

# San Juan 70.3 – March 17, 2013

---

This race report is in 2 parts: The Race and San Juan as a destination.

## The Race

The San Juan 70.3 is a fairly new race, this being its third year. Cait and Tim did this race in its inaugural year and liked it well enough to add it to the race calendar this year. Mike, Cait and Tim are all doing Ironman Texas, and this race fits nicely as a tune up for the full Ironman in May, so we all decided to go. I have 2 clients who I haven't seen in a while (they live just outside DC), and they are both dinged up – one not running; one running a lot, but not cycling. So we decided to do a relay and I would do the bike.

We arrived in San Juan 3 days before the race, which was held March 17, 2013. Because we arrived at night, our first day consisted of going to the grocery store and getting situated in our condo. Pedro Gomez and Chris Baird were both staying with us as well.

On Friday morning we got up early and went to check out the course, do some easy workouts on it and pick up our race packets. But first we put our bikes together. There is nothing like the way that the paraphernalia of six athletes takes over a small condo. But it's nothing like the way it can take over a mini-van.



Version One



After Pedro rearranged.

We inched our way through traffic – the roads and traffic in San Juan are outrageous – and we finally made it 3 miles to the host hotel for packet pick-up and a swim on the swim course. The swim is point-to-point and starts at one of the beaches at the Coronado Hotel. The swim makes a big horse-shoe, then goes under a bridge and over to a set of steps at the Hilton.

After the swim, we went to packet pick-up and the obligatory stop at the expo to pick up whatever was forgotten or misplaced by TSA. In my case, it was a bento box. A quick stop to sign some autographs – not me, Cait – and we were on our way to the bike course.

We tried to pick a part of the course with the least amount of traffic, and it wasn't easy to do, so after about 15 minutes of hugging the shoulder, ducking under branches and being beeped at by Puerto Rican drivers who will use any excuse to lean on their horns, we decided that the bikes worked just fine and any more time out here would be a bad thing, rather than a good one. A 10 minute run to make sure the legs still worked and we were piled back into the mini-van.

Saturday morning started early with Cait having to do a photo shoot for one of her new sponsors – 2XU – then home for a big carbo load breakfast: orange juice, papayas, and strawberry cornmeal pancakes. I'd like to say we put our feet up like experienced triathletes, but we actually spent about an hour walking around Old San Juan looking for a hardware store. I had an adjustment I wanted to make to my bike and I could only do it with some nuts and bolts. FYI – if you need to find a hardware store in Puerto Rico, just say "True Value" and they understand what you are talking about.

By mid-afternoon we had the bikes good to go, and I finally did put my feet up for a bit and caught up on some emails and Facebook posts. Then late in the afternoon we went back down to the race start for athletes' meetings, bike-racking, and for me to hook up with my relay-mates, Misko and Erica. After some very good recon of the race site, we all went back to our respective 'homes' to settle in for the night.

Everyone was up by 4 am race morning and the ritual was underway. Light easy-to-digest breakfast, double-checking the bags, topping off water bottles and several coats of sunscreen. Mike and I had a cab come get us, and because the pros didn't have to rack bikes until race morning, the 4 pros rolled out at the same time we did. Half an hour later we were all in transition doing final set-up to the bikes and then the long walk (1.5 mi?) over to the swim start.

Tim, Pedro and Chris were in wave 1. Mike was in wave 4. Misko was in wave 14! I waited until Mike's wave was called to line up and headed back over to the swim exit. I found a perfect spot just off the swim ramp. Friday, when we had come out to check out the swim, there were two guys working on the exit ramp for a very long time. Finally, one of them donned fins and a diving mask and started diving around the base of the ramp. I watched for a while trying to figure out what the problem was. I thought maybe he was clearing rocks or looking for glass. After about 15 minutes of diving in the water and coming up empty handed, he said to me, "All these rocks. You'd think I could find the one I want". I asked him what he was looking for and he said he needed a rock to stabilize the ramp so it wouldn't wobble. I thought to myself, "why not use a bunch of rocks?" but I kept that to myself. I didn't need another job.



Cut to race morning. I am on the other side of that exit ramp and I see a narrow set of stairs coming down the other side. When I say narrow, I mean from the front of the step to the back, not side-to-side. "Oh my God", I thought. "Cait is going to do a face plant".

