

SIMPLY UMU

# **THINGS I THOUGHT I KNEW BEFORE GOING FULL DISTANCE**



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By Simply Umu

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## BRAINSTORMING

Like many of you, I watched a lot of videos, and especially those videos titled ‘Things I wish I knew before my first Ironman’ or ‘The 5 Ironman worst mistakes’ or anything with a title resembling that. I thought I had done the research, I thought I was ready, I thought I knew all the things I should know before the hardest and longest race of my life. But the reality is that even with all this supposed knowledge, I couldn’t predict what I was going to face by [going full distance](#), meaning racing a full distance triathlon also known as the Ironman. These videos are great, don’t get me wrong and they are definitely worth watching, especially [this one](#) from my favourite pro triathlete. But the truth is, there are things that are never talked about and this is what this guide is for. This guide is especially tailored for someone considering doing their first ever full distance triathlon but I hope more experienced triathletes can also take some things from my experience. It is written as if you only know the very basics of triathlon and dream of becoming an Ironman one day with some insights coming directly from when I was training for my own first race.

As spoiled by the title of this chapter, the first step you need to take is to sit down and think about the big questions: why, where, when and how. Personally, before going to the triathlon club I mentioned in my story, I actually considered another one. It was a club that was midway between personal training and group training. The main coach was very selective about their athletes so they planned a meeting with me to hear about my motivations. I immediately told them about my goal to go for a full distance race and I vividly remember mentioning to them that I don’t have only at the race but also beyond because life goes on afterwards. It wasn’t my own insight, it was just something I heard in a video and that I was repeating like a parrot. Their answer was perfect: life goes on anyway. It made me realise I had to think more by myself and not simply repeat and apply what I hear elsewhere. I can’t answer those big questions for you and each one as their own answers. The point is that the best way to ensure that you will have the best journey possible towards your goal is to have a clear vision.

That being said, the guide isn’t made to overwhelm you. I’ll focus on the essential things and provide some links that I think are useful if you want to dive more in detail into certain topics. The point is that you have the most important piece of information here and can visit some links later on depending on the challenges you will be facing. And I can guarantee you that there will be challenges.

## PLANNING

Without further due, let’s dive right into probably the most important part. Completing a full distance race requires a very high level of discipline and discipline starts with a plan. Here are according to me the first things you need to do once you have answered the big questions:

1. Discuss your answers to the big questions with your family/friends/partner/roommate
2. Get familiar with [triathlon rules](#)
3. Sign up for a race
4. Buy gear
5. Make a training and nutrition plan and stick to it
6. ‘Swim 3,8 miles, bike 112 miles, run 26.2 miles and brag for the rest of your life’

Yes, just 6 steps, that's it, don't overcomplicate it. The important thing about the planning phase is to realise that you will have to base your whole life around triathlon and make the necessary adjustments. Training for an Ironman really forces you to optimise your day to balance with the rest of your life. It forces you to look at your priorities. And this is why the first ever step is to discuss it with the people that might be the most impacted. An Ironman isn't really a solo endeavour as you need a strong support system to carry on so make sure they are on your side.

If you have answered the big question, you also have a goal for the race. Planning will differ a lot if you just want to finish the race or aim at a certain time. In the latter you'll become way more geeky about metrics.

It's also important to know that if it's a one-time race, as it was for me, it's not worth listening to every optimization possible that will end up costing a lot of money and time. But if you plan to do that regularly it's worth it.

## GEARING UP

Gear is a trap, full stop. It can easily become crazy expensive but triathlon can be done on a budget just as shown on [this video](#) and many items can actually be borrowed, again especially if it's for a once-time race. To give an idea I spent around [4000 euros](#) in two years to go from 0 to race a full distance triathlon, where approximately 2500 euros was for gear. If you are curious I also made a [checklist](#) with all the mandatory gear and in brackets the gear I consider optional and weather-dependent. You don't need to buy everything on this list early on but it's good to have an idea of how much gear and logistics is needed for this sport.

It's also interesting to know that there is some gear only used during the race but also gear that you only use during training. If you are on a budget, again try to minimise very specific gear.

## FOCUSSING

So you know what you are getting yourself into, you have a solid plan and all the gear you need. It's now time to train. I won't explain the specifics of training in detail and will recommend the videos of the [GTN youtube channel](#). However, I would recommend taking a personal coach if that falls within your budget, or get a triathlon club membership. To me the bare minimum is to talk extensively with someone who has already done several Ironman races if you want to craft your own plan.

Making a training plan is the easy part. Sticking to it is the hard part. And I am not even talking about the fact that we are talking about tens of hours a week with some very hard training sessions. The hardest part is dealing with your environment. Your loved ones for example, can be your biggest support as well as they can be the biggest hurdle to your objective. Training for an Ironman takes a lot of will power and energy so if you have other responsibilities it is of utmost importance to evaluate the amount of energy you want and are willing to spend on it before you even think of training volume or target time. That is why I mentioned them in the first step. If you have discussed it and established clear boundaries, you will have quality time for them as well as quality time to focus on your training. It sounds nice but the reality is that you might face the harsh truth that most people won't understand why you want to do that no matter your reasons. And your job is to understand that actually they don't have to

understand you. It's ok as long as they respect your goal. So I would advise not to waste any energy trying to convince them to understand you at 100% and support every single step you take.

