

A RACE WEEK SURVIVAL GUIDE

140.6 MILES OF PREPARATION FOR ONE MORNING

THE FIRST-TIMER'S IRONMAN RACE WEEK PLAYBOOK

Everything to remember, and how to stay calm while remembering it.

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WRITTEN BY SOMEONE WHO HAS STOOD ON THAT START LINE

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This is an independent, unofficial guide written from personal race experience. It is not produced, endorsed, or affiliated with The IRONMAN Group or any race organizer. Always confirm exact days, times, and cutoffs against your own event's official athlete guide.



WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

You did not train for six or nine or twelve months, get up before sunrise, say no to weekends, no to drinks, no to your friends, to fall apart in the seven days before the race because you forgot your timing chip, or because a 3am thought convinced you that you're not ready.

Almost everything written for triathletes is about training. Almost nothing is about the week that actually decides how race day feels: the taper, the travel, the check-in, the night before, the two hours before the gun, the moment on the course where your brain tries to talk you into stopping even though your body is fine, and the strange, flat days after the medal is already around your neck.

This guide covers all of that: the boring, concrete list of things you must not forget, day by day, in the order a real Ironman weekend actually runs — and the much less talked-about part, the anxiety, the intrusive thoughts, the taper madness, the comparison spiral at the expo, the 3am wake-up panic, the post-finish crash — normalized, explained, and given a specific action instead of just “don't worry.”

You followed a plan to get your body ready. This is the plan for the week your body is already ready and your head is the only thing left to prepare.

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Work through it day by day starting seven days before the race. Each day has the same structure:

Do — logistics, checklist items, what actually needs to happen that day, in the order real full-distance races typically schedule them (check-in and expo first, course recon and briefing next, bike and gear bag drop-off the day before the race — not two days before, a mistake even well-prepared athletes make when they’re going from memory instead of the athlete guide).

Think — what your brain is probably doing right now, why that’s completely normal, and the specific thing to do about it instead of spiraling.

Handle it — one concrete technique for that day’s specific flavor of anxiety, cross-referenced to the full Anxiety Toolkit later in the guide, so you’re never just told to “stay calm” without being told how.

There is also a standalone Anxiety Toolkit, a Decision Tree for the moment on course when you’re deciding whether to keep going, a master packing list, a minute-by-minute race morning timeline you can copy and fill in with your own race’s exact times, and a full section on the days and weeks after the race — because the thinking doesn’t stop at the finish line, it just changes shape.



THE WEEK AT A GLANCE

Day	Theme
7 days out	Race week begins. Lock logistics, stop second-guessing training.
6 days out	Reduce volume further. Start eating like it matters.
5 days out	Travel day for most people. Protect sleep and routine.
4 days out	Course recon and practice swim, if offered.
3 days out	Athlete check-in opens, expo, gear shopping window.
2 days out	Mandatory athlete briefing, final shakeout, pack and photograph your kit.
1 day out	Bike check-in and T1/T2 gear bag drop-off. Carb dinner, early to bed.
Race day	Execute the plan you already made. Nothing new, nothing heroic.
Race night	Eat, hydrate, let people help you, sleep whenever you can.
Days 1–14 after	The week after. Expect a crash. This is normal and temporary.

A note on that order, because it's the single most common scheduling mistake in first-timer race plans: **bike and gear bag check-in is the day before the race, not two days before.** Almost every full-distance Ironman event racks bikes and collects T1/T2 bags on the final afternoon before race morning, specifically so nothing sits exposed overnight for two nights and so your bike setup matches the weather forecast as closely as possible. General athlete check-in (picking up your race packet, wristband, and race number) and the expo happen earlier in the week and are a completely separate step from bike/bag drop-off. Your timing chip most commonly isn't handed over until bike check-in, the day before the race — a smaller number of races issue it at athlete check-in instead, so this is exactly the kind of detail to confirm in your own athlete guide rather than assume. Confirm your own race's exact windows in the official athlete guide the moment you have it — this structure is how most full-distance races run, but cutoff times and exact days vary by event.



7 DAYS OUT

DO

- Training volume drops sharply now. Your plan already accounts for this — trust it, don't add extra sessions to “make up for” anything you think you missed earlier in the block.
- Pull up your event's official athlete guide (not last year's, not a friend's memory of it — this year's PDF) and write down, on one page: check-in opening hours and location, expo dates, mandatory athlete briefing time, bike check-in window, T1/T2 bag drop-off window, swim start time, and bike/run cutoff times.
- Confirm travel and accommodation if you haven't already, and work out roughly how your support crew (if you have one) will get around the course on race day — many spectator viewpoints require walking or public transport, not driving.
- Check your gear against the mandatory equipment list in the athlete guide. Helmets, timing chip compatibility, and bike frame number stickers are the most common last-minute surprises.
- Start hydrating properly. Not excessively — just consistently, every day, starting now, so your baseline is good before you also start carb-loading later in the week.
- If you're racing in a wetsuit-legal swim, do one short open-water or pool swim in it this week if you haven't worn it in a while, just to check the fit and any repairs still hold.
- Write down your Why — the real, specific reason you signed up for this, underneath “finish the race.” Keep it somewhere you'll actually see it, because you're going to need it on the course, not just this week. (Toolkit #11.)

