

Background

*Five year ago I didn't know what Ironman is.
Three years ago I would have told you that doing an Ironman was crazy.
A few days ago I finished one.*

I was never into sports as a child. I studied computer science which kept me sitting and eating in front of the computer screen for most of the days.

Fast forward to the last years of University...

I moved to Dundee, Scotland where I did my Masters. During the time at Uni I studied and partied really hard. In 2007 I hopped on a scale and saw 99kg! It was the tipping point - I decided to change my life.



Scotland, 2007

In 2007 I took a job interview with IBM Poland. I remember it like yesterday. During the interview process I had a chat with Jerry who asked me what my goal was for the next year. First thing that came to my mind, and I said aloud, was "to lose 20kg". I got the job, moved to Poland, took advantage of the gym benefit and started my journey..

I have never been a "go easy" person. I decided that running must be good for losing weight. Being an engineer, I knew that for this project I would need to skill up first. I found a few books written by a Jerzy Skarzynski - Polish Marathon runner (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerzy_Skar%C5%BCy%C5%84ski). I started jogging / walking on a treadmill.

In 2007 I could not even jog for 5 minutes. The progress was fast though the bar was moving fast 5 minutes to 10 minutes then 20 minutes and 30 minutes. Bang, one day I was able to jog for an hour! That day is a milestone, It was the day I decided to finish a marathon.

In 2010 I accepted a job offer with AOL and relocated with my wife to Dublin, Ireland. At this point I was running 3 times per week for an hour. Remember my goal from 2007? To lose 20kg in a year. It took me 2 years but i did it! So now it was 2010 and I needed a new big goal for myself.

Without thinking for too long or I decided to run the Dublin Marathon...

17th of September 2011 is another big milestone. It was first time in my life when I took part in a race. It was the Dublin Half Marathon where I finished in 1:51:01.

Dublin Marathon was next and my goal / dream came true on 31st of October 2011. I successfully completed my first Marathon in 4:02:52.



Dublin Half Marathon / Dublin Marathon in 2011

The Dublin Marathon was the first of many; since then I have completed Dublin three more times and many others big marathons including Barcelona, Berlin, Edinburgh, Paris, and Vienna to name a few. I have even been to New York to run the NYC Marathon. Unfortunately the race got canceled due to the hurricane Sandy.

My current Marathon PB is 3:22:53 and Half Marathon PB is 1:31:07.

Triathlon

In 2011 I started working at GILT Groupe. It's work which has always been fun, challenging and where I have the pleasure to work with super talented, inspiring people (I'm still working for them).

I heard about triathlon from our CTO - Mike Bryzek. Remember the "Five year ago I didn't know what Ironman is"? We are in 2012 now and I had completed many running races of different distances and was getting used to it, or maybe even not challenged enough, but stepping into ultra running was never my cup of tea.

Mike is one of the super smart, inspiring people with triathlon being his hobby. Mike lives in the states; when he came to Dublin office he would bring his bike, riding, swimming or jogging either before work or during lunch time. One day I accepted his invitation for a run and he told me about Half Ironman Triathlon. I didn't know about it before - but it sounded like fun and a huge challenge - that was it! My new goal was found - I decided to finish a Half Ironman one day.

In 2012 I was not able to swim. I didn't have a road bike - all what I had was a dream - "One day I will do a Half Ironman like Mike".

GILT Groupe had a bike2work scheme, offering up to 1000 euros to buy a bike for commute. Without any knowledge related to road bikes / tt bikes, I took the voucher and went to get myself a TT bike with bike cleats. It was a beautiful Felt B16.



Brand new Felt B16, 2012

I had the bike and a dream but no idea how to take it to the next level. I looked for a triathlon club nearby and found 3D (<http://3dtri.ie>). I went to the club's open night and talked to few ppl there. It was great and I joined the club the next day.

What a surprise it was when I showed up on my first Sunday bike spin with TT bike and was told that TT bikes are not allowed for group rides. Huge thanks to Kevin Gilleece who was leading bike groups and allowed me to join them with my TT bike (I didn't have a budget to buy one more bike in 2012). Kevin became my first mentor (he probably doesn't know it) but every week when we were riding he taught me something new or pointed me in a new direction to expand my triathlon knowledge.