I had set my watch when Tim went into the water and sure enough, 26 minutes later a pack emerged from the water with Tim on Pedro's heels. He would later tell me that Pedro was on his heels until they hit the ramp and after Pedro passed him on the ramp he started to claw his way past Pedro but then thought, "I'm not here to win the race up the ramp!"

Five minutes later the women started coming out of the water and exactly 5 minutes 29 seconds after Tim was Cait! Mike had gone into the water 10 minutes after Cait, so I expected him between 12-13 minutes after she came out. While I stood there watching, several pros kept coming out of the water (it was a VERY deep field) and then a couple people from the wave ahead of Mike, then a couple more pros, then - "OMG!" – the lone blue cap, Mike Lamie 12.5 minutes after Cait. The next guy in Mike's age

group wouldn't come out for 2 more minutes (Mark Allen's right hand man – Luis Vargas), and for what it's worth, Mike had the 6<sup>th</sup> fastest age group swim. Not bad for an old guy!

Misko wouldn't even go in the water for another 10 minutes so I slowly made my way towards transition. It's  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from the swim exit to transition (seriously!) so I stopped at the hotel to use the rest room, and then headed over. I double-checked my bike, changed into bike shoes and helmet, grabbed another cold drink and headed over to the relay pen to wait for Misko. There was something like 35 other relay teams, so the relay pen was crowded. Every time someone's swimmer came in, the whole crowd let out a roar.

Now, being the cyclist on a relay, you don't get that chance to warm up with a swim. Often a relay cyclist will bring her trainer and keep the legs moving while waiting for the swimmer. But there was no way I was bringing a trainer to San Juan. My plan was to jog around to get the heart rate up, but there was no shade and it was starting to get hot. I figured it was better to try to keep cool than to overheat trying to get the heart rate up. That means I would have to be conservative for the first part of my race until I warmed up, which was going to be hard with a tailwind I was dying to take advantage of.

I saw Misko in the distance and got ready to grab the chip and head for the bike. After a quick exchange and I jogged over to my bike, grabbed it off the rack and ran the bike over to the mount line. Again, we were in the last wave, so there wasn't chaos at the mount line. I jumped on my bike and took off.

One disadvantage of being on a relay and being in Wave 14, was that if I calculated right and everyone had the race they should have, I wouldn't get to see Cait, Mike or Tim finish. But this course is a lollipop: 12 miles out, then two 16-mile loops, then 12 miles back. With any kind of luck, I would see one or all of them as I headed out.

The first one I saw was Tim, or rather, he saw me first. He shouted, "She's doing great!" I love that about Tim. All he's thinking of is Cait's race. Then I saw a couple of women. A couple of women I didn't know (ITU racers), Leanda Cave, and – holy shit – a pink cap! "CAIT!" "MOM!" We both screamed at each other at the same time. Tim wasn't kidding! She was in something like 5<sup>th</sup> place with about 8-10 miles to go. If she runs like she usually does, she could be third! This field was so stacked (like Kona with a few ITU racers thrown in) that she had hoped to be top 10.

Anyway, as I said, there is a 12-mile section before you hit the loop part of the course. There was a good tailwind starting to pick up and I wanted to take advantage of that. However, before you get to the



loops, you make a series of turns, then get on one highway for a bit, take the exit ramp, get on another highway, take that exit ramp and ride on a straightaway before you see one of the turnarounds. Fortunately, the entire bike course is closed to traffic! Unfortunately, the pavement is horrible. The only part of the bike course that has elevation is the 12-mile highway section that you hit twice. So 32 miles of the course is pretty flat. But flat and fast don't always go hand-in-hand, despite what the brochure says. This was one of the slowest flat courses I've ever seen. We knew it was going to be windy,

and by the feel of the tailwind picking up there was going to be an equally fierce head wind. And as the day goes on, the wind get stronger. And we also knew to watch out for iguanas darting out into the road. Yup. Just like squirrels. And you see the road kill EVERYWHERE! Every time I heard a rustling in the bushes my hands started tingling.

What we didn't know was the pavement was horrible. It went from highway with potholes, to cement with ridges, to smooth pavement to chipseal. So you had to brace yourself for a pothole, or hang on tight on the chipseal, and refuel when the pavement was good. To make matters worse, the earlier waves experienced a downpour on the course! We didn't have rain, but there were still puddles when we got to the far end of the loop. Each end of the loop had a hair-pin turn, so you had to do that 3 times. And finally, because it was 2 loops, the course was congested.