THINK

- This is when “taper madness” starts: legs feel heavy or oddly fresh, sleep gets weird, and your brain — no longer burning off adrenaline through hard training — starts generating worry to fill the space. This is a well-documented phenomenon among endurance athletes. It is not a sign anything is wrong with your fitness or your race.
- The classic thought this week: *“Have I done enough?”* You have. The training block is closed. Nothing you do in the next seven days meaningfully changes your fitness — only your freshness. The only thing left to protect is your energy and your sleep.
- A quieter, less-discussed thought also shows up around now: *“What if this was all for nothing?”* — a flash of doubt about the whole project, not just the race. That thought is taper-driven noise, not a real reassessment. Big goals always look strange up close, right before they’re due.

HANDLE IT

Write down, right now, one true sentence about your own preparation — not a hype quote, an honest one specific to you. Example: *“I followed the plan for [X] months, I did the long sessions, my body knows what to do.”* Put it somewhere you’ll see it again this week. (This is Anxiety Tool #1 — see the full Toolkit.)



6 DAYS OUT

DO

- Reduce further. Short, easy sessions only — just enough to keep blood moving, nothing that leaves you tired the next day.
- Start shifting your eating toward more carbohydrates and slightly less fibre and fat than usual, so your gut is used to your race-week diet before race day, not surprised by it on the morning that matters.
- Lay out your full race kit once, completely, even though race day is still days away. Seeing it all together and complete is genuinely calming — it turns an abstract list into a concrete, finished pile.
- Do a full inventory of nutrition: gels, chews, electrolyte tablets or drink mix, and anything specific to your gut that you know you tolerate. Buy anything missing now, not on day 2.
- If you're travelling with a bike, book your bike box/bag transport or confirm your bike shop's pre-race tune-up slot.

THINK

- A quiet, flat mood is common right now — some athletes feel oddly deflated after months of intensity suddenly easing off. That's a normal physiological response to a big drop in training load, not a sign of fading motivation or waning excitement.
- If a wave of doubt shows up — *“what if I DNF,” “what if everyone can tell I’m a beginner”* — don't argue with it or try to suppress it. Just name it plainly, out loud or in writing: *“This is race-week anxiety, it happens to almost everyone, it will pass.”* Naming a feeling accurately reduces its intensity; that's not a platitude, it's how anxiety regulation actually works.
- Some first-timers also feel a strange guilt this week — like resting is “cheating” after a training block built on constant effort. It isn't. Rest is the last training stimulus your race actually needs.

HANDLE IT

Try box breathing once today just to have it ready: inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4, repeated for two minutes. It's mechanical, not motivational — it works whether or not you believe it will, which is exactly why it's useful later in the week when belief is in short supply. (Toolkit #2.)



5 DAYS OUT — USUALLY A TRAVEL DAY

DO

- If you're travelling, protect this day almost entirely for the trip itself. Don't schedule sightseeing marathons or a full day on your feet.
- Pack your bike properly, or confirm your bike transport/rental if you're not bringing your own, and pack race-critical gear (shoes, wetsuit, helmet, nutrition) as hand luggage where possible, never checked, if you're flying. You cannot finish the race without it, and checked bags are the one part of travel you don't control.
- Bring your own pillow if you sleep better with it. Small comfort, real effect on sleep quality in an unfamiliar bed.
- Scout where you'll eat your pre-race meals now — don't leave "what will I eat the night before" to chance in an unfamiliar city on day 1.
- If you land with energy left in the day, a short easy walk near the race venue is worth more than resting fully indoors — see below.

THINK

- Travel days spike anxiety because they strip away routine and control at exactly the moment you most want both. Expect a rise in low-grade unease today even if nothing has gone wrong.
- If you're arriving somewhere new, give yourself one unhurried hour to walk around near the finish line or transition area if you can get there. Seeing the physical space you've only imagined for months is one of the single best anxiety-reduction moves available this week — it turns an abstract fear into a familiar, ordinary place with pavement and street signs, not a stage for disaster.
- Jet lag or a long drive can make normal taper fatigue feel like something's wrong with your fitness. It usually isn't. Give it a day before drawing conclusions about how your body feels.

HANDLE IT

Use the "control the controllables" split: write two columns, one for what's still yours to manage today (food, sleep, arrival logistics) and one for what isn't (traffic, weather, other travelers). Anxiety about the second column is normal and not yours to solve. (Toolkit #4.)



4 DAYS OUT — COURSE RECON

DO

- If the course is open for recon, drive or walk key sections: the swim start and exit, a stretch of the bike route (especially any technical turns or the start of a big climb, if there is one), and the run route near the finish. Familiarity here is worth more than almost any other single prep action left this week.
- If a practice swim is offered in the race venue's water, take it. Feeling the actual water temperature and entry point once, calmly, is worth more than any amount of imagining it.
- Confirm your morning-of transport and parking plan in writing, including a backup if your first plan fails — road closures are extremely common on race morning in the exact areas you need to reach.
- Note the mandatory athlete briefing is typically still a couple of days off (most full-distance races hold it around 2 days out) — check your athlete guide for the exact day and time so it's already on your radar.

