 weeks before your Ironman. Otherwise, you'll peak too soon and your race performance will be left in a training session. During your base phase, concentrate on duration and heart rate below planned, Ironman-predicted heart rate (HR), rather than speed. In the last 16 weeks you'll also need to train at Ironman

As much as you may hate it, the only way to be fully prepared for the Ironman swim is to train in the open water

pace to use the muscle groups that you'll recruit during the race. That means, for example, if most triathletes are able to run three minutes per mile slower in the Ironman marathon compared to their current 10km speed, they should train at this pace during the race-specific period.

## 6 IRONMAN STRENGTH

Ironman strength isn't about being strong, it's about maintaining a constant effort; in other words, being able to maximise your exertion right to the finish line. Individual strength is absolute, which quickly fatigues, whereas fitness has no boundaries. Ask yourself, how can a professional female athlete who only weighs 120 pounds finish in the top 5% overall? She won't have the absolute strength of the athletes behind her; she is just fitter. You must always develop your aerobic fitness in preference to strength.

## 7 SWIM KICKING

Spend the majority of your swimming without a pull buoy. A big mistake is thinking that you can have a lazy kick in the Ironman swim to save your legs as the wetsuit will keep you high in the water. Swimming an hour plus at race pace is demanding and you'll use your legs more than you think. So, the better you are at kicking, the more you

## 11 MUSCLE MEMORY TRAINING

This is learning to recruit and use every muscle that you wouldn't normally. Develop a greater ability to spin a high cadence during bike training so, when fatigue occurs or you just need a change of effort, using an easier and slightly higher cadence will seem natural. During the Ironman bike you'll go through a tired spell, so you must be flexible at changing down a gear. If you're not, you'll lose the ability to recover during the race.

## 12 IRONMAN MARATHON

There are three parts to an Ironman marathon that require practice and respect:

**First part** (straight after the 112-mile bike): practise an easy run with good form of up to 30 minutes after your long rides.

**Middle part** (finding your run legs): shorter runs of two to three miles, after a short- to medium-distance ride with fast cadence.

**Final part** (when form and style changes): after a short, Ironman-paced ride of 15-30 miles, a long run of 12-16 miles.

## 13 RUN AND INJURY PREVENTION

With the greater volume of training, keep injury free by running on softer, off-road surfaces. Run with a drinks belt and learn to run feeling slow. Reduce bouncing by running with loose change in your pockets and aim to dampen the noise of the coins rattling. Unless →



save your legs for the bike and run. For Ironman swimming, fitness and efficiency is more important than being fast.

## 8 OPEN WATER

Long-distance open-water practice is a vital component to a successful Ironman swim. Aside from the confidence benefits, it's also very race specific (unlike in a swimming pool where you're constantly pausing for turns). Sighting, for example, can only be developed in the open water. Remember: going out too fast on race day will always result in a poor, total performance.

## 9 BIKING

Alternate long, steady rides for two weeks. Make week three a slightly faster ride closer to predicted race heart rate. Make week four a ride at half the distance of the first two weeks' rides and ride as a recovery. Aim to cycle hills seated, spinning without creating extra fatigue. Learn to keep going by reading the road and slowing down at junctions, rather than stopping. This mimics what happens at the Ironman feeding stations.

## 10 WINTER BIKE

Use a heavier bike during the off-season and get used to the

feeling of going slower. Tiredness creeps up much quicker on a winter bike loaded with mudguards, lights, large drink bottles... A slower bike is a time-efficient way to strength train and is more specific than weight training. In the race, after 80 miles your lightweight racer will feel slow. A heavy bike in winter develops your armory by making you do the work rather than the bike. Soon, you'll be ready to cope with uphill drags, slow pace out of corners and your failure to speed down hills.



Using a heavier bike for winter sessions is a time-efficient way to strength train and also helps mimic Ironman race conditions

you're an elite, only do four runs over 60 minutes off the bike in your Ironman build-up; otherwise you'll risk over-training and injury. And completing more than two long runs a month will start to reduce your leg strength.

