

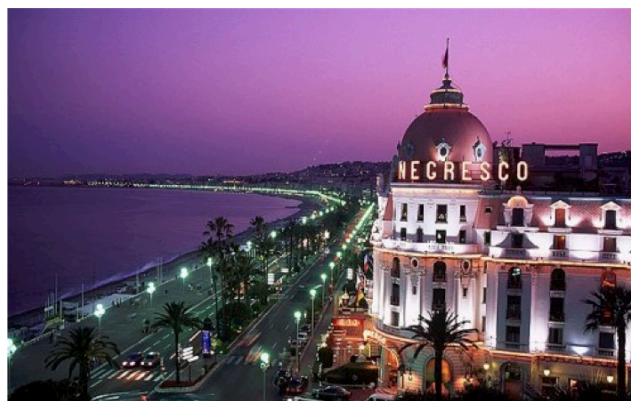
IRONMAN FRANCE 2012 – ROBERT BOTARD

First of all, what an amazing experience!! The whole family left Wednesday afternoon from Houston and arrived direct into Paris Thursday morning about 8:30. Luggage and bike arrived with no problems – what a huge relief. We had about 2 hours to work our way from the plane to the train that would take us to Nice. It was a little confusing but we made it. The first thing I learned is that no matter how “great” I ever thought I would be at The Amazing Race – in reality, I would be the first one off the show. Granted, they’re not usually ‘racing’ with 4 kids and a bike in a suitcase, but I’m just sayin’.

The train headed out of the station in Paris within 2 seconds of the scheduled departure time, they don’t kid around. That was the case throughout the whole trip, whether in Nice on the coast or metro stops in the heart of Paris.

The “speed” train still took about 6 hours to work its way to the French Riviera but it was worth every minute. Have to say the kids were a little sick of travelling by the time we got there – ok, well before we got there – but it was a great way to see some of the countryside and we were able to ride through Cannes and several other wonderful places along the coast for maybe an hour or two. All in, much better way to get there than flying from Paris straight into Nice – at least the first time, I might fly there on the next trip!!

I had rented a “flat” right on the beach and the owner arranged a driver to pick us up at the train station. We were right next to the historic Hotel Negresco – the hotel is on the right and we’re in the building just to the left. I circled the first door on our balcony (there were only two other doors that lead to the balcony (!)...



But back to the story...

Thursday evening we just settled in, grabbed some grub, picked up some gelato, and walked the beach/promenade. In the back of my head, as I’m thinking about the race a couple weeks ahead, my ‘casual’ goal was to make sure I finished before the sun set. By the way, there’s a 16-hour time limit on this race. Not really sure why. Anyway, about finishing before the sun goes down... What I didn’t realize is that it’s summer solstice. Sun doesn’t go down until like 9:30 this time of year. With a 6:30 swim start – and it was as sunny as it is at noon here – I figured I should be able to make it in before dark!

Friday I put the bike together early in the morning before anybody else got up. Once we made some breakfast, we all wandered the 3/4s of a mile or so down to transition/Ironman expo. Fortunately, and this is a theme of the whole trip in France, we had no language issues at all. There might have been a few people here or there that didn’t speak English fluently, but it was no problem figuring out what we needed to do or where we

needed to go. The expo was typical although it was neat to see a few vendors that I've never seen before. Picked up a t-shirt or two that nobody back here will likely have. Another neat thing was that I had signed my 3 boys up for the IronKids race. Just a little swim in the ocean and a short run down the promenade while the rest of us were out on the bike. But they got a cool t-shirt and a tremendous experience, they loved it.



We picked up their registrations and numbers on Friday as well. Then it was pretty much become a tourist for the rest of Friday and Saturday.

