

# The (last) Finish Line



Fireworks on the finishline. NCL39-05s

**I AM in Almere, near Amsterdam. I've been racing since 7.35 am, it's now 4.45 pm. My mission is to finish the world's second oldest Long Distance Triathlon, 28 years after I first completed this race.**

I was back for the last time. I had swam 3.8K in a freezing lake. I had battled my way through 180K on a windy bike course – now all I had to do was a mere marathon, what could possibly go wrong?!

As I stumbled out of T2 and changed my bike shoes for running shoes, the family were there waiting outside looking relieved – they weren't half as relieved as I was though!

They had a long, long wait. At last they knew I hadn't drowned or crashed or punctured, and was now gratefully trying to change from being a slow biker into a slow runner.

I thought my odds of finishing were now slightly above 50 per cent but there was still a lot of work to do. I was asked what I wanted and I managed to mangle a few words that included "hamburger..... ice-cream..... coffee..... chocolate.... but in no particular order," and all of those would be provided for me over the next few laps.

A marathon normally breaks a runner down into a hundred pieces. It takes everything that a runner has. Of course, by the time you start the marathon in an Ironman, you are already a shattered jigsaw of a thousand pieces, but despite the fact that you have given everything you had to survive the swim and everything you had to finish the bike, you must now regather, re-focus, and stick your courage to the mast.

If this had been a training session, it would have ended right here, if this was an ordinary race it would have ended right now. But this was no ordinary race, this was Ironman 16, I had started 15 and finished 15. If I was to finish the 16th and last one, I knew I had to dig deep.

The normal cut off time for an Iron Distance Race is 17 hours but the cut off in Almere is a mere 15 hours – i.e. no time to spare!



Mercy Ships, Peters nominated charity for PJ's last race.

By a cruel irony, the start of the run was opposite the Finish Line and all the winners were already done and dusted and probably showered with their feet up.

My compatriot Bryan McCrystal had finished 6th in 8 hours 24 and the winner from Slovakia had broken the course record to finish in 7 hours 53 – did he have a tail wind for 180K on the bike?!

I ran round the corner, up the red carpet, pretended to run down the Finish Line only to turn right at the last moment and give the crowd a laugh (a joke that was probably a bit jaded when I did it



for the next five laps!) and so my work began in earnest.

My right hamstring was soon sending me a signal to remind me that it needed to be nursed for the next five or six hours.

I ran, not walked the first K and struggled to find a rhythm but eventually I settled into one.

I was doing mental calculations in my head. I had 42K to go and I had 350 minutes to do it in. I had told my support team that I would be about 55 minutes for the first lap of 7k; instead, I was there in 45 and so missed my much needed hamburger.

One lap later the hamburger was cold but it was still gratefully wolfed down.

You meet all sorts out on the run course, one guy in front of me stopped to try to throw up, another stopped to stretch a hamstring, then jogged 30 metres, then stopped to stretch a calf muscle.

I passed one lady who had decided to run while carrying her shoes in her hand....

The pieces of the jigsaw were scattered all over this course and you just had to deal with it.

As I knew the wheels would fall off my chariot at some stage, I wanted to gain as much time as possible against the clock so I had money in the bank for later.

As the afternoon turned into the evening and as the evening turned into the night, the volunteers kept up their unbelievable barrage of bonhomie and supplied gels and drinks and food (now including Tuc biscuits, pretzels and cake), by that stage all I wanted was water.

I later found out that during the course of an Ironman, you expend between 7500 and 10000 calories – I was certainly looking forward to my post race pizza!

My good friend Jan's triathlon team had a tent of supporters on the course who cheered everyone to the rafters every single lap, no matter how bedraggled we looked – and felt.

I managed to run the first 21K/3 laps in 2 hours 20 minutes. (The reason why I was in such good shape was the fantastic training programme set for me by my coach, Bill Black, which resulted in me feeling comfortable in the latter stages of the marathon.

I was even able to walk around Amsterdam the next day without looking like a casualty of war!) Paddy Power was going to lose money if he was betting on me not finishing now!

I had 3 hours 30 minutes left to do a mere half marathon and so I decided to slow down and enjoy it.

I would either jog (certainly not run) a kilometre in seven or eight minutes or walk it in 10.

I got the idea of walking from a Russian who speed walked past me. I thought of asking him about Mr. Putin, but decided not.

I exchanged a few "Shaloms", with some Israeli athletes.

I wondered where Luke, (A kiwi) was. He had passed me on the bike despite his saddle being three inches too low. Wherever he was, he was ahead of me!

