



Ironman Pacing

A successful Ironman lies not only in your preparation for the event, but in the execution of your race plan at the event. Clearly, race simulation workouts in training are important to learn how your body will react to certain stresses - heat, wind, cold, fatigue, anxiety, nutrition, discomfort, and so on. This article is only meant to give you some suggestions on how to approach the pacing plan for a long event like an Ironman. Your individual strengths will vary.

For purposes of this article, I'm going to use perceived exertion (PE) or Friel HR zones: easy (Z1), comfortable (low Z2), comfortable-steady (mid Z2), comfortable-fast (mid-high Z2), moderate-hard or tempo (Z3), and hard (Z4) to define pacing guidelines. What I call High Z2 should correlate to about 20 beats below your lactate threshold heart rate (LTHR) and is often referred to as aerobic endurance threshold (AeT).

In general it's a good idea to break the bike and run into segments that you can focus on. For example, you can break the bike into 4 twenty-five mile sections and a final 11m section - or 3 thirty-five mile sections. The run can be broken into 4 ten kilometer sections and a final 2.2. Whatever works best for you to keep things manageable and in perspective.

Ironman Rookies

Swim

start in low Z2, ease into low to mid Z2 (comfortable steady) and hold it there. You're not going to win the race in the swim!

Bike

10m easy to low Z2

11-33 – low Z2

33- 80 – low-mid Z2

81+ – keep it comfortable steady/mid-Z2 (your HR will probably drift up here due to fatigue)

110-112 – easy, loosen up

Run – walk through all waterstops

0-3 easy loosen up, let HR relax from the bike

3-10 low-mid Z2

11-20 mid Z2 (hang tough, HR usually drifts upward)

20-26 – mid-high Z2 or whatever you have left to get to the finish

Intermediate athletes

Have raced Ironman or have extensive experience with shorter races (~12 hr weeks are common)

Swim

Start in mid Z2, hold it. If you're a strong swimmer take the first 300m out Z3 to low Z4 to get a good position.



Intermediate athletes (cont).

Bike

5m low Z2 (easy-comfortable)

5-35 low-mid Z2 (comfortable)

36-75 mid to high Z2 (comfortable-steady to comfortable fast)

75+ high Z2, may drift to Z3 due to fatigue or excitement: hold yourself back.

Run

0-2m loosen up in low-mid Z2 (easy)

2-15 mid Z2 (comfortable-steady)

16-21 mid-high Z2 (comfortable-steady) hold yourself back through here

21+ high Z2 to Z3 (whatever you can put into it)

Advanced athletes

Top 10-20% of your division regularly and/or multiple IM finisher (15+ hr weeks are common)

Swim

0-400m Z3/4 (to get a good position)

400m+ high Z2 (comfortable-fast)

Last 200m low Z2 (to let the HR drop) and kick the legs a bit to get blood flow going

Bike

0-5 low-mid Z2 (comfortable warm up pace)

5-50 mid-high Z2 (comfortable-steady)

50+ high Z2 to Z3 (comfortable-steady to -fast)

Run

0-2 loosen up, low-mid Z2 (comfortable)

3-15 mid to high Z2 (comfortable steady to fast)

16-23 mid-high Z2 to Z3 (comfortable-fast to mod-hard)

23+ Z3/4 (mod-hard to hard)

Note that I have accounted for HR drift in the zone recommendations; it's almost unavoidable that during a 10+ hour event your HR will drift upwards due to fatigue.

The most common mistake both new and experienced athletes make is to go too hard too early on the bike. Steady pacing is absolutely critical to 'race' the entire event. You want to be able to run those last few miles!

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