

Ironman 70.3 Lanzarote 2015 – Alex Edmans

I arrive in Lanzarote late on Thursday night and sleep for a blissful 9.5 hours. Then there's no time to waste. My background is distance running, where you just show up an hour before the race and run. But with triathlon, there's a ton of prep. I don't actually own a road bike (and never rode one until my athletics club, The Transformers', training camp in Lanzarote last year), so trained in London on a friend's bike. For the race I rent one from Club La Santa, an exceptional sports facility which hosts the Ironman 70.3. Their mechanics attach my aerobars, aero drink system, Shimano bike clips, and various bags to hold food and supplies. All of this was new to me until 2 months ago – with running you just run, but with triathlon there's so much gear involved.

I do a quick practice ride and everything feels fine, and then go for a practice swim in the lagoon. Swimming is by far my weakest sport, and a big reason for entering a triathlon was to force me to improve. The Transformers coaching sessions have improved my technique in the pool, but open water swimming is a whole new challenge altogether. I've been training in the Hyde Park Serpentine, which is pretty grim – dirty river water, with a fair amount of algae. My two Olympic triathlons (which I'd done in preparation for this) were similar. But, the La Santa lagoon is saltwater, clear enough that you could see the bottom, and the sunshine and sand surrounding it made the swim pretty pleasant. I have no trouble following the buoys (unlike during my first Olympic in London, where I went totally off course). Here's a picture – the yellow buoys mark the various turning points along the course, and the red buoys guide your way between the yellow buoys.



I then prepare my blue bag for the swim-to-bike transition (T1). In goes my bike shoes, which I douse in talcum powder (since my feet will be wet after the swim), my tri-belt to which I attach my race number, sunglasses, sun visor, bike gloves, compression socks, sunscreen, and towel (to dry myself after the swim). In my red bag, for the bike-to-run transition (T2), I throw my running shoes and more sunscreen. I then rack your bike and cover it with a plastic bag in case it rains overnight. Here's mine pre-coverage; my race number is 250.



You then hook your transition bags – here's the one for the bike-to-run.



20 Transformers are doing the half-ironman and we meet up at the pre-race meeting. There, we're told the rules, including the offenses that will lead you to being thrown in the Penalty Box

for 5 minutes between the bike and run. I laugh, being used to this in ice hockey, but that was for slashing an opponent with a stick rather than non-violent offenses such as drafting in the bike portion. But, of greatest concern is that they say the water is so hot that, if nothing changes overnight, we won't be allowed to wear wetsuits for the swim. For most of us, swimming is the biggest challenge and the wetsuit makes you much more buoyant, particularly important for surviving the inevitable kicking by other swimmers.



After a pre-race carb-loading dinner, most of us head to bed although a few hardy souls stay up to watch England in the Rugby World Cup. I try to go to sleep at 9:30pm, but have huge trouble sleeping. I've felt a mixture of nerves and excitement in the days leading up to the race but am pretty calm now, partly because of the good sleep last night plus today's swim, and bike – and am lucky to draw on past experiences. Although triathlon is new, I'm a battle-weary warhorse at mentally preparing for an endurance race (or band gig, or talk). Tomorrow will be a different arena, but it's the same game. Even the wetsuit news doesn't shake me as much as I might have feared. But, I just don't feel tired after last night, and also ate a huge plate of fruit at dinner to carb-load which may have given me a sugar high. I finally get to sleep around midnight and wake at 4:45am. Despite little sleep, I feel pretty good, and head to breakfast for another huge plate of fruit, some bread, and egg whites. I've been taking electrolyte tablets regularly since yesterday. The triathlete community is amazing and a couple of friends (former Wharton students) who've done full Ironmans have been sharing tips with me, this being one.

I then fill my CamelBak and aero drink system (a bottle that you put between your bike handlebars, which has a large straw coming out of it so you can drink when biking) with water and glycogen/electrolyte powder, and put the first in my swim-to-bike bag and the second on my bike. Then, on the loudspeaker, they announce the unexpected news that wetsuits are allowed (except for the professionals – their cutoff water temperature is 21C rather than 25C for us) which is a huge relief. We warm up in the lagoon. My goggles are on tight, and my muscles are loose – I'm ready to go!

