

How do you become a professional Ironman triathlete in 2010?

popQuiz!

- A. Get some sponsors
- B. Pay \$1300
- C. Be a talented swim/bike/runner
- D. Be a talented swim/runner
- E. Or A & D!

PRO HOW!

Let's make these questions multiple choice for all you Gen-Y athletes. I'm marking the exams. Check the correct answer after you've done the back reading below!

TEXT BY MITCH ANDERSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DELLY CARR/ANDY CUMMING

I'm pretty cranky about a lot of things these days. You know, kids aren't as respectful as they used to be. Bike riders in triathlon aren't as good as they once were. There used to be less drafting back in the day... I won't go on.

But the race is still there. Ironman is still for the hard man or woman, and not for the faint hearted. It's difficult for agers and professional athletes alike, even though there's more of both on course in 2010 than 1990. Sure there's pacing now (legalised drafting), better wheels and wetsuits,

but a lumpy course will break 'em up. There's still a long swim and bike leg, and even a marathon run.

Unfortunately, the prize money is also the same as 20 years ago, still capped out at US\$50,000. So now I'm cranky all over again because I have another licensing fee to pay as a pro. I am a medical doctor, and my indemnity insurance and registration is half that of my professional fees as a triathlete!

Before you say, "I'm just an age grouper and the pros should pay a fee like everyone else," be warned that your fees are not fixed by the government or

the Reserve Bank. Your fees are fixed by the same organisation that has just upped the ante for the pros. And there's a lot more age groupers than pros, which means there is more money to be squeezed out of you and your fellow racers. So, by that logic, you're next in the sights of the World Triathlon Corporation (WTC). In addition, the pros pay a licence of around \$500 to Triathlon Australia (TA). I'm guessing this is a little bit higher than your state licence. But we do get the benefit of travel insurance and prize money, so it all evens out at tax time.

Since I turned pro in 2003, things have changed a lot in Ironman. After finishing 21st overall in 2002, I decided I wanted to race in Hawaii as a pro in 2003. I'd won my age group (25-29) in Kona going sub-nine (8:59) and the next logical step was to try and turn a dollar. I finished ninth in New Zealand in March 2003 and got my coveted pro slot – 5.8 per cent behind Cameron Brown. Then I went on and finished 20th at Ironman Hawaii in October. The world was my oyster! I'd made US\$600 in prize money for the year and finished in the top 20 at the World Championship! Life was so good that I didn't even have to pay for my bikes anymore!

Now consider the same scenario with today's rulings. If I was a neo-pro, I'd have missed out on my slot in New Zealand because I finished over five per cent behind Cam Brown. Similarly, Ironman Champion and World Long Course champion Lisbeth Kristensen would have missed out on her slot, and not gone on to finish seventh in Kona in 2004. Most likely, I wouldn't have had the chance to race in New Zealand at all because the pro licence would have cost me a prohibitive AUD\$1,300 (TA plus WTC). I would have qualified for my prize money in New Zealand, but sixth-placed Andrea Fisher would have missed out on her money, despite having finished in the top 15 in Kona in the '90s and consistently finishing in the top five in almost every race she entered.

The hypotheticals of a single race in 2003 make a mockery of the new system devised by the WTC. Here's the executive summary of the rules for pro licence, called the PMP or Professional Membership Program:

1. Mandatory for pros who wish to race Ironman or 70.3
2. Cost is US\$750 if you hold a pro licence in your own country
3. Provides race entry and Ironman anti-doping program membership
4. Pros must finish within five per cent of winner's time to qualify for Kona
5. Pros must finish within eight per cent of winner's time to qualify for prize money
6. No redistribution of prize monies unpaid

Now let's go through this point by point to work out why we need this new fee/system...