THINK

- This is often when the *“what if I can't finish”* thought gets loud and specific — picturing the exact moment of quitting, in detail. This is your brain doing threat-rehearsal, a normal and even useful process when it's kept short and deliberate rather than left to run on its own.
- Standing at the actual swim start or looking at the actual finish chute for the first time can trigger a wave of emotion — some people cry, some go quiet, some feel a rush of excitement that's indistinguishable from fear. All of these are ordinary reactions to finally seeing the place you've trained toward for months.

HANDLE IT

Spend two focused minutes, on purpose, picturing a real low point — a bad patch, walking for a while, feeling like quitting — and picture yourself getting through it and continuing. Done once, deliberately, like this, it reduces anxiety. Done over and over without choosing to, it's rumination, and it does the opposite. The difference is that you're choosing this one and closing it when it's done. (Toolkit #7.)



3 DAYS OUT — ATHLETE CHECK-IN AND EXPO

DO

- Complete official athlete check-in: ID, confirmation, signing waivers, collecting your race number, wristband, and swim cap. Check-in and the athlete village typically open around now (often Thursday for a Sunday race) — go as early in the window as you can, since lines lengthen fast and standing in a long line close to a deadline is its own stressor. Your timing chip most often isn't part of this step — check your athlete guide, but for most full-distance races it's issued at bike check-in instead.
- Walk the expo, but shop with a list. This is the single easiest place to spend money and energy on gear-comparison anxiety rather than anything you'll actually use Sunday.
- Confirm the exact time and location of the mandatory athlete briefing (usually tomorrow, 2 days out, for most full-distance races) and put it in your calendar with an alarm — missing it is avoidable and stressful to fix later.
- If official gear-check or timing-chip testing stations are available at the venue, use them today rather than assuming everything works.
- This is also a good day to confirm your support crew's full race-day plan with them directly: where they'll be for swim exit, on the bike course, and at the finish, and how they'll know your rough timing.

THINK

- The expo is where “everyone else looks more prepared than me” hits hardest — rows of athletes with dialed-in gear, race tattoos already applied, talking confidently about splits and past finishes. This feeling has a name, comparison anxiety, and it is almost universal, including among people who go on to have great races and people who've done this many times before. Nobody's outward gear or confidence tells you anything about how their actual race will go, or how yours will.
- Holding your race number for the first time often makes things feel suddenly, sharply real. A spike of nerves right at that moment is common — it's your brain registering that this is no longer theoretical, not a signal that something is wrong.
- One useful rule for the rest of the week: **no new information, no new gear, no new plan.** If you didn't train with it, don't use it Sunday, no matter how good it looks on the expo floor.

HANDLE IT

Silently reframe every comparison thought the moment you notice it: *“That’s their race. This is mine.”* You don’t need to win the thought, just relabel it and keep walking. (Toolkit #5.)



2 DAYS OUT — ATHLETE BRIEFING AND FINAL SHAKEOUT

DO

- Attend the mandatory athlete briefing — this is the day most full-distance races hold it. Take the aid station and cutoff information seriously, and write your own personal cutoff targets somewhere you'll see them race morning.
- One short, easy brick session if your plan calls for it — a short bike into a short run, mainly to keep your legs feeling like themselves, not to build any fitness this close to race day.
- Lay out and photograph your complete kit, bag by bag: swim, bike, run, morning-of, and post-race. A photo means you can check against it tomorrow without trying to remember a mental list under pressure.
- Do a final inventory of race nutrition against your actual plan for bike and run splits, not just “enough gels in general.”
- Handle any last errands today — nothing administrative should be left for tomorrow, which needs to be as empty as possible.
- Eat well today, leaning further into carbohydrates, and get to bed on time even if you don't feel unusually tired.

THINK

- Hearing all the official rules and cutoffs read aloud at the briefing can feel intimidating rather than reassuring. That's a framing problem, not new information — you already knew these numbers existed; hearing them again doesn't make finishing any harder than it already was.
- With bike and bag drop-off tomorrow, today can feel like a strange holding pattern — everything is basically ready, but it doesn't feel finished yet. That in-between feeling is normal; there's genuinely very little left to do, and your brain isn't used to that after months of a full schedule.
- Some athletes get a sudden urge to change something at the last minute — a new nutrition product, a different pacing plan, a piece of gear they saw at the expo. This urge almost always comes from anxiety looking for something to control, not from a real gap in your preparation. Today is not the day to act on it.

HANDLE IT

Decide, out loud or in writing, on your mantra for the low point on race day — not “I can do this” (too easy to argue with when you’re exhausted), something more concrete: *“One more kilometer.”* *“I trained for this exact feeling.”* *“Slow is still finishing.”* Choose it now, while you’re calm, so you’re not inventing it later while depleted. (Toolkit #3.)