We hung out at the beach and walked around the town and saw the sights, enjoyed the food, maybe a little wine. Just really kicked back and relaxed. I went for a jog on Saturday and rode the bike a little – really just to make sure it wouldn't fall apart after –I– put it back together after the travels. We truly enjoyed ourselves on the French Riviera – what a venue, what a treat! One thing about the beach though – there is no sand. At all. It's all pebbles and rocks. You could

tell who the few locals were – they walked casually over the “terrain” while the rest of us stepped gingerly to the water where we jumped in immediately, just to get off our feet. Hopefully you can see in this pic...

What you don't see in this particular pic is what my boys TRULY LOVED about Nice – it's a topless beach. My 9-year-old, Luke, well, he was just giddy. Could hardly contain himself. I've got a couple pics if you really need them!



Sunday – race day... I got up and walked barefoot to transition – no need to take an extra bag if I don't need to. I may not have mentioned but every single day is glorious along this coast. The expectation was certainly that today would be just like that. And it was. The sun was coming up at 5:45, just another, incredible day.

It's a beach start, two loop course, no real waves in the water, more like a bay swim maybe. Music is pumping, crowds are growing. One of the random things about this race, something I've never seen before – cheerleaders. I mean full-on, skimpy outfits and pom-poms and all, with skirts or whatever, all coordinated and everything. Pretty fun stuff.



Have to say, I've never had less nervousness regarding a swim, ever. Now part of that is having done a few more races than before, and part is because it's a wetsuit race. But more than anything else, before, the scariest part for me has always been the swim. In Nice, I was VERY concerned about the bike ride. Look out at the buoys, swim around for a while. Between the salt and the wetsuit, I knew I'd eventually finish the swim. But the bike? And the mountains? I had essentially no idea what was ahead of me. I mean I'd seen the bike course profile and all. But those are lines on a piece of paper. The computrainer is great and I

used the dvd/video to train for St Croix. And that was huge, I mean I really knew where to push and where to lay back a little on the real course because I had pretty much ridden it a dozen times. Well, there's no Nice dvd/video. And to be fully honest, I hadn't trained as hard as I should have for this race. I was going into this bike ride more than a little unprepared. But so be it, it would be a great experience.

The swim wasn't my fastest by any measure. There was a little bit of "save yourself for the rest of the race". But I was also enjoying the swim. There's a reason I picked this race – some of it was the challenge of the bike course but some of it was the water. This was the most amazing water I've ever swum in, and that compares to St. Croix. There's a reason they call it Cote d'Azur. I'd say it was the clearest water I've ever seen, but that's not quite the case. It's clear, but you lose depth perception because about 10 feet beyond your hand it just starts fading into deeper and deeper shades of blue. I've been in Waimea Bay in Hawaii. You can float in that water and see 30 feet beyond your feet to the sandy bottom. Here in Nice, I'm not really sure how to describe it – it's just blue.



Out of the water and to the bike. This transition is set up along the sidewalk/road that runs parallel to the beach. Point is, it is the skinniest, longest transition I've ever been in. I think I was on row 46 or something. Later when I came off the bike, I asked the guy I was jogging through transition next to if he thought they counted the miles we run in transition as part of our 26.2 – he said he thought probably not!

Off onto the bike... the first 25 miles or so were relatively flat. You're coming off the water so everything is uphill to some degree. But it wasn't until somewhere after mile 25 that you hit your first big climb. It's short, maybe ½ a mile at most, could be less than that, but it's 11 or 14% or something. Either way, not that big of a deal after St. Croix.

Nevertheless, there were a handful of people who chose to walk this nice little intro. As a side note, I met a guy and his wife from Britain at the expo who was coming back to race this for the 2nd time. He had been here 3 years earlier and on this steep climb, his bike snapped – just broke apart. He said it was literally his bottle cage on the downtube that held it together for the split second before it all fell apart. If not for the cage, he would have crashed hard. Saw him after the race – he survived this time around.