## 14 SOLO TRAINING

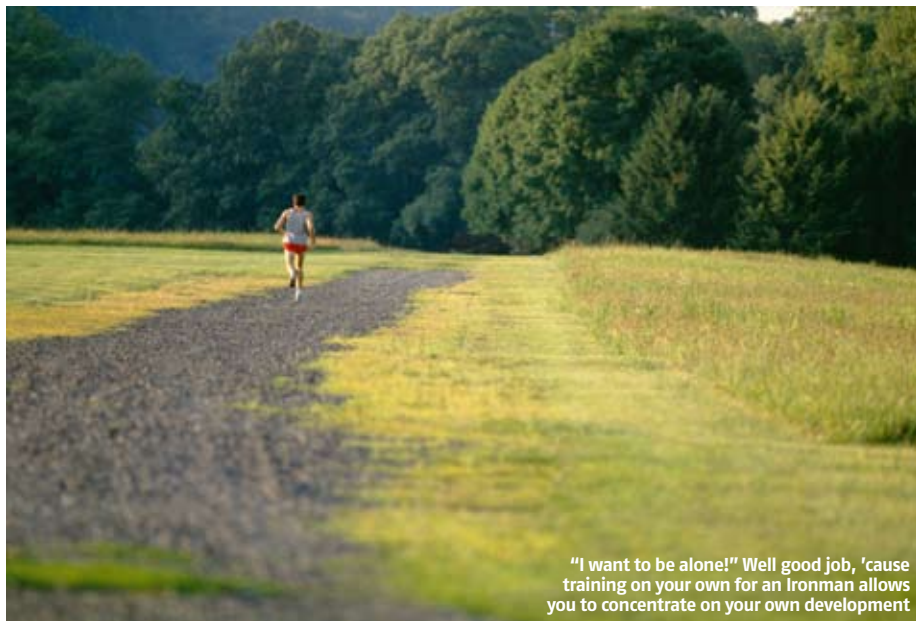
Despite the fun of training with others, you must do some of your key sessions alone without the drafting or pacing effect of your contemporaries. During the Ironman you're alone in your zone. You need to tune into your breathing rate, fatigue, power, heart rate and energy levels. While training with others you're subconsciously working with them, rather than concentrating on your own development and learning about your physical energy levels.

## 15 FATIGUE

Expect the unexpected. Without killing yourself in training, plan to get tired in some longer sessions to experience fatigue. You'll learn much more about yourself by steady-state training than starting off fast and hanging on. Halfway through several longer sessions, learn what happens when you fail to eat properly. Once you experience tiredness and fatigue, continue to eat and see how soon your energy levels improve.

## 16 MENTAL CONFIDENCE

It's very easy to become stale from training for the Ironman. As your mind becomes more tired from the



"I want to be alone!" Well good job, 'cause training on your own for an Ironman allows you to concentrate on your own development

training, you end up putting in huge effort, only to go slower into that headwind or up that hill, as you're unable to dig deep. You need to monitor your progress carefully and have the confidence to back off when training feels hard.

## 17 ENERGY AVAILABILITY

By understanding where your calories are stored, you can adapt your training to improve the usage of your huge reserve of free fatty acids. Improving your ability to use up stored fat will allow you to go faster for longer. Training above 85% of your maximum heart rate won't teach your body how to use this fuel. A 72kg male athlete could have the following calories available (exact values depend on fitness levels

and recent training): his blood sugar has approximately 300-600 calories of glucose available; muscle glycogen, 1,500-2,000 calories; liver glycogen, 300-600 calories; but his fatty acids storage is 50,000 calories.


## 18 TEAM WORK

With the level of commitment and training required for an Ironman, you need a good team around you. Positive people will encourage and inspire you, and not ask, "What the hell are you doing?"

## 19 RACE-AHOLIC

Too much racing isn't conducive to Ironman preparation. If you race a lot you're going too fast and not replicating Ironman effort. Recovery from racing takes much longer than any hard training session, and will affect the following 10 days of training as it interrupts consistency.

## 20 OVERTRAINING

By training for more than six months for your Ironman, you seriously risk overtraining. Training in many different ways, adding variety and not continually repeating the same sessions improves endurance. If you keep adding volume for six months without any consideration to fitness gains, you'll always lead yourself into a state of being over-trained. You're more likely to have a great Ironman by doing less training than too much. Training causes fatigue and only with adequate rest and recovery will you improve. 



Ironman training can take it out of you both physically and mentally, so you'll need the confidence to know when to back off