1 It makes sense that you make it involuntary if you want everybody to join up. No contest on that. But my complaint number one is that it is next to impossible to find details about the licence on ironman.com – it's actually found on the Ironman USA site (<http://www.ironmancenter.com/pros/>), which is also run by the WTC. If this is truly an international licence, let's make the hub at the home of Ironman. Instead, it's another reminder that Ironman is an American brand and that's where all the dollars are going. It's more like World Series Baseball than a true world championship (see point four). There are eight IM and 21 70.3 races in the US versus two IM and one 70.3 in Australia. If you want to qualify for Hawaii, the safest place is in the US.

2 A pro licence costs US\$750 on top of your local pro fees, making it around \$1,300 if you want to be registered as a pro and race any Ironman or 70.3 event (excluding Kona). How long will it be before all long distance races in Australia (where the Half Ironman series is now also owned by WTC) require pros to register for this licence? The prize money (\$5,000 total) would not support them at 70.3 events, but if it's WTC run... I would feel very sorry for domestic pros who need to trump up the dollars for racing in their local events. I also paid an extra \$35 for handling by active.com – does the WTC own a stake of active.com and, if so, why is there a double dip?

So where does the money go? I'm assuming it's helping to run the new anti-doping program, whose details have not yet been published. The WTC has declared it is now compliant with the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), but what is the actual change to drug-testing on the ground? I am already on the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (ASADA) watch list, so I can be drug-tested at any time prior to contributing to this new initiative. We already have drug-testing in Australian races, which is paid for by race organisers. So it's business as usual, unless there are going to be tests over and above those already done (top three finishers and another from top 10). I agree with Michael Lovato – the more tests the better – but the new system is discriminatory against women and non-US based athletes.

3 Does money go to organisers to cover pro entries? Given many don't pay for their entries, this represents no saving for me or many others. Plus we know the WTC own all the events, so it's probably covering the pro entries who used to pay but no longer need to. IMG always had a policy of offering entries gratis to those who made the top ten grade in the previous year. In my opinion, that was fair. In addition, I'm not sure if I'll ever get appearance money again (and that's not just because I'm over the hill!). If there's 30-40 pros turning up to each Ironman, all covered for entry by the licence, there is a cost to organisers of 10-20 additional entries (on top of the gratis previously offered). The fat is cut out, and I'm licking my chops about Challenge events instead of WTC ironman.

4 The idea of this point is to improve the field quality in Kona by cutting the numbers. However, I'm the perfect example of why this new rule is crazy – I finished 20th in 2003 but wouldn't have qualified under the new five per cent limit. In 2004, sixth place male finisher in Kona, Torbjørn Sinballe, would have missed the five per cent cut-off to re-qualify for the World Championships the following year! In 2009, I wouldn't have qualified under the new rules (I had a flat tyre and a bad race in Port Macquarie, gaining a roll-down for 10th place) but still finished 31st in 9:04 (having a shocker) in Kona. So does the WTC want only 10-20 finishers in Hawaii? I'm all for improving the field quality, but we only have two Ironman races here, and the quality >>

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Photo: Andy Cumming

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Photo: Delly Carr



is high. In the US, there is a glut of races (29 70.3 and full Ironman races) and cherry picking aplenty. If you miss out on a slot or prize money (due to a flat or bad race), then you can pull out and race the next weekend! Not in Australia.

I mightn't have even bothered finishing tenth in Port Macquarie last year if I had realised I wasn't going to qualify – though I did get my US\$500 for that place (and would have kept it under the new rules). I'd also like it noted that I always finish races at all costs – it's about representing yourself and your sponsors well. Only Bec Keat and Chrissie Wellington would have gone home with any money from Port Mac last year – no other pro woman would have been paid! Similarly, places eight, nine and 10 would have missed out in the men's race at WA last year, along with the four non-filled female finishes seven to 10. That's over \$14,000 in unpaid monies going straight back to the WTC. The incentive for pros in lower positions (11+) to finish is no longer there – because there's no hope of getting a roll down to Kona.

I believe the reduction in numbers will stratify the fields further. By this I mean that the faster swimmers will bunch together in the qualifiers (like they already do) and do fast bike times together (like they already do). Then some will run fast off the bike, making for a fast winning time. The five per cent cut-off will rule out the rest. This means Kona will be filled by fast swimmers, pack riders and fast runners. The days of the über-bikers are numbered.