1 DAY OUT — BIKE CHECK-IN AND GEAR BAG DROP-OFF

DO

- This is the day, for almost every full-distance Ironman event: **rack your bike in transition and drop your T1/T2 gear bags**, following the official process exactly as described in your athlete guide. Triple-check tire pressure and gearing before you rack it — you likely will not touch it again until race morning.
- Set your bike's gearing for the start of the bike course specifically (the gear you'll actually pedal away in), not wherever it happened to be after your last ride.
- **Collect your timing chip here if you haven't already.** For most full-distance races, this — not athlete check-in earlier in the week — is when and where you actually get it, often right after you rack your bike. A smaller number of races hand it out at athlete check-in instead, so if you're not sure, this is worth confirming against your own event's athlete guide before you assume either way. Attach it to the correct ankle per the instructions, and confirm your bag labels match your race number exactly.
- Eat a carbohydrate-forward, low-fibre, nothing-new dinner, early enough to digest fully before sleep.
- Set two alarms for race morning on two separate devices, and put your race-morning bag, nutrition, and support crew's instructions by the door tonight.
- Do nothing new today. No new food, no new gear, no extra swim "just to check the water," no long walk around the expo. Rest is the entire job today, alongside this one piece of essential admin.

THINK

- Letting go of your bike and gear the day before the race is, for a lot of first-timers, the single most anxiety-triggering moment of the entire week — it's the exact point where preparation ends and the outcome becomes real and out of your hands. That feeling of *"it's out of my control now"* is accurate, and it's also fine: everything that could be controlled already has been.
- Strapping on your timing chip for the first time today often makes things feel suddenly, sharply real in a way even the race number didn't. A spike of nerves right at that moment is common — it's your brain registering that this is genuinely happening now, not a signal that something is wrong.
- Poor sleep tonight is extremely common and, importantly, does not ruin race performance the way people fear. Your body has been resting and absorbing training all taper week; one restless night is buffered by that. If you're lying awake, don't fight it or catastrophize about it — resting quietly with your eyes closed still restores you meaningfully. Worrying about not sleeping does far more damage than the missed sleep itself.
- If a full wave of *"I'm not ready"* hits tonight, know that this thought arrives for almost every single athlete the night before a big race, including the fast ones and the ones who've done it many times. It is not information about your actual readiness. It's adrenaline with nowhere to go yet.

HANDLE IT

Write down one sentence tonight and then put your phone away: *"I have done the work. Tomorrow I execute."* Give yourself explicit permission in advance for the things you're afraid of: walking is allowed, slowing down is allowed, a bad low point is allowed. People who grant themselves this permission ahead of time report far less panic when any of it actually happens. (Toolkit #8.)



RACE MORNING

This is it. Every early alarm you didn't want to hear was building toward this one. Not to survive it — to run straight into it.

DO

- Follow the exact routine you rehearsed in training: same breakfast, same timing, nothing new, no matter how good someone else's pre-race coffee smells.
- Arrive with more buffer time than feels necessary. Rushing manufactures panic that wasn't otherwise there.
- Use the bathroom line early. It is always longer than you think, at every single race.
- Do a final visual check of your bike (tires, gears, bottles, nutrition mounted) and your body marking, then find your support crew's meeting point and confirm it with them one more time before you head to the start.
- At the swim start: find a fixed landmark to orient yourself, take one slow breath, and say your chosen one-sentence reminder from earlier in the week.

THINK

- Pre-race adrenaline and pre-race panic feel almost identical in the body — racing heart, tight chest, an urge to move. The difference is entirely in how you label it. Actively relabel it: *“This is my body getting ready to perform, not a sign something is wrong.”* This single reframe is one of the most effective, well-supported tools that exists for pre-performance nerves, and it costs nothing.
- Mass swim starts are visually and physically overwhelming for almost every first-timer — the washing-machine feeling of bodies everywhere is normal, not a sign of a bad race starting. It settles within the first several hundred meters for nearly everyone, including people who felt real panic in the opening minute.
- If you feel a sudden urge to cry, laugh, or go completely silent in the final minutes before the gun, that's a normal release of months of built-up anticipation, not a bad sign.

HANDLE IT

Box breathing again, right here: 4 counts in, hold 4, out 4, hold 4, on repeat until the horn goes. It lowers physical arousal directly rather than asking you to think your way calm, which is exactly what you need when thinking clearly is hard. (Toolkit #2.)



DURING THE RACE — WHEN IT GETS HARD

This is what the rest of your training didn't fully prepare you for: the specific moment, usually somewhere in the marathon leg, where your body is tired, your mind is tired, and quitting starts to sound reasonable.

- **Separate discomfort from danger.** Deep fatigue, heavy legs, low motivation, and wanting it to be over are all normal and expected in an Ironman-distance race, including for people who go on to finish strongly. They are not signals to stop. (See the Decision Tree below for the actual difference between “this is hard” and “this is not safe.”)
- **Shrink the race.** Stop thinking about the finish line. Think about the next aid station, the next kilometre marker, the next feeling of putting one foot in front of the other. Ironman finishers, almost universally, describe getting through the low patches by making the race smaller, not by gritting through the whole remaining distance at once.
- **Use your pre-chosen mantra** instead of arguing with the “I want to stop” thought. You don't need to win the argument with that thought. You just need something else to say instead, and you already chose it two days ago for exactly this moment.
- **Walking is not failing.** Walking an aid station, or walking when you need to, is a standard, common part of finishing an Ironman-distance race for a huge share of finishers, including people far more experienced than a first-timer. It is a pacing strategy, not a collapse.
- **Watch for the bargaining voice.** Somewhere in the run, a very persuasive internal voice will offer you a deal — stop at the next aid station, drop at halfway, “you can always try again next year.” Recognise it as fatigue talking, not a genuine decision being made with a clear head. Real decisions about stopping belong in the Decision Tree below, not in a bargaining moment.

