

A GUIDE FOR THE PEOPLE ON THE SIDELINES

WORKS FOR ANY FULL-DISTANCE IRONMAN

THE IRONMAN SUPPORT CREW CHEAT SHEET

Everything to know about tracking, spectating, and caring for yourself while you cheer for someone through a 12–15 hour day.

WRITTEN BY SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BARRIER



WHAT'S INSIDE

A general guide for anyone tracking, spectating, or crewing a first-timer on race day — written to work for any full-distance Ironman course, not just one specific race.

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A note on why this is written the way it is: no two Ironman races have the same course, cutoffs, or spectator rules. Rather than give you one race's specific times and street names, this guide teaches you the pattern every full-distance race follows, and gives you a template at the end to fill in with your specific race's real details from its official athlete/spectator guide.

1

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read sections 2–8 once, a few days before race day, so you understand the shape of the day. Then fill in Section 9 using your athlete's specific race's official spectator guide — every Ironman event publishes one, usually a few weeks before race day. Print or screenshot Section 10 and bring it with you on race day.

2

THE SHAPE OF EVERY FULL-DISTANCE DAY

Every full-distance Ironman (140.6 miles: 2.4mi/3.8km swim, 112mi/180km bike, 26.2mi/42.2km run) follows the same basic structure, even though exact times and locations differ by race:

LEG	WHAT'S HAPPENING
Pre-dawn	Check-in, gear/special needs bags, body marking. Usually the last time you see your athlete before the gun.
Swim	~1–2.5 hrs for most age-groupers. Mass or wave/rolling start. Swim cutoff commonly ~2h20m from the swim start — confirm your race's actual number.
T1	Swim-to-bike change, often in a tent. 5–20 minutes depending on the athlete.
Bike	~5.5–9+ hrs. Often one or more loops or an out-and-back, so you may see your athlete pass more than once. Cutoff commonly 8–10.5 hrs after their swim start — confirm yours.
T2	Bike-to-run change, usually faster than T1.
Run	A full marathon, ~4–7+ hrs for most first-timers. Walking late in the run is common and normal. Often loops through the host city — good news for spectators. Overall cutoff commonly 16–17 hrs from start — confirm yours.
Finish	Often open late into the night, with final finishers arriving right at the cutoff to loud, dedicated crowds — one of the most emotional parts of the day.

THE ONE THING TO UNDERSTAND

Total time on course for a mid-to-back-of-pack first-timer is very commonly **12–15 hours**. Plan your entire day, food, and energy around that, not around a "few hours at a race."

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BEFORE RACE DAY

DO

- **Get the official athlete guide and spectator guide** for your specific race. This is the single most important document — real swim start time, real cutoffs, real transition locations, real spectator points.
- **Download the official race tracking app** and add your athlete's bib number in advance so you get automatic split notifications.
- **Agree on a loose communication plan beforehand** — most athletes don't carry a phone on course, so agree instead on where you'll try to see them rather than expecting to hear from them directly.
- **Plan your own day like a full-day event** — pack food, water, a phone charger, cash, sunscreen, a layer for temperature changes, comfortable walking shoes, and something to sit on.
- **Plan transport and parking near the finish in advance** — road closures are common and can make areas unreachable by car for hours. Check the spectator guide for shuttle info or walking routes.
- **Ask your athlete what they actually want from you** — some want to see you often for a boost, others find it distracting. Ask, don't assume.

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RACE MORNING

DO

- Expect the athlete to be quiet, focused, or unusually blunt in the hours before the start — this is normal and not about you. Keep interactions short and low-pressure.
- You generally cannot follow them into the athlete-only pre-race area. Say your goodbye at the last public point, then head to your own spot to watch the swim start.
- A mass or wave-start swim is genuinely hard to spot one specific person in — don't stress about seeing them enter the water. Focus instead on catching them at the swim exit or in T1.

TRACKING

- Use the official tracking app for live splits (swim exit, bike splits, T1/T2 times, run splits, projected finish).
- Splits can lag by several minutes depending on timing mat placement — don't panic if a split takes longer than expected to update.
- No live app? Ask about SMS/text alert services, which many races also offer.

WHERE TO ACTUALLY STAND

General strategy — confirm exact points against your race's spectator guide.

- **Swim exit / T1 area** — often the best early-race viewing spot.
- **Bike course loop/out-and-back points** — many bike courses are shaped this way specifically so spectators can see athletes several times.
- **T2 / run start** — a high-value spot to gauge how they're doing coming off the bike.
- **Run course loop points** — often the best place to spend most of your afternoon/evening, since you may see your athlete several times without moving.
- **Finish line** — get there with plenty of buffer before their predicted finish; projections can be off by 30–60+ minutes, especially on the run.

PRACTICAL TIP

Because total course time is long and courses often loop, it's usually smarter to pick 2–3 fixed spots and wait there than to try to chase your athlete around the entire course.