In 2013 I joined a gym with swimming pool and started going there after work. I was feeling comfortable in the water as we had a swimming pool in my primary school - just didn't have the technique or swimming endurance to swim. I remember my first swim in 2013 - I was not able to swim the full length of the 18 metres pool.

Learning to swim was a magical experience - starting with the same butterflies from when I started jogging. Progress was fast and I was hooked. Within 3 months I was able to swim slowly for 1500metres. It was the right time to join the triathlon swimming classes organized by my triathlon club.

I bought my first road bike in 2013 and did lots of cycling and swimming with a goal of taking part in my first triathlon race in 2014.

Mark was my club swim coach. I really had a "love and hate" relationship with him. Every time he asked me to kick harder with the board in front of me I hated him, but I loved the classes and trusted him. Mark is great and he knows his stuff. Hats off to him, he helped me get comfortable in the open water.



First Open Water Swim with Coach Mark and 3D Triathlon Club, 2013

My first triathlon was a sprint distance with a swim in the pool. Portlaoise Triathlon. It's where almost all of the 3D members lose their virginity and become triathletes. I loved it. I loved every single minute, second and bit of it. Each part was unique / fun and magical!.



First Triathlon Race, 2014

Olympic distances were next to follow with a special race in Blessington. My friend Artur Kasperski was doing it as a check before Ironman Austria. (I met Artur and his wife Sylwia a few years back in one of the running races in Ireland - Half Marathon in Kinvara).



Olympic Distance / Finishing line with Artur, 2014

You might be thinking what was so special about the Blessington Olympic Distance Triathlon in 2014. It's the race where I met the person who helped me to become an Ironman - Mariusz Olejniczak.

I am pretty sure that Mariusz would not remember that we meet on 16th of June 2014. He was chatting with Artur and Sylwia. Mariusz was giving some Ironman advice to the first timer - Artur. Both Artur and Mariusz raced in Ironman Austria. Artur did an amazing time for a first timer and Mariusz won the age group with a sub 9h Ironman race!!! qualifying for the Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii.

In 2014 I was working, training and having lots of fun racing Olympic distances with the goal of doing my first Half Ironman in 2015. When Ironman announced the Dublin Half Ironman in 2015, I signed up for the race as soon as they started taking entries.

For the Ironman 70.3 Dublin I did not follow any specific training, didn't have a coach - mainly swimming in my free time, cycling with 3D club and running a bit before work.

It was also around the time when Mike committed to full Ironman and he did an amazing time in Ironman Nice in 2015. I have talked to Mike a few times during his Ironman journey and found it very inspiring, challenging and fun.

I don't really remember when I decided that one day I will do a full Ironman. Maybe it was Mike who inspired me or maybe it was one of the moment that you browse youtube and end up on video like this <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjxxYoL7nSU> asking yourself how did I end up here now?" - for sure the 'Ironman - Anything is Possible' is something that is in my memory. I remember seeing the video first time. I watched it like 10 times in a loop and don't know why but almost cried. It was magical. I knew I wanted to become one - I'm sure my wife didn't know this yet. Becoming an Ironman had just become my new next goal... new target... new dream. (One thing I know for sure. I had a dream to become an Ironman before I had even finished my first Half in Dublin).

Ironman 70.3 Dublin was tough, the run was extremely painful but it was worth it!. Loved it as much as my first Sprint. This was also time when I heard about Mariusz again. He won the Age Group.



Final preparation with Artur, before the Ironman 70.3 Dublin / Race medal, 2015

Finally, I decided to share my dreams with wife - that one day I wanted to take part in the full Ironman race. I knew it wouldn't happen next year as I was not ready for it, not to mention we were having our first child

I decided to train smart in 2016 with another A race being Half Ironman and thinking more and more about the Full Ironman for 2017.

In early 2016 my wife and I spent the holidays with friends by the Baltic Sea when Ironman announced the 70.3 in Gdynia. I had to sign up.

One day we were driving back to Dublin from Dun Laoghaire, where I did my open water swim in 40 foot and my wife enjoyed the Dun Laoghaire Sunday Market with our son.

It was my wife who suggested that If I really wanted to do a full Ironman I should get a coach or someone who will help me as she was very worried about me. My wife is a smart person..

Mariusz was the first coach who came to my mind. I sent him an email in the evening and he agreed to help me. Mariusz started coaching me for the Half Ironman Gdynia.

