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PHUKET

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IRONMAN 70.3 ASIA-PACIFIC
CHAMPIONSHIP. LAGUNA

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RACER'S GUIDE

IRONMAN 70.3 ASIA-PACIFIC CHAMPIONSHIP, LAGUNA PHUKET



Ironman is back in the tropical holiday island of Phuket, Thailand for the second edition of the Ironman 70.3 Asia-Pacific Championship, a race that is the centerpiece of Ironman 70.3 racing in the Asia-Pacific region. The race caps off an exciting week of multisport activities in Phuket with the famous Laguna Phuket Triathlon run the week before.

The race is based around the Laguna Phuket resort and features a challenging course set in a picturesque tropical paradise. The swim is unique in that it takes place in two separate bodies of water, one saltwater, one freshwater. The hilly bike course, too, is unique, with athletes having to dismount their bikes briefly to cross a pedestrian bridge. The run is flat and leads runners through the Laguna Phuket resort and onto the award-winning Laguna Phuket Golf Course, along the Andaman Sea coastline before looping back to finish at the Laguna Beach Resort.

This year is only the second time the race is run and it's already gaining in popularity, especially among athletes in the Asia-Pacific region. What makes the race even more enticing this year is the allocation of 30 slots to the 2012 Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii.

The course, which differs from the Laguna Phuket Triathlon course, is challenging but still lends itself to fast times. The bike course includes several extremely steep hilly sections but even that didn't stop Timothy O'Donnell from finishing a hair under four hours en route to winning that race last year. His 3:59:42 finish remains the course record. Meanwhile, Caroline Steffen took the women's race with a time of 4:20:13, also the course record.

The challenge at the Asia-Pacific Championship is not just the hills, but the heat and humidity of the tropical island can also play a big role in the outcome of the race. Temperatures in December go as high as the 30s Celsius and humidity up to about 65%. And this is during the cool season where temperatures and humidity tend to be lower. So remember to take in plenty of liquids before and during the race.

Tackling this race, or any 70.3 for that matter, requires a fine balance of speed and endurance. But with the hills, heat and humidity in Phuket, finding that balance becomes a bit more difficult. Together with a few pros who raced here last year, we take a look at each leg of the race and give you tips on how you can maximize your potential at

the Ironman 70.3 Asia-Pacific Championship and maybe even score yourself one of those coveted Kona slots.

"Racing in Thailand is great experience and this race can only be highly recommended," says Aleksandar Sørensen-Markovic, 16th in the pro men's race last year. "However before you get to the race there are a few considerations you should make and also a few adjustments to your training in order to have a great race.

"In general, Thailand is a hot place and if you are not used to racing in the heat you should get there some days before the race and make sure you train in the heat in order to get used to it," he continues. "It would be good to do your taper training at the warm hours of the day - make sure you bring fluids. And also, before you leave home you can also dedicate a few sessions to get used to the heat. Ride and wear extra layers of clothes when you are training."

The swim is unique in that it takes place in two separate bodies of water, one saltwater, one freshwater.



SWIM (1.9KM)



As mentioned before, the swim takes place in two different bodies of water: one saltwater, the other freshwater. The first 1.28km takes you through the warm waters of the Andaman Sea before sprinting 100m across the beach, then diving into a tropical lagoon and swimming across it for the remaining 620m, exiting at the Laguna Beach Resort Y-Junction.

“I think, this is one of the most beautiful parts of the race, especially if you’re not a strong swimmer.” says Domenico Passuello, 4th in last year’s race. “Really clear sea and a spectacular transition from the sea to the lagoon... It’s simply genius!”

Melissa Rollison, 2nd in the women’s race last year and the current Ironman 70.3 World Champion, agrees. “The swim is absolutely beautiful,” she says. “The ocean is so clear and warm.”

The first part of the swim is on a triangular course with a beach start. The first part of the swim is quite shallow so do a few dolphin dives until it is deep enough to swim. Dolphin diving gets you through shallow water far faster and energy efficient than trying to wade through. If you don’t know how to dolphin dive, now’s a good time to get practicing.