The race course curves to the right. Since I'm a weaker swimmer, I start on the left, and in the middle of the pack rather than at the front. The professionals go at 8am. Three minutes later the gun goes off to signal the start of 70.3 miles, and anywhere from 5-9 hours for us amateurs.

The start of the 1.9km swim is carnage. You have people swimming on top of you and kicking you; a breaststroke kick is particularly painful as it goes to the side, unlike front crawl which goes up and down. For my two Olympic triathlons, the first minute or so is mayhem but then it settles down as the faster swimmers have taken off. But, this triathlon is much bigger (600 people) and it stays mayhem almost throughout. Soon after the start, I get kicked hard in the goggles which cause them to shift, but not enough to cause them to leak. I'm sure I'll have to stop and readjust at some point, but thankfully it ends up self-correcting. Visibility is much worse than yesterday, with the water now opaque (perhaps because there's no sun yet), and the horde of swimmers blocks my view of the buoys. But, it has some advantages – I can follow the other swimmers rather than the buoys, and also heed my Ironman former student's advice to "draft" behind them (legal in swimming although not in biking). Despite all the carnage and being kicked multiple times, I remain surprisingly calm throughout – the experience of the mayhem in the two Olympics was invaluable here.

I get to the first turning point (yellow buoy) far quicker than I think. This really buoys me (pun unintended) – it shows that I've stuck to the course, and am probably going faster than expected. I actually really enjoy the rest of the swim – typically I see the swim as something I just have to get through. I'm now passing people, compared to being almost universally passed down the back stretch. With about 250m left, the end is in sight and I step it up a gear (which I haven't done in my Olympics), pushing the water harder with my arms. I feel like gliding through the water, a similar feeling to the best rowing races I've done. I exit in 43 minutes compared to my expectation of 45-50.

T1 in Lanzarote is unusually long. There's a long run up the beach and through Club La Santa past the bike racks. Running is my strong point and I pass team-mate Amy just before transition. Transitions have a huge effect on your time and I managed to cut my T1 between London and Reading by 5 minutes just by being sharper. I try to get through everything as quickly as possible – and with two Olympics behind me I'm on auto-pilot. I chuck the contents of my blue bag onto the floor and put on my compression socks which takes ages, but will be worth it for a 90km bike and 21km run. The bike shoes go on my feet, CamelBak round my back, sunscreen and sunglasses on my face, and visor on my head. I run to my bike, put on my helmet, then run with the bike past the "mounting" point, after which you're allowed to mount. During the start of the ride I put my gloves on, but it's really fiddly. The pros recommend doing as much as possible on the bike rather than in transition – but I have to bike so slowly to put my gloves on that, if I ever do this again, I'll just take the extra time in transition to do so. Luckily I get them on before the downhill part a few hundred meters in, so I can hit it at full pelt. I pass Amy who must have overtaken me in transition while I was putting on my compression socks!

I'd had a target time in mind before today's race. Based on my Olympics, I should do 5:30 in a normal course (45-50 swim, 2:45 hour bike, 1:45 run, plus transitions). But, Lanzarote is arguably the world's toughest Ironman 70.3 due to 1,200 meters of climb during the bike portion, including the notorious Tabayesco mountain, 550 meters of climb over 10 km of switchbacks.

That should add half an hour onto the bike, and the run hills should add an extra 5-10 minutes. Also, today the weather's forecast to be especially windy, at 12 km/h compared to 4 km/h two days ago so realistically I'm looking at 6:30 – but secretly I'm hoping somehow I'll get below 6. With distance running, you can have a pretty accurate target time in mind, but with triathlons it's so dependent on the course and weather. After the far-too-short downhill part, I'm now climbing a hill into a large headwind at 15 km/h, rather than my normal 30-35 km/h, and think that 6 is out of the question.

Since absolute target times are pointless, it's more useful to target your relative position. In the two Olympics so far, I typically pass people biking on flats, but get passed downhill (due to being light, and not having great bike handling skills since I'm relatively new to road biking) and uphill (again due to being new to road biking – this requires muscles not developed in other sports, whereas flats are more stamina which is transferable). I might get passed by 2 people for every 3 people I pass. But, surprisingly, I'm passing people even on the hills, and don't remember being passed by anyone permanently for the first 55km of the ride. I'm surprisingly encouraged by this and start enjoying the ride even though my target time is very unlikely.