We worked for nine weeks together. Mariusz looked on my garmin history and sent me an 'introduction week'. It was all new to me - tempo, intervals, swimming sets, turbo rides. As he was sending me weekly plans I was reading up on the proper triathlon training in books / internet and I was able to connect many dots why we are doing what we are doing.

With my first Half Ironman time being just under 6 hours - 5:57:57 to be precise. I had a dream to be sub 5:30 in Gdynia. I crushed the race with 5:11:35. I did not believe the results when I finished. I felt so strong and enjoyed the full race - even the run was fun and pleasurable.



Ironman 70.3 Gdynia, 2016

The second I finished Gdynia I knew I had made the right choice and Mariusz would make my dreams come true.

I also worked with Mariusz in 2016 training for yet another Dublin City Marathon, where I achieved my current PB.

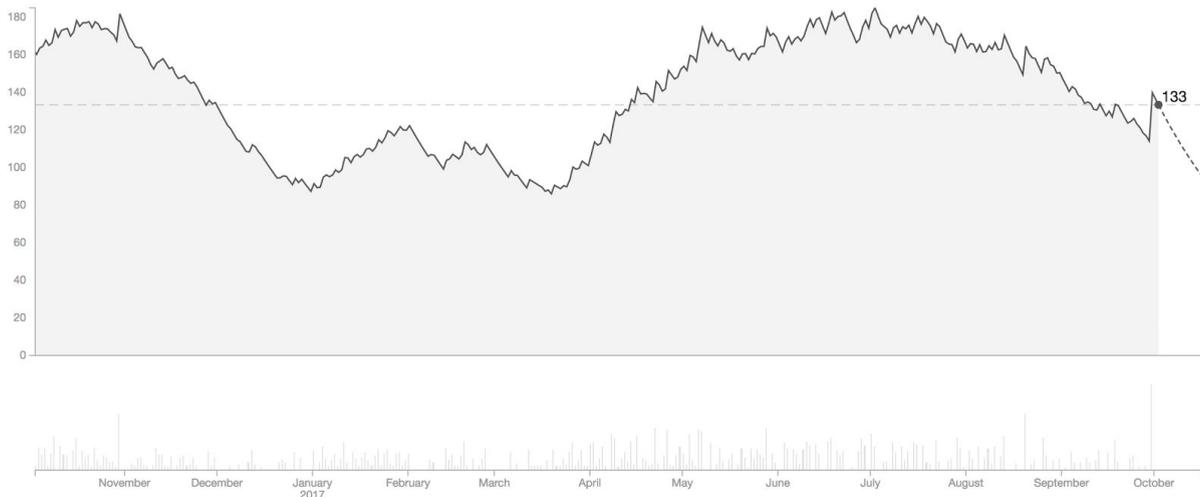
Ironman

*To accomplish something extraordinary
one must have an extraordinary dream.
A goal so high, a journey so demanding,
that its achievement to most seems impossible.*

We are now at the end of 2016 when I'm thinking where would be the best place to have family holidays and Ironman race. The choice is down to Ironman Mallorca and Ironman Barcelona. The decision became super simple as Ironman Mallorca was cancelled. I registered for Ironman Barcelona on 9th of October 2016.

In my opinion the true Ironman journey starts when you enter the race. I took the off season easy with a plan to start training for the Ironman on 1st of January 2017 which would give Mariusz 39 weeks to make me Ironman ready- Mariusz was on board with the plan and happy to help.

I had no idea how hard and challenging the journey would be. We started working in January and everything was going perfectly for first 4 weeks. The progress was just amazing. Let me show you a screenshot of my strava fitness level and comment on it.



As you can see above, January was awesome. But then in February, my father got a stroke, was paralysed and after a few weeks in critical condition he passed away. I was fortunate to spend lots of time in those final days with my father.

I only was able to resume solid training in the middle of March.

My heart was there, ready to training 15+ hours per week. Mariusz was smart and tuning my workouts from week to week according to what I was able to do.

First Ironman advice!

Make sure to answer honestly the following question for yourself: “what is the time that you can commit to training”. We are not talking about time that you want to train but real time that you can spend on training.

Keep in mind that 10 hours of training can quickly add to 15+ hours of your life time. It's 10 hours in garmin or strava, but nobody adds the time to get into the training (gym or swimming pool), warmup, stretch, foam roll, drive to open water etc...