I was now able to tell the family every lap what I needed (arm warmers one lap, gilet the next lap).

The arc lights were turned on around the course and the crowd on the Finish Line grew more ballistic as the finishers received more mayhem and noise than the winners several hours earlier.

When I jogged the only noise I could hear was the sound of the soles of my shoes rubbing on the tarmac.

I wasn't actually capable of lifting my feet at that stage and so I continued on my far from merry way with walking some and jogging some.

I could have moved faster but I would have suffered more.

I was not only out here for a long time but I wanted also to be out here for a good time.

I wanted to finish my last Ironman with happy memories, I wanted to remember the Finish Line with pleasure and not pain.

I also wanted to finish for the sake of Mercy Ships, a brilliant charity, which provides life changing operations in the ports of Africa for people without access to secondary health

care. At the end of lap five, I paused briefly near the Finish Line but then started the last long slow lap of my Ironman career, 7K to go out of the 226K.

I thanked each and every volunteer and helper on the course, these guys and girls are the living heartbeat of Triathlon in Almere.

With 2K to go, a 19 year old volunteer insisted on running with me.

Her parents had been helping in the race for the last twenty years and she has been here on race day ever since, first as a baby, then as a helper.

Her spirit of serving others was typical of the 700 volunteers who helped personalise this amazing event and make it an intimate experience for every lucky athlete.

With 200 metres to go she handed me over to my two sons, Patrick and Mark who have been with me on quite a few finish lines over the years in Europe and America and were there for me again.

I will never forget those last few moments. If you ever want to feel like a rock star then come to the best Triathlon Finish Line in sport.

For those last 100 metres of adulation however, you need to have put in hundreds of kilometres in training and racing.

You need to have sweated and sacrificed - and been selfish and made others suffer too.

Your finish is not just for you, you share it and you are glad to share it.

The arc lights were blazing, the PA system was playing one of my favourites, "We Will Rock You" by Queen.

Rock me? You could have rolled me and I wouldn't have felt a thing.

This feeling was better than the most powerful of drugs, it was joy and elation but most of all relief and gratitude.

I held my boys' hands and we crossed the line together.

A fit looking lady put a medal round my neck and said "Wear this medal with pride, you have earned it."

It turns out that she was Yvonne van Vlerken, who had won the race nearly six hours earlier, yet here she was, the Queen of Dutch Triathlon, helping an 'old Charlie' like me, making my day even more special.

As the adrenaline washed out of my system, waves of emotion poured over me.

There had been cheers, there probably would be tears and there certainly would be beers.

I looked back over my shoulder for the last time at all the colour and glamour and noise and fireworks of the Finish Line and also looked back at my Ironman career.

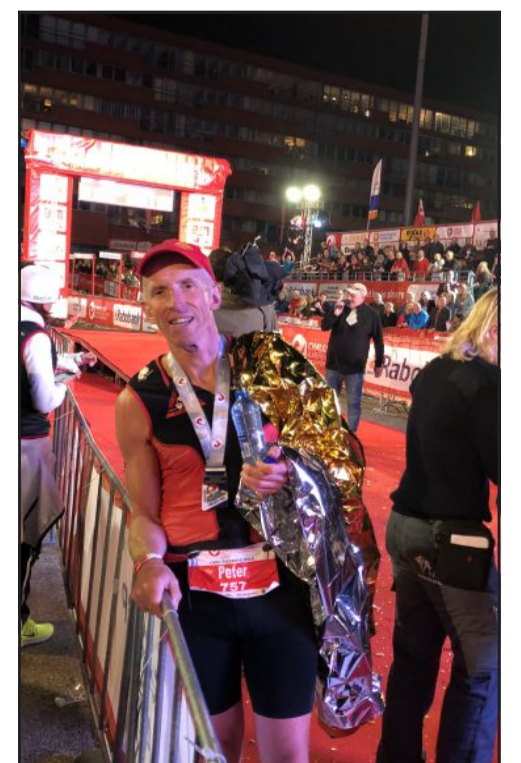
An Ironman cleans you out, it takes everything you have - yet it gives you back even more.

I turned round and shuffled off for a shower, ready to turn back into a mere civilian again.

28 years after my first, I have just finished my last Ironman which is the toughest one day race in the world.

Thank you Almere for letting me complete my dream of 16 finishes from 16 starts.

Sixteen has never been as sweet.



16 Ironmen started..... 16 Ironmen finished. NCL39-04s