WHEN IT GETS HARD, REMEMBER YOUR WHY

Somewhere in your training, you had a reason this whole thing mattered to you — and it wasn't your bike split. Not “finish under 12 hours.” The real one, underneath that: the person you wanted to become, the thing you wanted to prove to yourself, the person you wanted to show up for. That reason is still true right now, in this exact low moment, even though it's harder to feel than it was standing at the start line. Bring it back into your head, on purpose, when the distance feels too big — it's the one thing in this entire guide that doesn't need a technique to work. It just needs remembering.



THE FINISH LINE AND RACE NIGHT

You are going to hear four words you have been fighting to hear through every early alarm, every long weekend session, every plan you turned down to protect this. When you hear them, stop trying to process it, stop calculating your splits, stop thinking about anything at all — and just enjoy the hell out of it. That's the whole job for these last few metres. Not to understand it. Not to compare it. To feel it, completely, on purpose, because you earned every second of feeling it.

DO

- Keep moving gently through the finish chute rather than stopping abruptly — it helps your circulation and reduces the chance of feeling faint.
- Eat and drink something within the first while after finishing even if you don't feel hungry. Your body needs it more than your appetite is telling you right now.
- Let your support crew or finish-line volunteers help you; this is not the moment to be self-sufficient. Accept the blanket, the chair, the help walking.
- Check in with your body honestly before you decide how big a night it's going to be. Sleep, when you can get it, does more for you tonight than anything else.

THINK

- The emotional crash after finishing — from euphoria to tears to sudden flatness, sometimes all three within an hour — is extremely common and has nothing to do with whether you're grateful for what you just did. It's a real physiological comedown after a huge hormonal and physical event, not a character flaw or ingratitude.
- Whatever your finish time, some part of your brain will immediately start comparing it to a number you'd quietly hoped for. That comparison is normal and says nothing about whether you should be proud of finishing your first Ironman. The comparison voice shows up regardless of the result; it is not a reliable judge.
- Some first-timers feel strangely numb right after finishing, rather than euphoric. That's also normal — a huge goal often lands differently than the version you imagined for months, and that gap between imagined and actual is common, not a sign the day went wrong.

HANDLE IT

If the comparison-to-a-number thought shows up tonight, use the same reset from earlier in the week: name it, let it pass, and come back to the actual fact in front of you — you finished an Ironman today. That fact doesn't move regardless of the clock. (Toolkit #5, adapted.)



THE WEEK AFTER

Nobody claps for you on a random Tuesday two weeks later, when the medal's in a drawer and the legs finally feel normal again. That's exactly when it's worth remembering what you actually did.

The finish line is not where the thinking stops. It's where it changes shape, and this part gets almost no attention anywhere else.

Days 1–3 after

- **Do:** Move gently — walking is enough. Nothing structured. Keep eating and hydrating well; recovery has real physical demands even though the hard part is officially over. Expect soreness, swelling in your feet and ankles, and disrupted sleep for a few nights; all of this is normal after an event this long.
- **Think:** The “post-Ironman blues” — a flat, purposeless feeling in the days after — is one of the most under-discussed parts of the entire experience. After months where a single huge goal organized your time, energy, and identity, its sudden absence can feel like loss, even though you just succeeded. This is normal, it's temporary, and it doesn't mean the race didn't matter to you.

Days 4–7 after

- **Do:** Begin very light activity if your body allows it — an easy walk, a gentle swim — but resist the urge to jump back into structured training. Most coaches recommend a full recovery week or more with no hard efforts after a full-distance race.
- **Think:** A specific thought tends to surface around now: *“What do I do with myself?”* — the sudden absence of a training schedule can feel disorienting rather than freeing, at least at first. Some people also start to second-guess parts of their race (“I should have paced the bike differently,” “I could have pushed harder on the run”) days after it's already done and can't be changed. This kind of retrospective replay is normal processing, not evidence you did something wrong. Give yourself a limit on it — reflect once, deliberately, then set it down, the same way you rehearsed the “worst case” earlier in race week.

Days 8–14 after

- **Do:** Start thinking about what's next only if and when it feels good to, not because you feel you should already have an answer. A next goal, a rest period with no goal at all, or simply returning to easier training are all legitimate answers.

- **Think:** The identity shift is real and worth naming: for months, “training for my first Ironman” quietly organized a lot of your decisions and your sense of who you were becoming. Its absence can feel bigger than expected, even amid genuine pride in what you did. This isn’t a problem to fix quickly. It’s worth sitting with, and it passes with time and, usually, a next thing to care about, whatever that ends up being.

HANDLE IT

Write down, once, what you’re actually proud of about the day — not the finish time, the specific moments: the low point you got through, the decision to keep going, the training you didn’t skip on hard mornings months ago that made today possible. Read it back on the flat days. This is the one-sentence tool again, aimed backward instead of forward.



