

PACE IT RIGHT. FUEL IT RIGHT.

WORKS FOR ANY FULL-DISTANCE IRONMAN

THE RACE DAY PACING & FUELING PLANNER

Build your own hour-by-hour plan for the bike, the run, and everything you'll eat and drink — then rehearse it before race day.

A COMPANION TO THE FIRST-TIMER'S IRONMAN RACE WEEK PLAYBOOK



WHAT'S INSIDE

A build-your-own plan for pacing and fueling a full-distance Ironman. It works for any course — you supply your race's details and your own training numbers, and this gives you the method to turn them into a plan you can actually execute.

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A note on why this is written the way it is: no two athletes have the same fitness, sweat rate, or gut tolerance, and no two courses ask the same thing of you. So rather than hand you one fixed plan, this gives you the ranges that work for most first-timers and a structure for turning them into your numbers. Everything in here is meant to be tested in training before it is trusted on race day.

1

HOW TO USE THIS PLANNER

Work through Steps 1–6 around six to eight weeks out from your race. That leaves you enough time to rehearse the plan properly and change what doesn't work, which is the entire point of writing it down early.

- Use Step 7 to test the plan in your long rides and brick sessions, then come back and adjust the numbers.
- Fill in Section 11 during race week, once you have your race's official athlete guide and know the on-course nutrition.
- Print or screenshot Section 12 and have it with you on race morning.

This is a general planning guide based on personal race experience and widely published endurance-sport guidance. It is not medical, nutritional, or coaching advice. Individual needs vary a great deal — if you have any medical condition, take medication, or are unsure about your own numbers, speak to a doctor or a qualified sports dietitian before race day.

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THE TWO RULES THAT DECIDE YOUR DAY

RULE 1 — GO SLOWER THAN FEELS RIGHT, FOR LONGER THAN FEELS NECESSARY

Almost every first-timer who ends up walking the entire marathon rode the bike slightly too hard in the first three hours, back when it felt easy and free. The bike does not reward you for the effort you spend there. The run collects the bill.

RULE 2 — FUEL FOR THE HOUR YOU'RE ABOUT TO HAVE, NOT THE ONE YOU JUST HAD

By the time you actually feel empty, you are already 45 to 60 minutes behind, and digging out of that hole mid-race is far harder than staying out of it. Fueling is a schedule you follow on the clock — not a response to hunger.

Both rules feel wrong in the moment, on the day, with adrenaline up and people passing you. That is exactly why they need to be decisions you made weeks ago instead of judgement calls you make at kilometre 40.

STEP 1 — SET A REALISTIC TARGET

Pick the finish time you will actually plan around. For most first-timers that lands somewhere between 12 and 15 hours. The splits below are illustrative examples of how a day adds up — not prescriptions, and not the only way to reach each time.

TARGET	SWIM 3.8KM	T1	BIKE 180KM	T2	RUN 42.2KM
12:00	1:15 1:58 /100m	0:08	6:10 29.2 km/h · 18.1 mph	0:06	4:21 6:11 /km · 9:57 /mi
13:00	1:20 2:06 /100m	0:10	6:45 26.7 km/h · 16.6 mph	0:08	4:37 6:34 /km · 10:34 /mi
14:00	1:30 2:22 /100m	0:12	7:20 24.5 km/h · 15.2 mph	0:10	4:48 6:50 /km · 11:00 /mi
15:00	1:40 2:38 /100m	0:12	7:50 23.0 km/h · 14.3 mph	0:10	5:08 7:18 /km · 11:45 /mi

HOW TO PICK YOURS

- Base it on what your long rides and long runs are actually doing right now, not on what you hope race day will produce.
- Take the speed you hold comfortably on a long ride and take a little off it for fatigue, wind, and the course.
- Take your easy long-run pace and add roughly 30–60 seconds per kilometre, because you will have ridden 180km first.
- If the number that falls out is slower than you wanted, plan around that one anyway. You can always go faster late in the day. You cannot un-blow-up.

Course and conditions move these numbers meaningfully — a hilly, hot, or windy day can change a bike split by half an hour or more in either direction. Check your course profile and build that into your target rather than discovering it at kilometre 100.

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STEP 2 — SWIM PACING

The swim is a tenth of your day. You can't win the race here, only spend energy you'll want later.

DO

- **Pace by effort, not by your watch.** Aim for something you would describe as comfortable — around 5 or 6 out of 10. You should climb out of the water feeling like you could have kept going.
- **Expect the first few minutes to feel awful.** Breathless and chaotic, heart rate spiking — that's adrenaline and cold water, not your fitness. Breathe all the way out and let it settle.
- **Sight often.** An extra 200 metres costs far more than swimming slightly slower would.
- **Start toward the back or the outside** of your group if contact rattles you. The few seconds it costs buys you a calmer first kilometre.

A swim five minutes slower than your best is invisible at the finish. One that leaves you gassed is not.