Here's how dangerous this road was: right after I saw Cait, she crashed. She was reaching for a salt table with one hand and the other hand vibrated right off the bike. When she crashed she punctured her disk wheel and bent the derailleur hanger. It took her about 5 minutes to dust herself off and fix the bike well enough to start riding again. Mirinda Carfrae crashed essentially the same way, and Tim O'Donnell crashed on one of the hairpin turns. But that's not the worst. A good friend of Cait and Tim, Zach Ruble, went down HARD on one of the hairpin turns. He was taken away by ambulance and ended up with a broken hip and femur. (See my article on Racing in a Foreign Country).

Because I needed all of my concentration to hang onto the bike, I didn't try to look for Mike and was hoping that he was doing the same. His bike split was 2:30, so we had to have passed each other a few minutes after I passed Cait and he must have just missed her crash.

As I started to warm up on the bike I was feeling pretty good. I reminded myself to keep my heart rate down, even though I wanted to take advantage of the tail wind, knowing that a head wind was coming at me as soon as we turned. I took my salt tabs and ate my gel whenever we were on smooth pavement, and ended up going through 4 bottles of Gatorade.

I had a fast but careful ride to the turn around and as expected, met a wall of wind right after I turned. I hung on for 8 miles, sometimes riding in the small chain ring because the wind was so strong and the bumpy road made the bike difficult to control. By now, the day was really heating up, so in some ways, the head wind was welcome. Another hairpin turn, and a repeat of the tailwind/headwind scenario.



Once off the loops and onto the highway we were in the worst of the head wind. The wind and vibrations from the road had taken a toll on me and the last 12 miles were the toughest. I was feeling dizzy – probably from the bumpy road – so I tried not to raise and lower my head and instead focused on a line on the pavement a few feet ahead of me. The people I was passing were weaving all over the road so every couple of minutes I did have to look up and warn them I was on their left. Finally I was at the series of turns back into transition and I jumped off the bike just before the dismount line.

I was starting to get a little tunnel vision as I was running in with the bike and it made me think of Cait and the way she finishes every race, so I wasn't afraid. I told my legs they knew what to do and I ran over to the bike rack, racked my bike, took off my helmet and ran over to where Erica was waiting.

It was just about noon when I gave Erica the chip and it was VERY hot at this point and she was facing a very difficult run. I went back to my bike, poured some water over my head, put on my sneakers and sunscreen and as soon as I started heading towards the finish line I heard them calling Mike's name. We saw each other right away and just then we saw Misko, then Cait, Tim and the rest of the gang. Someone had told me that Cait finished 7<sup>th</sup> and I was a little surprised that she hadn't finished higher, but some of the ITU girls can run. That's when she told me that she had crashed. and the big bandage on her arm or the cuts on her leg! She was thrilled with her race, though, as well she should have been.

Mike, on the other hand, had a very tough run. The run course in San Juan is very hilly and very exposed, so even if you don't feel the effects of the heat when you are running into the wind, it's sapping your strength. And you DO feel it when the wind is at your back. We sat in the shade, drank cold drinks, and as soon as we were feeling better, Mike and I went to Misko and Erica's hotel room to shower off, while everyone else went back to our condo.

It seems that we were no sooner finished showering that we headed back to the finish line just in time to see Erica finish. She had done that half marathon in 2:03. A great time on its own, but with the heat and hills, outstanding!



The run course.



More of the run course.

Would we do this race again? I thought the swim and run were pretty cool, even though they were tough. And I really like a tough bike course as well, as long as it's safe. If they repaved the course (not likely) it would be safer, or would it? People would be going even faster, and on two tight loops, that might not be a good thing. I asked Mike if he would do this race again, and he said, "Yeah, but I wouldn't want to do it in Puerto Rico". Maybe you need to read our thoughts on the destination in order for that to make sense.

## The Destination

There is nothing like heading to a tropical island in the middle of March – especially in the middle of a tough New England winter. Throw in a race and a chance to be with friends and family, and it's a recipe for a perfect vacation. So Mike and I were really looking forward to heading to San Juan to do the 70.3 with Cait, Tim, Pedro, Misko and Erica.