You can check out the profile of the course online sometime. I'll sum it up – up and down to about 4,000 feet for the next 50 miles or so. It was everything I imagined and a whole lot more. I promise you I set a record for the amount of sweat I poured out of my body. Mind you, it's not blazing hot out there, nice and sunny, but maybe 85 or 90 as we head into the mountains. Look at the profile though and you'll see some incredible (for a Houston guy) stretches of loooong climbs. And here's the weird thing, I'm passing guys. Ok, not like blowing by everyone but getting surprised looks from people as I come by them. I'm not killing myself either, but certainly working hard. I mean I think my kneecaps and shins were sweating. But I'm going by people and in the back of my head I'm thinking 'what do they know that I don't? what else is up ahead, how much worse does it get?' And the truth is it never really gotterribly worse. Just a constant grind, at least through about mile 50 or so. I remember you telling me "I can get you up the mountains, no problem, it'll be the coming down..."

I had scouted the profile the night before, I figured it was the least I could do! Between 50 and 80 it was more up and down than straight up. Gotta say two things...I probably could have gone a little faster up the mountains. But there were some trade-offs. The first of which is I wanted to see the course, the surroundings. I've never been in this area and it is exactly like you would imagine, straight out of a movie or something. Gorgeous, incredible, beautiful – words can't describe this ride. It was truly overwhelming, unlike anything I had experienced or seen. You look out and you see incredible vistas, rolling hills. You climb up a road and at the top is some Italian looking villa and you look out and think "this guy lives here?" You can see for hundreds of miles, overlooking some valley with a stream running through it and... it's just too much. I thought maybe I would just stop, somehow get absorbed into the culture and never be seen or heard from again back in the states. But then I wouldn't be able to brag about having done this race!

The other thing, for me, is that I had to balance racing and the scenery with the concern of plummeting to my death if I take my eyes off the road for too long. Barricades on the side of the road – ha, for what? No need for that apparently. And when there was a barricade, or a little piece of wood held up by little support ‘beams’, I literally thought “if I go down and slide that direction, I HAVE to hit or grab onto one of the beams.” The f*^king beams were so wide apart my bike and I would have slide right in between them! And there’s no forgiving a mistake on this course. You go off the edge and it’s not a broken bone or something, it’s game over. No one would even hear your scream as you hit the side of the mountain 500 feet below. Thanks for coming out today, hope your family enjoys their trip back by themselves!!

Fair to say I also wasn’t sticking completely to the nutrition plan either. I managed to take down the vast majority of the gels and almost all the salt-tabs. But staying up on the recommended amount of fluids was a challenge. I’m just used to a very flat course where you can close your eyes, text a few people, take down some fluids whenever you want. I barely had time to get aero, I was up on my hands most of the time.

But it was beautiful. We rolled through half a dozen little towns along the way. The people were all out cheering us on. I have no idea what these people do all day. Looked like make bread, grow grapes, make wine, and make love. Whatever it is, I wish I was them. Really. Very much so.

Anyway, by about mile 70 I was cursing no one more than myself for having signed up for this stupid thing. And not just this race – all Ironman races! It has to be the dumbest idea anyone has ever come up with. Again, I kid you not, I think the only reason I kept going was so I could tell people “oh, yes, Ironman in the French “Alps”, yea, that was a really fun race. What? Yea, it was a real challenge, but man, what a good fun day that was.” And I’ve said that, a few times already, oh so coolly and casually. Bullshit! That ride was out of control. Don’t get me wrong, I always knew I was going to get to the finish line, and I’d get there before they set the fireworks off – but I was beginning to wonder. Ok, not really. Well maybe!!