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STEP 3 — BIKE PACING

The most important pacing decision of your day. The marathon is where you learn if you got it right.

PICK YOUR TARGET — WHICHEVER YOU ACTUALLY TRAIN WITH

- **By feel:** conversational the entire way. For the first half you should be able to speak a full sentence out loud without gasping. If you can't, you are riding too hard.
- **By power:** most first-timers sit at 65–75% of FTP. Where you land inside that depends on your strengths — if the bike is your strongest discipline you can ride the higher end, and if you came from swimming or running, stay low and protect the marathon.
- **By heart rate:** steady aerobic riding, commonly 10–15 bpm below your threshold heart rate. Expect it to drift upward late in the ride; let it, and don't chase the early number by pushing harder.

EXECUTING IT

- **The first 90 minutes should feel almost embarrassingly easy.** The riders streaming past you here are not your problem, and you will see a good number of them again on the run.
- **Don't spike on the climbs.** Sit, spin, and let your speed drop. Short hard efforts up hills cost far more than the seconds they save.
- **Keep your cadence comfortable** — most riders sustain something in the 80–90 rpm range better than grinding a big gear.
- **Ease off deliberately for the last 20–30 minutes.** Spin lighter, drink, and let your legs come back underneath you before T2.

If you roll into T2 thinking "I probably had more in me than that" — you paced the bike correctly. That feeling is the goal, not a regret.

Your legs will feel foreign for the first ten to fifteen minutes off the bike. That is normal, it happens to everyone, and it passes.

DO

- **Start slower than feels necessary.** The first 5km will feel easy and you will be tempted to bank time. That feeling is the trap, not a signal.
- **Decide your run/walk pattern before the race and start it from kilometre one** — not from the point where you are forced into it. Common patterns are running nine minutes and walking one, or running between aid stations and walking through each one.
- **Walking the aid stations is a strategy, not a failure.** It lets you actually drink instead of wearing it, take what you need, and reset — and it costs a fraction of the time that the death march it prevents would.
- **Expect to run 60–90 seconds per kilometre slower** than your standalone marathon pace. That is not you falling apart, that is the 180km already in your legs.
- **Break it into pieces.** The next aid station, not the next 30 kilometres.

A first-timer who runs the first half sensibly and walks a little in the second half almost always finishes ahead of one who runs the first half hard and walks the last 15km.

Three things to get right every hour, all day long: carbohydrate, fluid, and sodium. These are typical ranges for endurance athletes — your job is to find where you sit inside them, in training.

WHAT	TYPICAL RANGE	NOTES
Carbohydrate — bike	60–90 g / hour	First-timers should aim for 60–90 g/hr and build up to it in training. The top of the range needs a trained gut and a mix of glucose and fructose rather than one sugar source.
Carbohydrate — run	30–60 g / hour	Absorption drops once you're running. Take less at a time, more often.
Fluid	500–750 ml / hour	Can reach around a litre an hour in real heat. This is the number that varies most between people — set it from your own sweat rate, not a table.
Sodium	300–1,000 mg / hour	500–700 mg/hr is a common starting point. If you're a heavy or salty sweater — white marks on your kit after training — you belong nearer the top.
Caffeine	~1–3 mg per kg	Save it for the late bike or the run, where it does the most good. Only if you already use it in training.

THE RULES THAT MATTER MORE THAN THE NUMBERS

- **Start within the first 15–20 minutes on the bike.** Don't wait until you feel like eating.
- **Nothing new on race day.** Not a gel, not a bar, not a new flavour of sports drink — nothing you haven't already used in a long training session.
- **Know what the race actually hands out** — it's in the athlete guide — and either train with that product or carry your own.
- **More solid food early, more liquid and gels late.** Solids get harder to stomach as the day goes on.

ONE REAL WARNING

Drinking large volumes of plain water while sweating hard for twelve-plus hours can dilute your blood sodium — hyponatremia — and it is genuinely dangerous. Fluid needs sodium alongside it. Drinking to a rigid schedule regardless of thirst and conditions is how people get into trouble here, so treat your fluid number as a starting point you adjust on the day, not a quota to hit.

STEP 6 — YOUR HOUR-BY-HOUR FUEL PLAN

Write in exactly what you'll take and when. Vague plans fall apart around hour five — specific ones don't. Fill this in, then test it in training and change what didn't work.

SEGMENT	CARBS (G)	FLUID (ML)	SODIUM (MG)	WHAT, SPECIFICALLY
Pre-race (2–3 hrs before)				
Pre-swim (~15 min)				
Bike — hour 1				
Bike — hour 2				
Bike — hour 3				
Bike — hour 4				
Bike — hour 5				
Bike — hour 6				
Bike — hour 7+				
T2				
Run — hour 1				
Run — hour 2				
Run — hour 3				
Run — hour 4				
Run — hour 5+				

A plan you have never tested is just a guess written down neatly. This is the step people skip, and it is the one that decides whether the rest of the document is worth anything.