AND A WORD FOR YOU, SPECIFICALLY

Today you came to cheer for someone you love — but don't forget to take care of yourself too. Being a spectator is genuinely hard on the body, even though you're not the one racing. In my own first race, my family walked thousands and thousands of steps trying to catch me at as many points on the course as possible, and in doing that they forgot to eat and drink properly — they could only think about getting to the next spot in time to see me. By the evening, after the race, they were completely exhausted too. So build real food and water breaks into your day on purpose, not just whenever you happen to remember. You being worn out doesn't help either of you, and your athlete will want to see you standing and present at the finish line, not running on empty.

NORMAL VS. ACTUALLY A PROBLEM

Athletes will look rough at multiple points during a 12+ hour day. Most of it is completely normal. This is not medical advice — always defer to on-course medical staff for anything you're unsure about.

NORMAL AND EXPECTED

- Looking exhausted, emotional, or unusually quiet by the run.
- Walking during the run, including extended walking — very common, often planned.
- Slower-than-hoped pacing, especially late in the bike or run.
- Brief low points ("the wall") that pass — often somewhere in the marathon, then lift.
- Not wanting to talk much when you see them on course — focus and energy conservation, not about you.

FLAG TO MEDICAL STAFF IMMEDIATELY

- Confusion, disorientation, or slurred speech.
- Stopping sweating in hot conditions, or looking flushed/hot with no sweat.
- Visible stumbling, collapsing, or inability to stay upright.
- Chest pain or difficulty breathing.
- Any first-aid tent flag, or the athlete saying something feels seriously wrong.

If you see any of these, alert the nearest race official or medical volunteer immediately — don't wait, and don't try to handle it yourself.

WHAT YOU CAN & CAN'T DO ON COURSE

Every Ironman race enforces **outside assistance rules** — real rules, not suggestions. Violating them can get your athlete penalized or disqualified. The specifics vary by race, but the general pattern is:

- **Generally OK:** cheer, hold up signs, take photos/video, verbal encouragement from the sidelines.
- **Generally NOT OK:** handing your athlete food, water, gear, or anything else outside of designated aid stations — even a banana or fresh socks over the barrier can be a violation at most races.
- **Pacing/accompanying** (riding alongside, running next to them off the course line) is against the rules at essentially every race.
- If your athlete needs something specific from you mid-race, the usual legal option is a **special needs bag** prepared before the race and handed to them at a fixed point on course — check if your race offers this.

When in doubt, don't hand anything over — cheer instead, and let the aid stations do their job.

- Finishers are often disoriented, cold, nauseated, or shaky immediately after crossing — normal, not usually an emergency, but stay alert for the warning signs in Section 6.
- Most races route finishers through a chute with volunteers, water, food, and a space blanket — let that system work, but know the family meet-up point since finishers aren't always easy to intercept right at the line.
- Bring warm, easy-to-put-on clothing (buttons/laces are hard right after finishing) and something to eat that isn't just race food.
- Avoid alcohol immediately post-race even if it's offered — dehydration plus alcohol is a bad combination.
- Expect them to be quiet, overwhelmed, or unexpectedly emotional — give them space rather than immediately asking "how was it," and let them lead.

THE DAYS AFTER

Expect low energy, sore mobility, and often an emotional flatness or even mild low mood as the huge structure of training suddenly disappears — common and temporary, but patience and low-key support helps.

FILL IN FOR YOUR SPECIFIC RACE

Do this once you have your race's official athlete/spectator guide — usually released a few weeks before race day.

RACE NAME & DATE

.....

ATHLETE'S BIB NUMBER

.....

SWIM START TIME

.....

SWIM CUTOFF TIME

.....

BIKE CUTOFF TIME

.....

OVERALL RACE CUTOFF

.....

TRACKING APP / SMS SERVICE

.....

BEST SWIM-EXIT / T1 SPOT

.....

BEST BIKE VIEWING SPOT(S)

.....

BEST RUN VIEWING SPOT(S)

.....

FAMILY/FINISHER MEET-UP POINT

.....

SPECIAL NEEDS BAG DEADLINE

.....

NEAREST MEDICAL TENTS

.....

PARKING/TRANSIT PLAN

.....

EMERGENCY MEDICAL CONTACT

.....

SECTION 10 — PRINT OR SCREENSHOT THIS

ONE-PAGE QUICK REFERENCE

Carry this with you on race day.

BEFORE THE DAY

Tracking app downloaded + bib number saved, spectator guide read, transport/parking planned, your own kit packed (food, water, charger, cash, sunscreen, layer, seating).

ON COURSE

Cheer, don't hand anything over except at aid stations or via special needs bag; pick 2–3 fixed spectating spots rather than chasing the course; expect a 12–15+ hour day — and eat and drink on a real schedule, not just when you remember.

WATCH FOR REAL PROBLEMS

Confusion, no sweating in heat, stumbling/collapse, chest pain or breathing trouble — flag to medical staff immediately, don't try to fix it yourself.

AT THE FINISH

Bring warm clothes + real food, skip alcohol for now, expect them to be quiet or overwhelmed, let them lead.

AFTER

Expect a few low, flat days as training structure disappears — normal and temporary.

This is an independent guide written from personal race-support experience. It is not produced, endorsed, or affiliated with The IRONMAN Group or any race organizer. Always confirm your specific race's rules, cutoffs, and spectator logistics against its official athlete and spectator guides.