What really rankles along with this reduction in pro slots is the maintenance of the other qualification methods into the Ironman World Championship. Come on down lottery winners (200), CEO challenge entrants (those who can afford it), US forces entrants and discretionary slots (for the likes of Lance Armstrong, etc) – but toughen up and take your medicine if you want to be a pro. If you have bad luck or an off day, you won't be paid. The WTC is essentially saying, we don't want the pros who place 25th or above in Kona, but let's clap at the finish line for the burger-eating couch surfer who got his slot in the lottery. He paid up in full – plus got a whole bunch of souvenir t-shirts. It's all very well to promote a World Championship with standards, but last time I checked, Steve Moneghetti never paid his entry/airfare/accommodation to race for Australia and, when he turned up, there wasn't a lottery guy racked in the race – this is a very different scenario.

He also wasn't faced with there being 29 qualifying races in the US and only three in Australia!

On top of that, the pro fee doesn't cover Kona or Florida 70.3 entry. Seriously, how many times do we need to pay? The race in Kona is very expensive for the international pros in terms of flights, accommodation, food and drink, and equipment – in the context that only 10 people from the respective pro fields take any money home. If you're good enough to qualify, why should there be another fee other than the US\$750 we've already paid. WTC is only missing out on US\$50,000 by providing 100 entries, which should be well covered by the extra fee and the non-distribution of prize money. In IMWA and IMOZ alone last year, the prize money savings would have been >US\$14,000! That's 28 entries. They can afford to spot the pro entries under the new rules, but it's a business model, not an athlete support model. >>

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- Ironman Port Macquarie preview with firstoffthebike.com Phil Wrochna
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PRO HOW! AN INSIGHT FROM MITCH ANDERSON

Photo: Andy Cumming



5. Michael Lovato represented the WTC in writing a response to this article, and he responded with an opinion piece. Where are the facts? Where is the why, aside from the laudable intent of improving drug-testing? As a female ex-pro and implementer of the new system, Paula Newby Fraser should know how important it is to encourage the fairer gender to compete in Ironman. They're only 10 per cent of the field as a general rule and in WA 2009 only six females finished as pros. The ability of women to turn a dollar will be vastly reduced by the new licence – especially courtesy of Chrissie Wellington. Ironic that we've got our fastest ever female on the planet, who is the biggest advocate for women's racing (<http://www.gotribalnow.com/>), and her times are going to mean many other women don't get paid as pros! As stated, she and Keat would have been the only females to go home with prize money at Port Mac in 2009. Wellington must be gnashing her teeth all the way to the bank.

6. The prize money is, in essence, now paid by the WTC because it owns all the races. So why pay out more than you have to? This means that the prize pool is less than it was 20 years ago – because not every pro field will finish in the limit. They have already



budgeted to pay the prize money, and a quality field has finished within the top 10 (here in Australia especially). How about you don't get a licence if you can't finish top 10 in the year prior, rather than penalising athlete's pockets again by withholding monies that have been allocated to the pro purse?

So that's what really grinds my gears about the new WTC licence. Am I grumpy because I'm:

- A. An old crank?
- B. A fast biker/slow swimmer?
- C. Money-hungry pro?
- D. Bigoted against US corporations?
- E. A and B?

If you answered E for both questions, give yourself a smiley stamp, and prepare your cheque book for the future of Ironman. Oh, and don't bother sending cranky letters to the editor, send them directly to me: mitch@mitchanderson.com.au

NEXT MONTH... I'm going make the change of a lifetime and get positive! How can we make the racing better, cleaner and a fine product for everyone to enjoy?



Marce Zamora 4X Ironman Nice Champion | Fred Belaubre 4X French Champion | Oliver Marceau World Champion | Chrissie Wellington 2X Ironman Champion | Rebekah Keat Ironman Australia Winner | Mitch Anderson StrongMan Japan | Tim Berkel Ironman Australia Winner

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