DO

- **Run your full bike fueling plan in at least two long rides of four hours or more**, at your intended race effort, using the exact products you'll use on the day.
- **Do at least two brick sessions** — a long ride straight into a 20 to 40 minute run — using your planned run fueling and your actual run/walk pattern.
- **Practise in the heat if your race is hot.** Sweat rate and gut tolerance both change substantially, and finding that out on race day is expensive.
- **Estimate your sweat rate.** Weigh yourself before and after a long session in the same kit, without drinking during the weigh-in. Each kilogram lost is roughly a litre of fluid you didn't replace — use that to set your hourly number.
- **Write down what went wrong.** Stomach trouble in training is information, not bad luck. Change one variable at a time so you learn which one it was.

If a product or a number fails you twice in training, it will fail you on race day, under more stress and with fewer options. Replace it now rather than hoping at the aid station.

Most bad patches in a long day are fixable, and most of them trace back to the same short list. Knowing the response in advance is what keeps a rough hour from becoming the end of your race.

WHAT'S HAPPENING	USUAL CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Stomach shutting down — nausea, sloshing, can't face another gel	Too much, too concentrated, or riding and running harder than your gut can handle	Back the effort off for 10–20 minutes and switch to liquid only, sipping rather than gulping. Flat cola late in the race is often tolerated when nothing else is.
Suddenly empty — legs gone, mood crashing	Under-fuelled over the previous hour or two	Take simple sugar straight away — gel, cola, sports drink — then accept a slow 20–30 minutes while it works. Keep fuelling on schedule even once you feel human again.
Cramping	More often pace than salt — working harder than you trained for	Ease off, walk if you need to, take electrolytes, stretch gently. Returning to the effort you actually trained at usually settles it.
Dizzy, chilled, confused, or stopped sweating in the heat	Potentially serious — heat illness or a sodium problem	Stop. Get to the nearest aid station or medical tent. This is not one to push through or negotiate with.
Well behind your target time	Usually the bike, sometimes simply the conditions	Recalculate against the cutoffs rather than your goal, and re-plan the fuelling for the longer day you're now having. A slower finish is still a finish.

WORTH BEING CLEAR ABOUT

The fourth row is a medical decision, not a pacing decision. On-course medical staff exist for exactly that situation, and using them is not quitting — it is the correct call, and it is the one that gets you to a start line again.

YOUR RACE DAY PLAN, IN ONE PLACE

Fill this in during race week, once you have the official athlete guide and know what's on course.

RACE NAME & DATE

SWIM START TIME

BIKE TARGET (POWER / HR / SPEED)

RUN/WALK PATTERN

CARBS PER HOUR — BIKE

FLUID PER HOUR

ON-COURSE DRINK (FROM ATHLETE GUIDE)

IN MY BIKE SPECIAL NEEDS BAG

SWIM CUTOFF

OVERALL RACE CUTOFF

TARGET FINISH TIME

SWIM EFFORT CUE

MY FIRST-90-MINUTES CUE

RUN TARGET PACE

CARBS PER HOUR — RUN

SODIUM PER HOUR

CAFFEINE PLAN & WHEN

IN MY RUN SPECIAL NEEDS BAG

BIKE CUTOFF

IF IT GOES WRONG, MY FIRST MOVE

ONE-PAGE QUICK REFERENCE

Carry this with you on race day.

THE TWO RULES

Go slower than feels right, for longer than feels necessary. Fuel for the hour you're about to have, not the one you just had.

SWIM

Effort 5–6 out of 10, comfortable the whole way. The first few minutes feel awful for everyone — breathe out fully and settle. Sight often. Exit feeling like you had more.

BIKE

Conversational effort all the way; 65–75% of FTP if you ride on power, higher end only if the bike is your strength. The first 90 minutes should feel too easy. Don't spike the climbs. Ease off the last 20–30 minutes into T2.

RUN

Start slower than necessary — the easy first 5km is the trap. Run/walk from kilometre one, walk the aid stations on purpose, and expect 60–90 sec/km slower than open marathon pace.

EVERY HOUR

60–90g carbs on the bike, 30–60g on the run. 500–750ml fluid, more in heat. 500–700mg sodium. Start within 20 minutes of getting on the bike and keep going on the clock.

NOTHING NEW TODAY

No product, flavour, or number you haven't already rehearsed in a long training session.

IF IT GOES WRONG

Ease off, switch to liquid, take simple sugar, walk a while. Confusion, no sweating in the heat, chest pain or breathing trouble — medical staff immediately, no negotiating.

This is an independent planning guide written from personal race experience and general endurance-sport guidance. It is not medical, nutritional, or coaching advice, and it is not produced, endorsed, or affiliated with The IRONMAN Group or any race organizer. Carbohydrate, fluid, and sodium needs vary widely between individuals — consult a doctor or qualified sports dietitian before finalising a race-day plan, particularly if you have any medical condition or take medication.