On the bike, nutrition is key. You're on it for 3+ hours, and you have access to food stored on it unlike in the swim or run. I eat an energy bar and take an electrolyte tablet; a Wharton Ironman gave me a genius tip to keep them in a tic-tac box. All of this takes a fair bit of dexterity to rip open the bar, or get the tablet out of the box, while biking – in London I dropped my food while doing so. I sip constantly on my aero drink system. This is perhaps the best triathlon investment I've ever made, as it's so much easier to sip on the straw than to reach down for your bottle, drink (using up a hand) and put it back in the bottle holder (which risks you missing and dropping it).

I try to get on my aero bars as often as I can. These are handlebars that you attach to the front of your bike, which you rest your forearms on to allow you to get into an aerodynamic position with a flat back. But, my visor blocks my visibility and I can only see a few meters in front of me, requiring me to look up often to avoid crashing. This was the case during my two Olympics but it was so sunny the trade-off was worth it. Now it's still cloudy, so I take it off and try to attach it to my bike (I'll need it later for the run given the forecast) but mishandle it and it drops and is gone forever.

With my new-found vision, I see a slim figure in the distance pelting it up a hill, overtaking tons of people. I think this must be Lyn, my former MBA student and running partner at Wharton, who got me back into running competitions in 2010 after a 7-year break. We're of very similar ability in all three sports so she will be a good benchmark. On the flat parts I start to catch up the figure, but then another hill comes and it pulls away. Finally, on a flat stretch, I pass the figure and it's indeed Lyn. I'm hitting my normal 30-35 km/h on the flats, but know there are many more hills to come.

Lyn passes me on the next hill and we pass each other back and forth for the next few minutes, depending on whether we have a flat or hill. It's nice to chat and keep each other company. Then on a huge hill, I see Lyn stopped at the top asking a volunteer bike mechanic for an Allen key (= hex key for Americans); I hope the problem isn't too serious.

In a rare downhill patch I exceed 50 km/h, the fastest I've ever biked (I previously hit 45 in London). There are amazing views, with the coast to your left and the mountains to the right. A half-ironman puts you through tremendous physical pain, and you take months to train for it. So why do it? It's not for the medal, it's not to check it off a bucket list, it's not even for the target time – that's only the second most important aspect. The most important is to enjoy the experience. The length, breadth, height, and depth of doing a triathlon – or any endurance event – is to soak in the scenery, crowd, atmosphere, and camaraderie with other competitors. I keep reminding myself that I *chose* to do this, and to enjoy every aspect of the bike just like I did with the swim.

Shortly after, I pass someone with a Serpentine T-shirt. This was the running/triathlon club I was part of for a year before joining Transformers and shout “Good job Serpie”; she kindly replies “Thank you, good job yourself”. And then it's more hills.

I hit the first refreshment area. The first station is water, which I grab (slowing down my bike but not stopping), the second is Coca-Cola. This is the first time I've seen Coke at a race; normally it's a sports drink. There are several kids offering Coke – almost begging you to take it from them. I choose one at random and he's elated and jumping up and down. It's incredible how so many people volunteer to help at these races, even though they get nothing tangible in return. I ensure I thank everyone I take something from. I refill the aero drink with the water and am back on my aero bars again. In addition to the volunteers, I have equal respect and gratitude for the supporters. There are locals who stand outside to cheer people they've never met before and will never see again, but it gives me a big lift and brings a smile to my face. I thank them in Spanish (which I speak a little) and am able to joke a little with them as well.

At 45 km starts the infamous Tabayesco climb, and my speed drops to the low teens, sometimes crossing below 10. No part of the hill is exceptionally steep, but it's just relentless. It also switches back and zig-zags which, which not only makes it harder as it challenges your bike handling skills, but also is psychologically draining as you think you've got to the top before it switches back again and you realize you have even further to go. But, the views are incredible and the slow speed allows me to enjoy them that little bit more.