THE ANXIETY TOOLKIT

A short list of specific, concrete tools — not vague reassurance — for the feelings that show up across the whole week, referenced by number throughout this guide.

- 1. The one sentence.** Before race week starts, write one true sentence about your preparation — not a hype quote, an honest one. Example: *“I followed the plan for [X] months. My body knows what to do.”* Read it whenever doubt spikes. Specific and true beats generic and motivational every time.
- 2. Box breathing, for the 3am wake-up or the start-line spike.** Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4. Repeat for two minutes. This isn’t a trick — it’s a direct way to lower physical arousal (heart rate, tight chest) that anxiety runs on. It works because it’s mechanical, not because you have to believe it will.
- 3. The mantra for the low point.** Choose one short phrase now, before the race, for the moment you want to quit. Not “I can do this” (too easy to argue with when you’re exhausted) — something more concrete: *“One more kilometre.”* *“I trained for this exact feeling.”* *“Slow is still finishing.”* Decide it now so you’re not inventing it while depleted.
- 4. Control the controllables — write the actual list.** When anxiety is vague, it’s unlimited. Make it specific by writing two columns: things you can still control this week (sleep, food, gear, pacing plan) and things you can’t (weather, other athletes, race-day chaos). Anxiety about the second column is normal; your job is only the first column.
- 5. The comparison reset.** At the expo, on the start line, on the course — you will see people who look faster, calmer, more prepared. Their gear, their tan lines, and their confidence tell you nothing about your race. Silently reframe every comparison thought into: *“That’s their race. This is mine.”*
- 6. Relabel the sensation.** A racing heart and tight chest mean almost the same thing whether you call it “excitement” or “panic.” Choosing the label “my body getting ready” instead of “something is wrong” is a well-supported way to shift the entire experience of the same physical feeling.
- 7. Rehearse the worst realistic case, on purpose, once.** Spend two focused minutes picturing a real low point — a bad patch, walking a stretch, feeling like quitting — and picture yourself getting through it. Done once, deliberately, this reduces anxiety. Done repeatedly and unintentionally (ruminating), it increases it. The difference is whether you choose it and close it, or it keeps intruding.
- 8. Give yourself permission in advance.** Decide now: walking is allowed, slowing down is allowed, a bad low point is allowed. People who have given themselves permission for these things in advance report far less panic when they happen than people who treated any deviation from the plan as failure.
- 9. Name it out loud.** Whether it’s taper madness, expo comparison spiral, or post-race flatness — saying the specific name of what you’re feeling, out loud or in writing, reduces its intensity almost immediately. Vague dread is much harder to sit with than a named, expected, temporary feeling.

10. The two-minute limit on replay. After the race, when you catch yourself re-running a moment on the course, give it a hard two-minute limit. Reflect on purpose, then close it. Endless unscheduled replay is what turns normal processing into rumination.

11. Remember your Why. Write it down before race week gets loud: the real, specific reason underneath “finish the race” — the person you wanted to become, the thing you wanted to prove, who you wanted to show up for. Every other tool in this list is a technique. This one isn’t. When the distance feels too big, on the course, you don’t need to manage the feeling — you just need to remember the reason, on purpose, and let it carry you the next kilometre.



THE DECISION TREE — PUSH THROUGH, OR STOP?

Discomfort is expected. These are different categories, and knowing the difference before race day means you don’t have to figure it out while exhausted and emotional.

Normal and expected — keep going, adjust pace or nutrition as needed:

- Heavy legs, deep fatigue, low motivation, wanting it to be over.
- Mild chafing, blisters, general soreness.
- Feeling emotionally overwhelmed or like crying.
- A slow patch where your pace drops significantly.

Warning signs — slow down, walk, reassess at the next aid station, consider medical:

- Dizziness, confusion, or disorientation.
- Nausea or vomiting that prevents you from taking in fluids or fuel.
- Cramping severe enough to affect your gait significantly.

Stop and get medical attention immediately:

- Chest pain, tightness, or an unusual heart rhythm.
- Severe confusion, inability to respond normally, or fainting.
- Signs of heat stroke: stopped sweating, hot or dry skin, confusion, in hot conditions.
- Any injury that changes how a joint or bone feels to bear weight on.

If you are ever unsure which category you’re in, that uncertainty itself is a signal to slow down and ask a race medic — not a sign of weakness, and not a DNF unless it needs to be.



BIKE MECHANICAL READINESS CHECKLIST

Do this five to seven days before race day — early enough that if something needs a bike shop, you still have time, and never the night before, when nothing can actually be fixed.