But I had looked at the profile the night before, remember. And the one thing I recognized was that all I really had to do was get to mile 80 or so, and then it was pretty much downhill. Well, they’re not kidding around, I mean seriously. I think it was mile 78 or so when you crest over a peak and then take off. Blazing. I’m going 30, 35mph with the brakes on. Just flying. And there’s this euphoria that comes over you and makes you realize maybe you will make it to the finish. No, not maybe – you really are going to. This goes on for probably 12 of the happiest/scariest miles I’ve ever ridden. And then it stops and the course turns back up again. Imperceptibly. It’s maybe a 2 or 3% incline! but you curse it like you were in the Himalayas. And then, like an angel, you head off again, down. But this time, down some of the most harrowing turns I’ve ever seen in my life. It’s beautiful! Really. I couldn’t believe what I was doing. What I was riding.

Now at this point, my forearms are more tired than my legs. I managed a couple times to drop down into aero position because I had to take a break, I didn’t think I could hold myself up any longer. But the general idea for the next 10 miles or so, was to stay as close as I could to the guy in front of me. Mind you, that’s like 10-15 bike lengths behind. But I needed to use somebody to create a ‘line’ for me to follow around these blind curves. Invariably that guy would trail away – I could never keep up with them on these downhills. And when he moved off into the distance, I’d become a little more timid for a while until the next guy flew by me and I tried to track him around the turns. Honestly, it was a fun little game I played, entertained myself with. And it was a comforting way of getting down the mountain. Especially since I saw at least 8 guys sitting on the side of the road all bandaged up, blood still dripping down their legs, bike all torn up. On the one small corner where you could possibly have landed, there was actually a helicopter loading two guys up, getting ready to take them off. I figured a few minutes slower on the bike was worth the rest of my life!

About mile 100, maybe a little sooner, you're pretty much off the mountains and flattening into the coastline. I was able to pass many of the guys that flew by me on the way down the 'edge'. That was nice. I was still one of the slower ones overall on the bike, there's no doubt. But what I learned is these Europeans aren't really great climbers. They were very measured and reserved in their ascent, for the most part. But they are fearless on the way down. Just utterly daring. It was great fun to watch them.

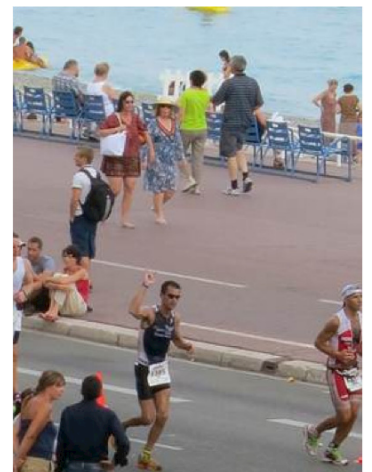
My wife asked me later, do you think about or worry about having to run a whole marathon – still – after riding all that? I couldn't have cared less. I could have run back to Paris. I was never really terrified on the mountains. But it was harrowing. The thought of being on my own two feet – I feel a rush of calmness just thinking about it now. Nothing 'fun' about running 26 miles. But at that point I knew I had made it through the most challenging thing I've ever "raced". And I probably could have walked the marathon and finished before the cutoff if I had to.



I headed out for the run. This is a 4 loop course up and down the promenade that runs right along the beach. Nothing particularly exciting - EXCEPT FOR THE FACT THAT YOU'RE RUNNING A MARATHON ALONG THE FRENCH RIVIERA!!! But truth be told, it is as flat as a pancake. You get to see/pass by every participant on the course (except for the few yahoos that finished before I even got off the bike!). Spectators on both sides, cheering you on. Plenty of young (and old), beautiful, rich people just hanging out on the beach [yes, some topless]. Plenty of Ferraris and Bentley's cruising by, yes, topless, with people inside looking out

thinking "what on earth are these people doing?!" Again, I could have moved across that course faster than I did. But it was more a mental challenge at this point than a physical one. I'm not going to win this race or come anywhere near that. Just keep moving and keep it respectable... "how slow can I go and still make it in before ___?" That somewhat predetermined number came out to be 13 hours. I stopped and gave the kids kisses and high-5s a few times. I tried to enjoy what I was doing, soak up the fact that I was doing it where I was doing it – something I am very fortunate to be able to enjoy. Truly a remarkable experience.