We have been to San Juan a couple of times, but only as a stopover on our way to St. Croix. And every time we've been to SJ, we've walked away thinking that Puerto Rico is the loudest country on earth. Or at least the loudest one we've been to. We were there for an overnight on the way to St. Croix last year and every conversation is held at what most people call their 'outside voice'. All night long we were awakened by these high decibel conversations that sounded like they were taking place right outside our bedroom window. Which is bizarre, because we were staying on the second floor.

As I write this, I am sitting in the Newark Airport, and no one is speaking above a whisper. But when we arrived in San Juan a week ago, every conversation was at full volume and they were all competing with each other. We figured that once we got away from public spaces we would get some peace and quiet.

We were renting a condo in Old San Juan that I had booked online from a booking service that I have used many times with huge success. We called the rental agent on our way to the condo and she said she would meet us there and we could unload our bags and then go find a place to park. Sensing my confusion, she told us that parking in Old San Juan is scarce, and that we would need to drive around until we found a space, or we could park in a garage that was a couple of blocks away. Our party had less than the normal amount of luggage for six people, but we also had 5 bike boxes.

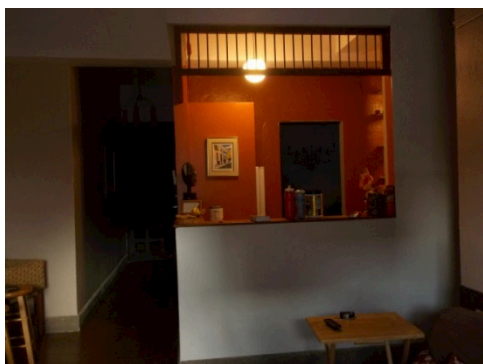
OK, fine – we'd figure it out. We quickly navigated to Old San Juan and turned down Calle Del Sol. Or we TRIED to turn down Calle Del Sol. The cobblestone streets are so narrow that one car can barely fit down. Each street had bumper to bumper parking on at least one side as well, so it was a tight squeeze fitting the minivan down to our condo.



We double-parked at our destination and unloaded all the bike boxes and luggage. This is when we found out about surprise #2: it was a 3 flight walk-up! I usually do better than this when picking rentals, but none of this was mentioned on the website.

After we lugged everything up 3 flights of stairs and unpacked, we quickly showered (no hot water) and went to bed. We noticed that things were still pretty lively at 9pm, but didn't REALLY notice it until lights out. Once again with the loud voices, plus horns blaring and dogs barking and there was no way to shut the windows. Even though we had air conditioning, the windows were louvered slats.

I was determined not to be the kind of American traveler who travels the globe but always wants things to be just like home. So Mike and I pushed the twin beds together, and I put my earplugs in and tried to sleep.



Our tiny condo.



Our dorm room.

That was Thursday night. By Friday night, you could add loud thumping music to the cacophony. Not to worry, it stops around 3 am. By Saturday night – the night before the race – we had a plan. Cait had brought earplugs and an eye mask (she always travels with these), AND she brought enough earplugs for everyone! We all gladly accepted – all except Mike. For some reason, he didn't want to try the earplugs. Big mistake. Saturday night is when they REALLY get the party going, and in addition to all of the above, some idiot was playing the bongo drums. Somewhere around midnight, we heard several louds cracks that sounded like gunfire and then (relative) silence. I'll admit, I was more relieved at the silence than concerned about the potential gunfire. Mike, Tim and I all met in the hallway, and although there was nothing funny about this, all we could do was laugh. About half an hour later we heard the same thing, but I think at this point we were pretty sure it was fire crackers.

I managed to fall back to sleep, but Mike didn't. An hour later he woke me up to suggest we move the beds away from the wall and it did mute things slightly. I fell back to sleep, but – you guessed it – Mike didn't. I vaguely remember him waking me to tell me he was going out to find ear plugs (he didn't want to wake Cait). Not sure where he went or how long he was gone, but at 4 am when it was "go" time, there was a package of earplugs on the bedside table.

Oddly, the only time it got quiet there was Sunday night. So as charming as Old San Juan is (I have some nice pictures), it's not the place to stay when you are there to race. IF we were to do this race again, the only way to do it would be to stay at the host hotel. Then we wouldn't have to drive the congested streets to get to your meetings, and other race obligations, and we could be those Americans who travel the world, but has all the comforts of home!