During the 39 weeks of training I I was able to train between 8 - 16 hours of pure garmin training data with many days swimming in the morning before work and cycling or running after work.

Be realistic. If you have, like myself, a full time job, wife, small baby and another baby on the way, training for Ironman is not easy and you won't be able to execute 100 percent of the plan that you are following or have set up for yourself.

In my case the head always wanted to train. I would often swim in the morning, then wanted to hop on turbo after work... but due to work and life commitments, quite often I could only start my training around 9 or 10pm which resulted in being in bed after midnight with my eyes wide open for another hour.

Second Ironman advice!

Make the recovery session a priority!. You are training 10+ hours per week but somehow you are too lazy to stretch and foam roll. During the many weeks of training you will do enough of swimming / cycling / running to be ready for the event. It's always the S+C, stretch and foam roll that takes a hit. They are super important if not the most important.

In my case I paid for it with knee injury. As the physio said it was not bad. It's what they call a 'warning injury' - I had to take it easy for 3 weeks and did not fully recover for 4 to 5 weeks. At this point, I'm not sure if it was harder to recover physically or mentally. Any injury / illness during the Ironman training will play with your mind. Stay strong and talk to your coach!.

Third Ironman advice!

Ironman is an eating and drinking competition - or as my coach says 'eating and drinking is the fourth Ironman discipline' - practise, practise and one more time practice!.

Did you hear about people who bonked, who got sick, who had stomach problems? Don't be like them - practise eating on the bike - eat a lot during the bike sessions.

Do not expect to race and eat every 20 minutes with a high HR if you don't eat every 20 minutes during your training sessions. It's one of the things that Mariusz would write every single week with red bold big font.

Buildup before race

We came to Calella on Thursday morning. Because we were traveling with my two years old baby and pregnant wife it was impossible to take the bike with us. I decided to use "ship my bike" and had one less thing to worry about. In addition, we booked a private car transport from Barcelona Airport to The President Hotel, Calella - we used atlastransfer.

We arrived in the hotel at noon. I had a quick lunch in the hotel and went to registration, got my bip, wrist band, bought a branded Ironman t-shirt and teddy bear for my son. Next, I picked up the bike from ship my bike and went for a test ride. Everything was smooth. I did 40 minutes on this test ride and noticed that the surface was really good. Originally I was planning to ride 120PSI, but decided to bump it to 130PSI for the race. I also noticed that it was very hot and drinking enough on the bike had to be a top priority.

On Thursday I was in bed at 7pm trying to get some sleep - as I knew this was last day that I could get a few solid hours of sleep. I slept well.

Friday was all about eating. Started with breakfast - very simple 4 slices of white bread with butter and big layer of strawberry jam. Lunch was made in the hotel room - porridge with half a jar of blueberries jam.

After lunch I went to check in my bike and to hang the red and blue transition bag.

In my blue bike transition bag I left my bike helmet, five gels with caffeine and eight iso gels, race belt with bip number on it and bike glasses.

In my red run transition bag I had my running hat, running shoes with quick laces, and running socks left in the left shoes and right in the right shoes. I've also put a small vaseline container there and extra running belt with pouch where I had put four salt sticks and an extra 2 iso gels.

Dinner was massive. I had spaghetti with tomato sauce (huge bowl) followed by pizza margherita. Yes you are reading it right I basically had two dinners for myself at the same time.

I finished eating at 6pm - which was according to the plan as I booked breakfast for 5.30am on the race day.

Also before going to bed I had put everything into the backpack what I was going to wear and need on the race day including 50+ sun cream, vaseline, iso water, tri shorts, aero short sleeve bike jersey, bike shoes, simple bike computer, and shoes to get into the transition zone.

30th September 2017, Race Day

On Friday night I set the alarm clock for 5:20am, I also set the alarm clock on my garmin fenix, and to follow better safe than sorry, I had asked my wife Ewa to set her alarm clock for 5:25am as a backup. I went to bed around 9pm and got a few hours of broken sleep. I was waking up almost every hour looking at the clock. Finally when I looked again and it was 5am I decided to get up.

I brushed my teeth had a quick shower and went down to the canteen for breakfast where I had two coffees and five slices of white bread with butter and thick layer of strawberry jam.