If I'm to have any chance of hitting 6, I need to complete the bike in 3:15. I passed 45 km at 1:35, so hoped to do the 10km climb in 40 minutes. But, I'm struggling to make the required 15 km/h, even though I'm still passing people and haven't yet been passed by anyone yet (except by Lyn in our back-and-forth). I finally, finally get to the top at 2:25 after a 50-minute climb. If I can do the remaining 35km at 45 km/h, I'll be fine. Given the steep climb, and that it's supposed to be all downhill from here, this is doable given I hit 50 km/h before.

The initial descent is glorious. I manage to top 60 km/h and it's incredibly exhilarating to speed down the mountain with no effort, particularly after nearly an hour on the hill, and feel the cooling wind on your face. I get passed by the only time during the bike ride, by some bikers with aero lids. These are aerodynamic helmets which cost £200 but make you go about 1 minute faster per hour. I didn't get one due to the cost, and also would feel embarrassed being a novice biker wearing such equipment (a fellow Transformer – who has one because he's a superb biker

– says they're often referred to as a "twat hats"). I'm much more confident going downhill than I was a few months ago. There are a few sharp bends and I lightly tap the brakes – perhaps I don't need to, but last year someone died when crashing downhill during this race.

I hit 60km at 2:30 after an extremely fast 5k, and I now realize I only need to do 40 km/h for the final 30km to get in at 3:15. But, just as I get my hopes up, they're immediately dashed. The next stretch is still downhill, but less so – and there's a huge headwind blowing at me. I'm struggling to break 25 km/h – slower than I would be during a flat, due to the headwind. I'm having to pedal hard downhill, rather than freewheeling. And then I start feeling cramp in my left quad. It's only slight, but I have to be careful not to aggravate it. I've been good with taking electrolyte tablets regularly but missed the last one because it's impossible to take one when doing downhill fast. I take another one in the next flat, and stretch it out by riding off my seat. I think it was caused by the downhill stretch – when freewheeling, I have my right leg at full extension and my left leg bent. I make sure that, in all future freewheeling, I switch it up so my right or left leg alternately are at full extension.

But the wind doesn't let up. And – contrary to the claim that it's all downhill after Tabayesco peak, there's a fair bit of uphill which – coupled with the wind – takes me below 20 km/h. There are a few junctions where the marshals aren't paying attention so don't signal which way to go, and a downhill stretch in La Santa village has speed bumps preventing me from hitting top speed. So, even though I'm still passing people and don't get passed, those final 30km are much slower than expected and I come in at 3:27. But, I nevertheless enjoy every moment.

Just before entering T2 Agnes, the partner of David (Transformers Head Coach) cheers me on and says David is just in front of me. Indeed, David and I grab our red bike-to-run bags at exactly the same time (his race number is 249, so right next to me) which gives me a lift as I'd expected to be half an hour behind him. I have lock laces so only need to pull up on a string, rather than tying laces, which helps me make a quick transition. After a splash of sunscreen I'm out in two minutes, and start the run.

The half-marathon run course is 3 loops of 7 km. Each loop starts in the La Santa running track, and you're given a red wristband at the start of the first lap, then a blue one, and finally a yellow. Starting in the running track is awesome as there are tons of supporters, and the atmosphere is tremendous. 80 Transformers will arrive on Monday and, together with the 20 recovering half-ironmen, will have a week's training camp. But, a few have kindly come a couple of days early to cheer us on. I'm lifted up by cheers from Anisha and Angie, and also fellow finance professor Emiliano, who was supposed to be racing today but has an injury.

The run is my strongest discipline. But, a Wharton ironman advised me to start out slowly and ensure I don't get too excited at hitting the run. The first time I ran after biking, my legs were like jelly, but after a few months of brick (bike-then-run) training, it isn't so bad - but still the advice to start slowly is spot-on. David overtakes me shortly into the run – his half-marathon PB is 1:19 compared to my 1:31, so there's no way I will catch him.

I'll need to run a 1:42 half marathon to come in under 6, which is very tough after 90km of biking, particularly the hilly course and that the sun is beating down on us now (my HM times

are around 1:35 now). The change in temperature, after biking in the wind to running in the sun, hits me. My left knee starts cramping again. It's all mental now. With swimming and biking, there's a lot of technique, but the run is just about gutting it out and pushing your body forward even though it wants you to stop. But, this is what I'm used to. The battle is on my turf now. Except for David, and a couple of athletes with additional wristbands (so they're on higher laps than me), I'm passing everyone. I'm going for the 1:42. The splits on my Garmin show that I'm close, but just off.