So far away from all the race action – ha ha... my son took this pic from the balcony of our flat. The family had been to the beach a couple of times already, out to eat (probably more than once), probably some sight-seeing, anyway, they were getting a little tired by the time I got to the run so they just cheered me on from the comfort of "home" for a little while, until I got closer to finishing!



I finished the race, came across the finish line, turned around and gave the crowd a wonderful wave and couldn't have been any more thrilled. In all honesty, at that point, I really did kind of feel like 'it wasn't THAT big of a deal – just a fabulous way to spend a day in southern France.' It's an experience I will never forget.

As usual, I wasn't physically broken or anything. Could walk and talk just fine and felt pretty good. I will say I was a little concerned that I wouldn't be able to get any food/nutrients in me for some time – the transition area was set-up a little differently than you might expect. Had to get all your stuff, bike and all, and then head back over to the expo area. I guess you could have gone straight to the expo area and then come all the way back. But it had been a long day for the kids and family and they were hanging out at the finish line, so I told them to just hang there a little longer and enjoy the 'show' as the racers crossed the finish line. I jumped into the med tent and asked them to load me up with an IV. They were a little concerned about me but I explained I felt fine, had just heard from several friends that it sped up recovery, so the nurse

said fine and stabbed me and I was getting rejuvenated before I knew it. It did make a difference too, it was about an hour and change before I was settled in to our place and could get some real food in me, but I felt great.



Showered up and hung out on the balcony and watched the runners go by as the sun set. Just a little before 10pm, I hurriedly dragged the kids outside. They were like – why? Then they shut up as we walked outside and saw the fireworks going off just a little ways down the road.

Got up early Monday before the rest of the gang and cleaned up all the equipment, took the bike apart and packed it up. Once they were all up and moving, we headed over to Monaco for the day.

Tuesday we were up and at the train station by 7:30 for the 6-hour ride back up to Paris. I could give you as much detail, and probably even more, about our time in Paris – but I'll only say a few things. I am a beach kind of guy, that's just who I am. Given a list of 100 choices, I'd probably pick "marooned on an island" as my top choice. Nice, France was overwhelming. But Paris – have you ever been there?? OMG, I love it. If it was cheaper and easier to get to, I'd be writing this note from the banks of the river or at some coffee shop

or from outside the Louvre gardens or who knows where. Even with the kids in tow, it was one of the most amazing places I've ever been. The people, the food, the culture, the sights, the way of life. Even just the architecture was amazing. The history – my goodness. You guys up on the east coast, you have a little taste of that kind of stuff. We have nothing like it here in Texas. It was simply more than I could absorb. You could visit for months, maybe years, and never be able to take it all in. I literally stopped several times and just took a deep breath and looked around and tried to absorb all that we were surrounded with. We walked everywhere. Well, except for the day we spent at Disneyland Paris – d'oh! We saw all the big tourist sites and even kind of just wandered around a little.

Last night, watching the end of the Tour de France, I was sitting around with the kids and they were beside themselves as the guys rode past the place on the Champs Elysees where we stopped at a corner shop to grab crepes and hot dogs stuffed into French baguettes. I paused the tv on the aerial shot so I could point out the building near the Louvre where our apartment was. We took 600+ pics on the vacation and I'll spare you the slideshow but I truly had the time of my life on this vacation. And the really neat thing about Paris, especially, was the kids seemed to absorb the depth and so much about what they were immersed in – at least a lot more than I had imagined they ever would.

I absolutely think it was a great experience for them, something they'll never forget. I know I won't.

Well, like I said, that's probably a lot more than you needed or expected but I wanted you to have the full picture. Truth is, if not for your coaching, I would never have had the confidence to think I could ever get 'over' that course. Thank you for giving me that.

Talk to you soon. Thank you coach,

Rob