- ☐ Practice changing a tube on your actual race wheel at home, once, even if you've done it many times before. Time yourself. If you run tubeless, practice plugging a puncture, and know your backup plan (a spare tube and how to seat it over sealant) if the plug doesn't hold.
- ☐ Check tire pressure and tread condition on both tires. Replace anything showing cracking, a bulge, or a visible cut, no matter how small.
- ☐ Check sealant level if you run tubeless — top it up if it's been more than a couple of months since you last checked.
- ☐ Check every bolt you can reach with an Allen key: stem, seatpost clamp, bottle cages, aero bar clamps, saddle rails, brake calipers. A creeping loose bolt is one of the most common “why does my bike suddenly feel wrong” race-day problems, and it is completely preventable with five quiet minutes at home.
- ☐ Check the headset for play (front brake on, rock the bike forward and back — any clunk means it needs attention) and the wheels for play (grab the top and bottom of the wheel and rock it — it should feel completely solid).
- ☐ Test both brakes at speed somewhere safe, and check pad wear while you're at it.
- ☐ Run through the gears end to end, including your smallest and biggest combinations, checking for chain skip or rub in every position.
- ☐ Lube the chain the day before you rack the bike, not the morning of — excess lube needs time to settle rather than flinging onto your legs or brakes on the way to transition.
- ☐ Pack your on-course mechanical kit — spare tube(s) or plug kit, CO2 or a pump, tire levers, a small multitool — and confirm all of it is mounted securely, not just placed in a pocket and hoped for.
- ☐ If any of this is unfamiliar, book a pre-race safety check at a bike shop this week rather than learning it for the first time under pressure. Paying a shop for a once-over during race week is normal and common, not a sign you're behind.

This is a checklist, not a mechanics course. The goal isn't to become a bike mechanic overnight — it's to know, personally, that you've handled every part of your bike at least once before race morning, so nothing about it is a surprise if something goes wrong on course.



TRANSITION CHECKLISTS — T1 AND T2

Transitions are where a calm, rehearsed routine saves real minutes and real panic. Walk this list once in your head the night before, and once for real on race morning.

T1 — Swim to Bike

- ☐ Wetsuit stripped efficiently — practice this at least once before race week if you've never done it in a mass-participation transition tent before.
- ☐ Helmet on and fastened before you touch your bike. Most races disqualify you for wheeling a bike with an unfastened helmet — this is one of the few genuinely hard rules of the day.
- ☐ Sunglasses on.
- ☐ Bike shoes on, or already clipped into the pedals if you're comfortable mounting that way — only do this on race day if you've specifically practiced it, not for the first time under pressure.
- ☐ Race number positioned per your event's rules (front for the bike leg in some races, back in others — check your specific athlete guide).
- ☐ Anti-chafe reapplied if needed.
- ☐ A quick visual check that your nutrition and bottles, mounted at bag drop-off, are still there and secure.
- ☐ Sunscreen reapplied if the transition walk is long and exposed.

T2 — Bike to Run

- ☐ Bike shoes off, running shoes on.
- ☐ Race belt with your bib swapped to the back for the run, if that's your event's rule.
- ☐ Hat or visor on.
- ☐ Socks changed if you run in them and yours are wet or sandy — most first-timers underestimate how much this one small change helps for the next four-plus hours.
- ☐ Run nutrition restocked into your belt or pockets from your run bag.
- ☐ Anti-chafe checked again, particularly underarms, thighs, and feet.
- ☐ Blister care items grabbed if you packed them and you know you're prone to hot spots.
- ☐ One deliberate second to reset mentally: you are starting a fresh leg, not finishing a race that has already gone a certain way on the bike.

A general note on both: practicing your transition routine at home, fully dressed, against a stopwatch, at least once during race week removes an enormous amount of uncertainty. You don't need to be fast. You need it to be automatic, so your brain has one less thing to manage on a day it's already managing a lot.



RACE FUEL AND PACING — THE BROAD IDEA

This section is deliberately broad, not a personal plan. Nutrition and pacing needs vary hugely between individual athletes — your gut tolerance, sweat rate, and training history all matter more than any general number here. Use this as a starting shape to build your own plan around in training, well before race week, never for the first time on race day itself. If there's one theme to take from this whole section, it's this: **you need carbohydrate, consistently, in the days leading into the race and all the way through it — the question is never really “carbs or not,” it's “how much, and in what form, works for your gut,” and training is where you find that answer, not race day.**

Carb-loading in the days before the race

- The general idea most athletes use: gradually shift the balance of your meals toward more carbohydrate and somewhat less fibre and fat over the two to three days before the race, without dramatically increasing total food volume or trying new foods.
- This isn't about one big meal — it's about consistently keeping carbohydrate at the center of every meal for two to three full days, so your muscle and liver glycogen stores are genuinely topped up by race morning, not just your stomach on the night before.
- Hydrate consistently across those same days rather than drinking a large amount all at once close to race morning.
- The goal is topped-up energy stores and a settled gut, not a single “big pasta dinner” the night before — by then it's largely too late for loading to matter much, and a heavy, unfamiliar meal the night before a race is more likely to cause problems than help.
- On race morning itself, eat a carbohydrate-forward breakfast, timed and portioned exactly the way you've rehearsed in training — this meal is part of your fuelling plan, not just a formality before the swim.

Carbohydrate intake during the race

- As a broad floor to build from, many endurance athletes aim for at least roughly 60 grams of carbohydrate per hour once the bike leg is underway, with plenty of well-trained athletes working up toward 90 grams or more per hour if their gut tolerates it. This is a widely cited general range, not a rule — the right number is whatever you've actually practiced and tolerated in your own long training sessions, not a number copied from this guide.
- Whatever number you land on, it should already be one you've practiced in long training sessions, not one you're trying for the first time on race day. If 60 grams an hour feels like a lot and you've never trained your gut for it, that's exactly why you test it months out, not the morning of.
- Keep taking in carbohydrate on a schedule rather than waiting until you feel low — by the time hunger or a fading feeling shows up, you're already behind on fuelling and it's much harder to recover from on course.