There are four aid stations on the course and I try to take as much as possible from them. They say nutrition is the fifth discipline in a triathlon (transitions being the fourth). They give out Coke, water, sponges, energy gels, and fruit. After the race I realized I'd consumed the equivalent of 15 energy gels during the bike and run – compared to the 3-4 I had during my marathon. It's enough sugar to turn a classroom of kids into a nightmare, but nothing's worse than running out of fuel and hitting a wall. The fruit volunteers have an orange wedge in one hand and half a banana in the other. At one station, the volunteer only has an orange wedge, so I shout frantically “banana, banana!” (it's a good source of potassium), which the other volunteers mimic (in a well-meaning way) as if I was a talking monkey crying out for a feed. I pour cups of water and squeeze sponges over my head, and later notice athletes putting sponges between their shoulders and tri-suit straps, and copy them.

My knee is holding up. It's mildly painful, but I can handle that, and never gets severe. But, I feel a burning in my right foot, as if my shoe is melting in the sun. If I stop to take a look at it, I might not be able to get going again – and in any case even if it were melting, there'd be nothing I could do about it anyway. So I keep pushing through. At the next water station, I grab a cup and try to pour it on my foot. Bullseye! My first attempt makes a direct hit, and cools it down – but it gets hot again. I try again at future water stations, but don't repeat my beginner's luck – since your foot is moving all the time, aiming it is tricky. But, I get enough droplets on it to eventually cool it permanently.

The run is incredible. The bike is a single loop, so you only see the other athletes you pass. Here, since there are three laps, and each lap is a there-and-back, you see tons of other athletes. It's also through La Santa village, and so the crowd is cheering you at every step. On my way up I run past Andrew, who's on the back stretch of his first loop, and sometime after that Damon, giving them both high-fives. Both are excellent Transformer triathletes who've given me lots of advice in preparation for today. I am amazed that I'm not too far behind them. Then there's an incline up to the highest point – not severe, but more than enough to make you feel it – particularly after the other sports. It's downhill until the turning point and I see David on the other side just as I approach it, and we give each other a word of encouragement. On my way back I see Lyn coming up, so thankfully her bike issues weren't too serious, and then Eric and Amy. Then it's back into the stadium, now bathed in glorious sunshine. I pass Agnes and my friend Lisa (also here to support) coming down the side of the race-track. Then you loop back and run round the 400m race track, surrounded by crowds. I take a blue wristband from a volunteer, high-five Anisha and Angie again, and then am cheered by Ceri and Amy's parents a little further down the track. Leaving the track for the second loop outside I high-five Marijke, who's volunteering as a marshal.

It's getting even hotter. Marijke tells me afterwards that she saw a runner who was white on the first lap and then pink by the third lap. My Garmin watch suddenly goes dead due to the heat, so now I have nothing to check if I'm on track – they have clocks in the stadium, but nothing outside. So, I just have to push as hard as I can. It's also interesting how the mind can improvise when needed. Without a physical watch I now use others as my "watch", and remember distinctive athletes who I noticed from the first lap. I pass "Tall Paul" (everyone has their name on their race number) quite a bit further down than my first lap, suggesting I'm going at a good pace, and it's the same for other athletes I use as benchmarks. I see another Serpentine T-shirt and shout "Keep strong Serpie" and hear the same accent in response as last time – I realize it's the same woman, just a lap behind me, and we chat a bit (which we couldn't on the bike) before I run off. I'm passing more people now; it hurts and it's getting hotter, but I'm loving the occasion. Coming back towards the stadium I see Damon starting his third lap and give him encouragement. He's our most experienced triathlete, doing standard half-ironman courses in 4:30, and has provided us rookies with invaluable tips throughout our training. He shouts back "you're doing f**king well". It dawns on me that I'd expected to finish an hour behind him (since I'd do 5:30 on a normal course) but am about 5 minutes behind. His kind words give me an added lift.