If you’re nervous about the start, wait a while to let the chaos subside a bit and stay to the outside on the left to avoid getting involved in the melee. You may have to swim a bit further but that might be better than getting kicked, punched or swum over. If you’re feeling aggressive, start right up front and go all out for the first 100 meters or so to get some clear water.

“Go out hard!” advises Rachael Paxton, 7th in the women’s race last year. “The ocean is flat and easy to handle, however it’s a mass beach start so be prepared to get kicked, hit and pushed in the early stages if you don’t make a quick break.”

Once you’ve cleared the chaos, settle into a rhythm and try and find some feet to follow. Don’t forget to keep sighting so that you don’t stray off course. “The swim is well marked in the ocean with large buoys,” says Paxton. Use the buoys as your sight markers and concentrate on your form. Keep telling yourself that this is fun.

When you get to the turn buoys, speed up a bit because there will inevitably be crowding there. Pick up the pace a bit to avoid the crowd then settle back into your rhythm. Before you know it, your hand will be brushing the sand and it’s time to get out of the sea.

But the swim is not over yet. After about 100 meters, you jump into the lagoon to finish the swim. “Here you swim straight across to the other side,” says Rollison. “Last year I remember if you kept to the right here you could run longer as the water was shallow. I suggest checking this out the day before the race.”

“The fun bit is exiting the ocean to run over a sand bank and swim across the lake,” says Paxton, but look out for the difference in buoyancy when jumping into the lagoon. “Prepare to feel really heavy going from the buoyant salt-water to the heavy fresh-water,” warns Paxton. You can really feel it, especially after swimming in buoyant seawater for the past half an hour.

“Be prepared for the second part of the swim,” agrees last year’s champion Timothy O’Donnell. “You will feel like you are sinking coming from salt-water into freshwater but don’t worry, it is like that for everyone!”

It’s a straight swim, but it’s still possible to stray off course. Use the finishing arch as a sighting marker and you’re good. It shallows out soon enough and you’ll eventually find yourself walking through slimy mud before finding the exit mat and the end of the swim section. After a short jog to T1, you’re ready for what could be the toughest part of the race: the bike.

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BIKE (90.1KM)



The bike course at the Ironman 70.3 Asia-Pacific Championship probably has more character than any other bike course you've ever ridden. Along the way you'll come across tight corners, bumpy concrete roads, stray dogs crossing the roads just as you're passing and stray scooters roaming the streets. "There are the typical Asian roads out there - some windy rough village roads," says Paxton. "Beware of pot holes and wild dogs in these sections and the odd scooter that may not know the road is closed!"

And to add even more character, the organizers threw in a highway crossing at 16k where you have to dismount, run up the ramp to a pedestrian bridge, cross the highway, down the ramp on the other side, mount again and continue on your way. It's a bike course unlike any other.

The first part of the course is flattish to rolling. You'll want to spend this time spinning gently to get the blood circulating in the legs. It's tempting to really hammer here but don't get too carried away, the toughest part of the course is the second half of the bike leg.

"The first part is quite simple," says Passuello, "but this is where you have to find the pace, the right pace is where you feel comfortable so don't spend a lot of energy here but stay calm because the best is yet to come."

"Pacing is very important," adds Sørensen-Markovic. "You might gain a few minutes early in the bike but if your legs are toast when you get to the last part you will lose it all and fry your legs for the run."

The road surface here can be rough at places so make sure your bottles are securely mounted in the bottle cages. Having bottles launched and strewn all over the road is not uncommon here.

At 16km, you'll come across the bridge to cross the highway. It may seem strange to have such a feature on the bike course, but it has actually become a hit among the athletes who raced here last year. Some say that it actually helps give a preview of the running legs before the run. This is especially true the second time you have to cross the bridge at 65km. "Have fun with

the dismount and pedestrian bridge on the bike," says O'Donnell. "Use it as a chance to shake the legs out a bit and to break up the bike some."

"Here you quickly have to decide whether to keep your bike shoes on or slip out of them," says Rollison. "I guess this is very individual as to what you are quicker at. Last year I chose to keep my shoes on and run over the bridge in them." Paxton reckons either way won't make a difference but you should still decide early on which is best for you so that you approach the bridge prepared.

