

Reflections On Kona 2007

Contributed by Allan Besselink, PT, Dip.MDT
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I had the good fortune this year to be on hand for the 29th Ironman Hawaii World Championships in Kona this past weekend. Once again, we were given an amazing race with some amazing human performances. Every time I've been to Kona I have been reminded of how special this event really is.

I want to reflect upon a number of surprising (and perhaps not-so-surprising) observations that I made during this year's race. Let's start with the obvious ones - those that seem to occur on a fairly consistent basis from year to year ...

- There always seem to be a number of favorites that fall victim to some strange ailment at or before race time. This year, it was the dreaded "stomach virus" (Faris Al-Sultan, Cameron Brown, Michellie Jones, and Normann Stadler).

- Mechanical woes will strike at least one contender (this year's unfortunate candidate: Natascha Badmann).

- Many competitors thought to be real contenders will have a very difficult day (or perhaps even a core meltdown) on the lava fields (Desiree Ficker, Lisa Bentley, Rutger Beke, Thomas Hellriegel, and Katja Schumacher all had long days this year).

- Time and again, there always seems to be someone that flies "under the radar" (can you say "Chrissie Wellington"?) or comes up with a not-totally-unexpected-but-pleasantly-surprising performance (how about Torbjorn Sindballe, Tim DeBoom, Luc Van Lierde, Kate Major, and Joanna Lawn?).

One thing that must always be remembered about this race - "Kona giveth, and Kona taketh away" ... as it can be one of the most fickle locales for any sporting event. Madame Pele - the Island's goddess of fire - certainly has her ways!

Now on to the less obvious points.

Short course triathletes are here to stay at the Iron distance. On the men's side, Craig Alexander races his first Hawaii (and only his second IM) after years of ITU racing and finishes second. Chris McCormack has a long history of ITU racing and gave up training for the Olympics to pursue his Hawaiian dream. On the women's side, Samantha McGlone, the 70.3 world champion, races her first IM (and first Hawaii!) and finishes a strong second. Former ITU world champion Leanda Cave left her mark on her first Ironman, leading on the bike and finishing 8th. There is no doubt in my mind that ITU/short course athletes have developed the power output to handle the iron-distance.

McCormack developed the power output to race at the shorter distances. He then refined his long course game plan. I witnessed McCormack's implosion on his first go-round in Kona, a victim of his fueling and hydration. Though coaches and athletes alike speak of the many long miles accrued by Mark Allen as he was preparing for his 6 Kona wins, it is oftentimes forgotten that his foundation was in the shorter, faster events.

Much like the now-marathon-world-record holder Haile Gebrselassie, these athletes have been successful at shorter distances, and have then "moved up" in distance, taking that huge power output and attentional focus to the longer races. I bring up Gebrselassie because he's owned the world record at distances ranging from 2 miles to 5K to 10K to the marathon - his first being in the 5000 m (12:56) and his most recent, the marathon (2:04:26). In the triathlon world, add in some effective fueling and hydration strategies and you have the makings of a Hawaii champion. It was, in my eyes, just a matter of time. I suspect there are many more wins ahead for McCormack and his short course compatriots.

It would also appear that you CAN go to Hawaii and be very successful without ever having raced there before. Examples of this? The aforementioned Wellington, McGlone, Alexander and Cave.

Chrissie Wellington also displays some tremendous lessons for IM athletes. She was a virtual unknown in the sport. Last year was her first year in the sport. She had won Ironman Korea (her first Ironman) a mere 7 weeks before Kona. If you ask the experts, that "double" isn't highly likely due to the proximity of the races, time to recover from one, time to prepare for the next, etc. But someone forgot to tell Wellington. She has virtually no history in the sport and yet she obviously had the mental focus to succeed. She also doesn't have the miles in her body that many other athletes her age have acquired to this point in their triathlon careers.

Once again, I will leave you to ponder the age-old question - is success at the Iron-distance related to volume of training, power output, or an ability to fuel/hydrate effectively for the demands? I think there is some good hard "evidence" this year for the non-believers.

On another note - I've always believed that you have to become a good runner to do well in triathlon. This certainly becomes more important as the race distance increases. Swimmers winning Ironman are rare - cyclists somewhat less so. The race comes down to being a solid runner. McCormack ran 2:42 - the fastest men's marathon in about 10 years. Wellington ran the second fastest women's marathon ever - 2:59 and change - in her first attempt on the Big Island. Mark Allen's 2:40:00 marathon is still a course record - and that's a fast marathon without having the 2.4 miles of swimming and 112 miles of cycling beforehand! The rarity is the Stadlers and Hellriegels of the world.

Speaking of cyclists, I must admit it was pretty cool to see Lauren Jalabert on the course. "Jaja" can be fondly remembered for his many attacks on the Tour de France. Jalabert's time in his first IM Hawaii? 9:19:58. But check the splits ... a swim of 1:15:40, a bike of 4:45:49 (no surprise there!) and a run of ... 3:10:08! Even "Jaja" has become a runner!!! He was 12th in his age group - and if he drops 10 minutes of swim time (like the others in his AG), he's on the podium.

And let's not forget the stunning age group performances. How about the sub-10 hours to win men's 50 - 54? The 11:07 to win men's 60 - 64? Maybe a 13:11 to win women's 60 - 64? This year, you had to go 13:05 to win men's 70 to 74 and 14:55 to win men's 75 - 79!!! Those are some smoking fast times from the grandmasters!

So another year at Kona passes us like the mumuku winds on the Kohala coast. It was a great year, full of what many saw as surprises - but for me, it was a simple re-affirmation of where the sport will head with time. Athletes with mental focus, good race management strategies, and power to burn (that can run like the wind) will be the future of our sport. The sports sciences have already shown us this - perhaps Kona 2007 is the first step in the process.

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