Back into the stadium for a third time, I see the clock. I'll need to complete the third 7 km lap in 33 minutes (a 1:39 half-marathon pace) to hit my target, which is almost impossible but I can only go for it. I grab the third and final yellow wristband and am on pure adrenalin now, overcome by emotion. I shout something at Anisha and Angie which they later tell me caused them to shed a few tears. I can't quite remember it but it was something like "I've got this, I'm coming home!"

On my third lap I pass Carla and I'm glad to see more Transformers have made it to the run stage. It's funny what minutiae go through your mind when you're trying to make up an extra few seconds. I debate internally whether to run on the road or the pavement. The road is softer and kinder on your knees, but I'm figuring that the hardness of the pavement will cause my feet to spring up faster, so I go for the pavement. The temperature and my exhaustion are now at their peak but there's nothing I can do except push through. I pass each refreshment stop for the final time. David passes me on the way back closer to the turning point than last time and I realize that I've somehow gained on him. I shout "Come on David, you can beat 6 hours!" and he speeds off. Shortly after I pass the turning point myself, and it's 3.5 km on the back straight to the finish. I see Andy and Manju on the way up, two other team-mates, and cheer for them. I'm passing everyone now, as the fastest runners have already finished (rather than there being faster runners on higher laps as before). I make sure to take a mental note of every landmark, every bit of scenery for the last time.

Entering the stadium, supporters give me a huge cheer. The wristband system is smart as it means that supporters know if you're about to finish, so they give you extra encouragement. I look at the clock and see that I won't make 6 hours. But, it doesn't matter – I want to finish as strongly as possible. I enter the 400m track and it's 300m to the finish. I quicken my pace, and sprint the final 100m at full pelt, passing a couple of other runners which gives the crowd a lift, and they cheer even more excitedly. There's a really nice touch at the end where volunteers hold a large ribbon at the finish gate (as you typically see only for winners) and you run through it.

You obviously haven't won the race, but you've won your own race. I sprint through the ribbon and David, Damon, Andrew, and Lisa are all right there to share in the moment with me. I cross in 6:02 (the amateurs start 3 minutes after the pros), but the time is irrelevant – the feeling of accomplishment might be greater than all of the running races where I got new PBs or hit my target times given my performance relative to the field. In the bike I only got passed once on a downhill stretch, and in the run I only got passed by my coach.



Why do I do it? Allow me to sell the triathlon to you a little, both to those new to endurance athletics, or those who are pure runners.

- Any endurance sport – a triathlon or marathon – is really, really fun. The Ironman 70.3 was one of the best experiences of my life. Pushing your body to the limits and going even further might seem like masochistic pain, but it's actually amazing to see what the body can achieve. The feeling is like getting to the top of a mountain, or holding a deep stretch, but multiple times better.
- The variety makes it more fun than running. With running, it's 26 or 13 miles of the same stuff. Here, each discipline has its own challenges, and own joys – gliding through the water during the swim, seeing the ocean and mountains during the bike, and high-fiving your friends during the run. While the bike may seem a 3.5 hour slog, it also has variety, with uphill climbs, switchbacks, and downhill free-wheeling.
- It's unpredictable. With running, you know how long it will take (within a narrow window). Here, it depends so much on the weather, conditions, and inclines. While this adds some nerves, it makes it all the more exciting. With every challenge comes a sense of achievement, as you pedal up the hill, ride through the wind, or stay your course during a chaotic swim.

- The training. Yes, it's time-consuming and demanding – but incredibly rewarding. There will likely be one sport you're weak at (swimming, for me), and to see the improvement in that was gratifying. With running, I was already close to my peak and any additional gains would have been small. And there's so much that you can learn while training given iPods (I also have an underwater iPod for swimming). When I did the Philadelphia Marathon in 2011 I learned Spanish through an audiobook; this time round I listened to tons of insightful talks.

Thank you so much again for your support. This really was a team effort: David coached my running and biking and Ali coached swimming; another David lent me his bike to train in London; Damon and Andrew (Transformers) and Patrick, Billy, Zach, and Scott (Wharton Ironmen) for training tips, and all of you who generously sponsored me or gave me moral support and prayers.

So what's next? Another half-ironman, or progression to a full? No time to think of that now – the Transformers now have a week-long high-intensity training camp here in Club La Santa!