After the bridge, you'll weave through little rural villages, towns, and farms. Enjoy the scenery while you can because the climbs will be coming soon. Throughout the course, you'll have school kids lining the road cheering you on. You'll find that this really helps motivate you, especially towards the end of the ride.

"After the bridge is where the real bike race starts," says Passuello. "There are several hills with an important ascent where you have to be agile so as not risk to burning your legs."

The terrain of the first 40km allows you to stay aero throughout. There are some small hills but you should be able to get through them on the aero bars. Then you hit the first steep climb. It's short but very steep. Don't be surprised to see people dismounting their bikes and walking up the hill. You can avoid that by getting into your lowest gear early and gently spinning up the hill. You may have to get off your saddle to get some extra power into your cranks but don't over do it, there's still more climbs later.

The descents are just as brutal too. "The course is technical with sharp corners," says Rollison, "you have to slow or you will surely over shoot a turn." Some sections are controlled by yellow flags so that means there's a speed limit. In the yellow flag zones, you're not allowed to exceed 20km/h and there's no passing allowed until you get the "all-clear" green flag. Think of it as a safety car period during a motor race!

"You must see the race course before you race because there are some tricky turns and descents," adds Sørensen-Markovic.

The next 30km is made up of mostly rolling hills. You can use this to your advantage; power up the hills and use the downhills to gain momentum to assist you up the next hill. Ride this section right and you'll be able to maintain a high average speed with little effort.

"Attack the downhills, as long as it's not followed by sharp turn, and attack the flat sections when you get them," recommends Paxton. "But don't ever think that this hill has got to be the last because I'll guarantee it is not!"

At km65, you'll go over the highway pedestrian bridge again. This means you'll have approximately 6km to go before the final climbs begin. So enjoy the rollers as much as you can and start saving your legs for the assault on the hills. With all the climbing and descending, don't forget about your nutrition. "Make sure you keep your nutrition up," advises Paxton, "because during the last 10km, you hit a tonne more hills which could really wipe you out if you aren't prepared for it."

"Fuel early in the bike," says O'Donnell. "The toughest sections are on the back half of the course. The first part of the bike is fast, use it prepare nutritionally for the tougher hills later in the race."

From km71 to 78 it's mostly uphill. You climb the first hill, enjoy a short descent, then you're up the final climb. The first hill is short, so get in your low gear early and try spinning it up the hill. Alternate spinning with out of saddle efforts to share the load with other muscles as you make your way up. You will see people pushing their bikes up, try to resist the temptation if you can, you'll feel much better after the race that you rode up rather than walked up.

"The hills are VERY steep," warns Sørensen-Markovic, "and you will be smart to save your legs for the last 20 km of the course otherwise you will be walking up the hills."

After the first hill, you get a brief downhill section to help the legs recover and flush the lactic acid out. But this respite won't last long for the final hill will be upon you at about 75km. This is the big one so be prepared for it. Again, shift into your low gear and make your way up, alternating between sitting and standing. You can afford to put in a bit more effort here since it's downhill all the way to T2 so give it some gas and don't be tempted to get off and push. It will be painful and your legs would be screaming but this is an Ironman 70.3 and pain is always part of the game.

Once over the final hill, give your legs a rest and soft pedal down the hill to bleed out the lactic acid. Stretch out your lower back and your calves and get ready for the final part of the race.

The choice of bike here is a tough one. The steep hills make riding a road bike tempting, but the long flat and rolling sections calls for a tri bike. Rollison rode a road bike last year and would consider doing it again. Whatever bike you choose, just make sure you have the proper gearing, advises all the pros we talked to, something like a 27-28t low gear will do the job. Even some pros here have been seen using a 28t low gear out back.