I was back in the room 5:50am. I put on my tri shorts and big layer of vaseline to be comfortable on the bike. Next were the calf guards, then I applied vaseline on my chest - on every single spot that gave me a bit of chaffing during long training sessions or previous races. I put the jersey on and then covered rest of the body with 50+ sun cream. Timing chip, swimming goggles and swim cap were in the backpack.

I also prepared three bottles of 2:1 high five iso that I took with me and put on the bike, aero food bag with 5 unwrapped cut in half Cliff's bars, and 7 salt sticks.

I left the hotel at 6:20 am and walked to T1. I was next to my bike at 6.50am. First thing in T1 was to use portaloos - I'm sure you know it... but just in case, carry some toilet paper with you when getting ready for any race.

Next was bike final setup. I was riding on 25mm Continental Competition Tubular Tyres glued on Zipp 808 front and Zipp 808 + aero jacket on rear. I pumped both tyres to 130PSI, attached 3 bottles of 2:1 high five iso water on my bike and clipped on and secured my cycling shoes with a rubber band. I also put some extra lube on the chain. My bike was ready at 7.30am which gave me plenty of time to put on the wetsuit and drop the white street bag with my backpack in it.

I drank 750 ml of iso between leaving hotel and putting on the wetsuit. I was standing on the beach at 7:50 am looking at the rising sun - listening to the DJ who was mixing pretty cool pumping songs.

Before the race I had three goals.

First and the most important - finish the race healthy and have fun.

Second the one that you tell all your friends around - be under 12 hours.

Third - the one that you have for yourself and your coach - sub 11:30.

It was a rolling start and my strategy was to finish the swim between 1:15 - 1:20.

I positioned myself at the end of the 1:10 wave. The pro men started at 8:10, pro women at 8:15 and AG started rolling at 8:20 - a few minutes later I was in the water.

It was awesome. Water was 21 degrees, crystal clear. I spotted only a few jellyfish but they were all at least 2 meters below me. From the first stroke to the last one I took it very easy. The plan was to save the energy. Each stroke was slow but well executed technically with good push and pull. I was saving the legs and not kicking hard - I tried to focus on the current that was pushing people into the sea to make sure I was not one of them and that I'm swimming to the next buoy without putting in anything extra. I swam the whole distance on my own as I couldn't find any good swimmer to draft off. I was not looking at the watch during the swim and didn't have a clue what was my time / progress. I got out of water hit the lap button and saw 1:14:37 - a great time for me and a new PB for the distance.

Coming out of the water I was very strong. Literally not tired at all like I could have been just starting the race again. I believe this was my training.

During my 39 weeks of training I logged 236km of swimming. On average my swimming session was between 3200 - 4500m with my longest swim of 6000m where I made a stupid mistake and added an extra 2500m by mistake. Well I did the 6000m swim and thought it was ok - but was wondering for the rest of the day why Mariusz would ask me to swim 6km.

Very Fast T1, being well lubed and covered in vaseline definitely helped to take off the wetsuit fast. I took isogel in the tent, put the helmet on, polarized goggles, belt with bip and started the bike after 5:04 minutes in T1.

There were a couple of priorities for the bike. First and most important was the eating and drinking. I made a huge effort to stay focused and to eat every 20 minutes (gel, half of the Cliff's bar, gel etc.. with caffeine gel following 2 iso gels) I also took 3 salt sticks on the bike and drank lots of iso on average 2+ bottles per hour.

The nutrition was very well tested during the trainings and I was very comfortable eating and drinking a lot on the bike. Not a single burp, no stomach problems... all went according to the plan.

I knew well in advance that barcelona was quite flat - so I got into this aero theory and how to make yourself faster for 'free'.

I watched hundreds of youtube video but being an engineer I found hambini videos the most interesting - pure science no marketing bs (<https://www.youtube.com/user/nrgizerbunny>) make sure to watch his explained aero bike wheels (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUih_emc54M), as well as how to get more aero (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YUo1ryCFm8>) and explained aero road bikes (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgxFRNJ_HGs)

Riding in aggressive aero position is neither easy nor comfortable. It's not something what you can achieve in a few weeks, in my opinion.

It's something that I had spent months training for. I have built up gradually, started with proper bike fitting where I told them that I want to have very aggressive aero position.

Next I rolled towel on aero bars when doing turbo session at home... (to not be in such an uncomfortable, aggressive aero position). Reducing layers over time and then extending time from 1minute to 5 then 10, 20, 30, 60 minutes.