In this period of focus you also need to understand the difference between training and racing. Basically you have a plan and you have to stick to it. Nowadays the most popular training strategy is polarised training, meaning you are either going very slowly or very hard and rarely in the middle zone which is close to a middle-distance race. If you have to train easily, don't push. If you have to train hard, don't ease off. You have to be very strict with it but it's easier said than done especially with social media and group training. It's so hard not to get tempted to enter into a competition with a fellow athlete. It's training, not a race. No matter what you shouldn't let them disturb your focus.

Another thing that can disturb your focus are injuries. Training for an Ironman is so long you will have to face unforeseen events and learn how to handle them. Regarding injuries the best way to avoid them is to listen to your body. And by that I also mean knowing the difference between a body that's too tired or being lazy. The best way to assess that is just by starting the training session you planned and if it's too hard you can adapt it. Most times it will be fine and you'll understand you were just being lazy. And even if you were feeling tired doing that is better than skipping sessions altogether. Same if you have a light injury, it is better to keep training but at a lower intensity and volume because you reduce the risk of losing all your gains from the past weeks or months. This is of course to discuss with your family doctor. In this way you will learn to manage your mental and energy levels. You'll also learn that fitness is not necessarily equal to performance and that the human body is kind of unpredictable. The training days I was supposed not to perform because I was tired were actually the days I performed the best. In general avoid skipping training sessions as much as possible as volume is a paramount factor in Ironman training.

You'll often feel discouraged. For instance, knowing that Ironman training is also about increasing volume each week makes it even harder mentally as we know that if a week was hard, the next one will be even more difficult. Rest assured, there is usually one rest week every four weeks where the volume and intensity are decreased to ensure better recovery.

Don't let the weather have on training as well. Remember that you have no idea how the weather will be on race day so it's better work on that mental toughness and train regardless. Especially knowing that you will race for probably more than 10 hours so how can you do so if you avoid running 2 hours in the rain. Dress up accordingly and if the weather is dangerous, train inside.

While you will be training more and more, you will probably be doing some races like an olympic-distance race and then a half Ironman. Just know that in terms of feels, A half Ironman distance race is closer to an olympic-distance race. And the closer you get to the full race the more you will have to train your mind and you can hear some tips from pros in [this video](#). In general a great way to stay focused is by watching motivational videos or reading inspiring books from other triathletes, professional or not. And for that I suggest you this great [talk](#).

## EATING

Just like training is not racing, you will learn with time the difference between training nutrition and competition nutrition. I would first suggest focusing on basic nutrition meaning how to eat healthy in general. And by that I mean getting enough and quality proteins, carbohydrates and vegetables every day. Then you can look more specifically at how to optimise this for sports in general, then for endurance specifically and finally considering supplements. Don't jump into supplements before you have a system for basic healthy sports nutrition. You can find some interesting articles [here](#).

If you are specifically interested in the state-of-the-art for sports nutrition and the very technical and scientific aspects of it I would recommend this [extensive lecture](#).

You will also have to develop your own fuelling strategy with all the options available meaning choosing between solid and liquid nutrition or energy bar vs home made food for instance. Timing is also important, in the sense of when you want to consume them and at which frequency, because I guess you want to avoid stomach issues. I hate to say it but this is mainly about trial and error as everybody reacts differently.

## ENJOYING

I won't sugarcoat it, my own race day was brutal for me. Well that's not entirely true. It became brutal during the marathon. No one really tells you that but the beginning is not really tiring and doesn't feel that difficult. I mean, you specifically trained for it but you have to know it's not an intense effort but rather slowly getting out of fuel. Racing an Ironman doesn't feel like you are pushing all the way through. In that sense, the official race is easier than the training. It's the mental aspect that's way harder. See it as a very long hike where with every step you take, you get a little bit tired. You were optimistic about it and by the end of it you feel tired and are not quite yet home. Except that with an Ironman race you go way beyond your usual fatigue levels.

I don't say that to discourage you but I think you should be aware of that. That being said, it means that almost 75 % of the race feels ok so don't think about the last half of the marathon. The rest will be pure bliss and enjoy it as much as possible. Look at the views, get energy from the supporters, it is your day, you have worked hard for it so soak up everything you. And also never forget, don't try anything new on race day. Like, seriously!

## RECOVERING

You've done it, you are now an Ironman. You deserve and most importantly you should rest properly. And that means only light walking, swimming, cycling and/or stretching but no intense effort at all. The first week post race is the most important as explained in [this video](#). Also don't forget to drink plenty as you will have some level of dehydration at the end of the race and eat and sleep enough. Take the recovery as seriously as you took your training and now you can finally brag for the rest of your life.