- Run nutrition is typically lighter and simpler than bike nutrition, since a jostled stomach tolerates less at that point in the day — many athletes shift toward simpler sources (cola, gels, aid-station broth) through the marathon leg, but the goal of steady carbohydrate intake doesn't stop just because the bike leg did.

Hydration and electrolytes

- Drinking to thirst plus a general electrolyte source (drink mix, tablets, or aid-station drinks) covers most athletes reasonably well in moderate conditions. Heat, humidity, and your own sweat rate all shift this considerably.
- Weighing yourself before and after a couple of your longest training sessions gives a rough, personal sense of your own sweat rate rather than guessing from a general number.

Pacing — the broad shape

- **Swim:** controlled and easy relative to how it feels early on. Most first-timers who struggle later in the day trace it back to an over-excited, too-hard swim start that felt fine in the moment.
- **Bike:** the leg where discipline saves your run. A broadly sensible approach for a first-timer is an effort that feels moderate, even slightly conservative, in the first half, saving something for the run rather than spending it all on the bike split.
- **Run:** start slower than feels necessary in the first few kilometres. Almost every first-time finisher with a strong run describes deliberately holding back early, and almost every difficult run story starts with going out too hard off the bike.

None of these numbers replace your own training data. If your own long sessions, a coach, or your own gut have taught you something different about what works for you specifically, trust that over any general range in this guide.



MASTER PACKING CHECKLIST

Bike & bike bag

- ☐ Bike (serviced, tires checked, gears tuned)
- ☐ Helmet, bike shoes, sunglasses
- ☐ Race nutrition for the bike leg, mounted/packed
- ☐ Spare tube(s), CO2/pump, tire levers
- ☐ Bike computer/GPS, charged
- ☐ Race number for the bike (if separate from run bib)

Swim

- ☐ Wetsuit (if applicable), goggles (plus a spare pair), swim cap (often provided)
- ☐ Anti-chafe product, earplugs if you use them
- ☐ Timing chip and ankle strap

Run bag

- ☐ Run shoes, race belt/bib
- ☐ Hat/visor, socks
- ☐ Run nutrition/gels

Morning-of bag

- ☐ Timing chip, race number, ID
- ☐ Pre-race breakfast, race morning nutrition
- ☐ Warm layer to discard before swim start
- ☐ Sunscreen
- ☐ This guide's one sentence and mantra, written down somewhere you'll actually see it

Post-race bag (leave with your support crew or in gear check)

- ☐ Dry, warm clothes and comfortable shoes
- ☐ Any medication you personally take
- ☐ Phone charger

- ☐ Simple snacks you know you'll actually want after finishing

For your support crew

- ☐ Your estimated timing for swim/bike/run splits
- ☐ Where and when to meet you, with a backup meeting point
- ☐ What you might need handed to you on course (specific nutrition, a jacket if weather turns)
- ☐ Your "in case of emergency" contact and any medical info they should have on hand



RACE MORNING TIMELINE TEMPLATE

Fill this in with your own race's actual times, then keep it with your morning bag.

- Wake up: _____
- Eat breakfast by: _____
- Leave for venue: _____
- Body marking / final bike check: _____
- Drop morning bags: _____
- Bathroom, final: _____
- At swim start corral: _____
- Buffer built in: _____ minutes



YOUR RACE DAY CARD

Fill this in during race week, while you're calm, so it already exists the moment you need it. This page is yours — write it by hand if you'd rather.

- My goal for this race, in one honest sentence: _____
- My mantra for the low point: _____
- My carbohydrate target, practiced in training: _____ g/hour on the bike · _____ on the run
- The reason I'm actually doing this (not the bike split):

- Three people who are proud of me before I've even started: _____ · _____ ·

- The one sentence I wrote in race week that I want to remember:

- My finish-line word, the first thing I want to feel when I hear my name:



A LAST NOTE

The hardest part was never the race. It's everything that leads up to it — the week where your body is finally ready and your mind hasn't caught up yet — and everything that follows it, including the strange quiet days after the medal is already around your neck. Every feeling in this guide — the taper madness, the 3am doubt, the expo comparison spiral, the moment on the run where quitting sounds reasonable, the flatness a week later — happens to nearly everyone who lines up for their first one, including the people who go on to finish strongly and the people who've done it many times before.

Think back, for a second, to whoever you were when you signed up for this. Before the long Saturdays. Before you knew what your own sweat rate was, or what a brick session felt like at hour three, or what it means to say no to a Friday night because Sunday's session matters more. That person had no idea what they were actually capable of. You're about to show them.

You don't need to feel calm to be ready. You just need a plan for the week, a plan for the moments your head gets loud, and a plan for what comes after. You now have all three. Everything else — the fitness, the discipline, the months of getting up in the dark — you already brought yourself. This guide was never going to be the hard part. You already did that.

So here's the only thing left to do: go get your four words.

See you at the finish line.

YOU ARE AN IRONMAN.