Be aware that you head causes the most drag. If you can stay in the aero position and keep the head in 'turtle' position you can make a lot of extra saving (<http://www.joefrielsblog.com/2010/12/head-up-vs-head-down.html>). There is really no need to look far in front of you all the time - just keep the head down and keep eating :)

There are a few other extra tricks that I have done to get myself more aero. For example I picked up the Infinity Aero Kask helmet (decided to buy a used one as brand new is too expensive). I upgraded the chain before the race (I will never understand a triathlete who rides a few thousand euros bike and his chain is not lubed, making a squeaking noise).

I got the aero jacket for my rear Zipp 808 (<http://www.wheelbuilder.com/aerodisc.html>) which has a similar aero advantage to a full disk wheel but costs a fraction. I got aero food pouch

on aliexpress. I also got a chinese replica of the super fancy Pro Team Aero Jersey from Rapha.

With all of this investment and research I was committed to riding the bike hard - very hard and so I did with bike split of 5:10:08 or average of 35 km/h.

Quick run to the changing tent where I put on my running hat, socks and running shoes. I did use the extra vaseline and put a thick layer of it into my tri short. You can guess where.

The whole T2 took me less than four minutes 3:56 to be precise. I was very surprised that my legs were not destroyed after pushing the bike hard. First few kilometers went fast and I felt great and was actually holding back to stay around 5:00 min/km pace.

Despite drinking a lot on the bike I was a bit worried that I had not peed yet - decided to force myself and drink a lot on each aid station. The aid stations were located approximately every 2.5 - 3km. On each of them I took a cup of iso, small bottle of water and a flat coke. First I would drink the 100-200 ml of iso, then another 100-200 ml of coke followed by a few sips of water, rest of the water would go on my head, chest, sometimes back sometimes legs.

First 20km were great. I started dropping pace after the 22km mark. Running between 5:20-5:40 min/km. I kept that for another 10km and then had to slow down again. It was around km 33 that my pace dropped to 5:40 - 6:10 with walks through the aid stations.

Last 5 km were very tough. My legs were just super heavy and tired - on the run I took 2 salt sticks and had the feeling that I'm so close to start cramping. One of the reason why I slowed down was to follow "better safe than sorry". My thinking was go easier and finish happy than push a bit harder and cramp very badly.

When I saw 40km mark I was happy - I knew I was going to finish and become an Ironman in a few minutes time. There is nothing that would stop me now. My body was exhausted but the mind was happy and I was smiling.

Next I spotted my shouting wife with my uncle. A few more steps and I was on the red carpet.

What a magical feeling it is. I slowed down to enjoy this moment for as long as I could. I gave high five to a person who was saying "Lukasz. You. Are. An. Ironman." and I crossed the finishing line after 10:31:55 with tears in my eyes.



T2 / Finishing Line, Ironman Barcelona 2017

Huge thanks to my wife who was supporting me all the time, taking care of our baby when I was getting up at 5:30am and disappearing before anyone would wake up at home. For Ironman training you need a partner that would support you. Hopefully one day our son Adam who was here with us will read this :)

Obviously, huge thanks and hats off to my coach - Mariusz Olejniczak. It's been a fantastic journey that we went through together from Ironman 70.3 Gdynia to Ironman Barcelona. In both races I crushed my dream time by more than half an hour! - You're the best Mario! (<https://www.facebook.com/PtMariusz/>, <http://no1fitnesskilcullen.com/pt-mariusz-triathlon/>). Thanks you.

Artur Kasperski - for inspiration, training / racing together, sharing knowledge and experience - long phone calls and keeping me motivated when life & training commitment became very challenging mentally and physically.

Friends and colleagues from work. Mike Bryzek - for telling me what Ironman is, for inspiring by committing and doing one. Karl Gohery - for sharing his experience from doing an Ironman race, talking about training, racing and everything related to what's called 'bike porn'.

3D Tri Club. For awesome off seasons bike rides, swimming lessons and many inspiring stories from Ironman races.

For anyone thinking of signing up for one. Just do it!. It's a huge commitment but the feeling when crossing the finishing line is totally worth it.

Remember the Ironman journey starts when you register for the race. It's great to share the journey with a good coach. I was happy to have one. I strongly recommend getting a mentor / coach for your Ironman journey.

Anything Is Possible,
Lukasz. An. Ironman.