"There are some STEEP sections in the back hills, be prepared with the right cassette," says O'Donnell. "Last year I rode an 11-28 with a 42 small chain ring in front (39 is standard). Consider an 11/25 or 11-26." If you have a compact crank, then go ahead and use that. Your legs will thank you for it. Wheel selection is easy: a disc if you have one, the deepest wheelset you have if you don't. Helmet choice may not be as easy. An aero helmet is always best but if you have a high



RUN (21.1KM)



The run course may be flat but it is by no means easy. By now, the afternoon sun would be up and your legs have just taken the brunt of a 90km ride.

"I absolutely love this run!" says Paxton. "It's two laps and has everything except for hills (which is good after the bike!). You head out on the road and the course loops back on itself in the opening few kilometers, which gives you a good look at where you sit in the field, then goes back through the golf course and through some trails, then you hit an out and back section then run back onto the road through the Laguna hotel area, then through some shady trails to finish the 1st loop and then you repeat."

"The run course is great!" agrees Rollison, "There is a little cross-country through dirt and grassy trails and then some on the road. It weaves in and around Laguna and the hotels and is very flat."

"After the mix of up and down on the bike, you have an easy run, apparently," says

Passuello, "but be aware because here will be the heat and humidity."

Start the run off easy. Your legs are going to feel a little jelly-like after that ride, so spend some time getting your legs used to running. Enjoy the sights on the first lap and don't forget to hydrate at the aid stations. "Be smart on the run," advises O'Donnell, "it is hot and humid and can get tough out there. Use the first lap of the two-lap run to find your rhythm, don't force it!"

"People usually go out really hard in this run," agrees Paxton, "but because it's flat and varied in surface don't be deceived - people usually fall to pieces just before the end of the first lap."

Grab electrolytes to drink, water to splash over your head and sponges to help cool you down. "The heat and humidity are your enemies," says Passuello, "so drink and refresh your body more than ever to keep your temperature down and you'll be able to run faster!"

"As described it can be hot," Sørensen-Markovic adds. "Make sure you have gotten your fluids on the bike and you keep drinking on the run according to how much you need. It is a good idea to keep yourself wet with water from aid stations and to have a few sponges around your neck."

One tactic that helps is breaking the run down to small manageable chunks. So keep telling yourself to just run to the next aid station. When you get there, tell yourself to run to the next, and so on and so on. Before you know it, you're done with the first lap.

At the end of the first lap, you will come close to the finish line. Don't be disheartened that you still have another lap to go. Instead, use that finish line to motivate you to get there faster.

Pick up the pace a bit on the second lap. By now, you'll have a good idea of the lay of the land and will know where you can push it and where you can take it easy. If you really want to go for it, push the pace as you're passing the Banyan Tree resort after the turnaround. "I would save you energy for the section on the gravel road as it's quite exposed and mentally tough," advises Paxton. "Make the most of the few shaded trail sections."

At that point, you'll only have less than 3km to go and the pain will only last about 15 minutes or so. Put your head down, grit your teeth and just go for it. It will be painful but if you push that pain aside, you can cross that finish line with the knowledge that you've left everything out on the race course.

And as you raise your hands across the line, you can be proud that you've completed one of the most prestigious races in the region and you did it with a little help from BeyondTransition's Racer's Guide to Ironman 70.3 Asia-Pacific Championship.

"Last and final tip," adds Sørensen-Markovic, "and this goes for the whole race course - do remember to enjoy racing in the wonderful nature of Phuket."

Celebrate your finish and listen to Tim O'Donnell: "Don't miss the awards and after-party celebration," he says, "it is one of the BEST race parties out there!"

Good luck in Phuket everyone and enjoy yourselves!



WE'D LIKE TO GIVE **SPECIAL THANKS** TO THE FOLLOWING PROS FOR TAKING THE TIME TO GIVE US THEIR TIPS ON RACING THIS RACE:

Timothy O'Donnell
Domenico Passuello
Mellisa Rollison
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More details on this race can be found at <http://www.beyondtransition.com/site/races/Race112968>

Please send any comments, good or bad, or anything you may want to add to this racer's guide to arif@beyondtransition.com

Don't forget to send us your race review of this race (or any race you've done and want to share with the world) at <http://www.beyondtransition.com/blog/race-reviews/>



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Message from the developer

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