

HOW
WAS IT
FOR YOU?

FEEL THE WOBURN

A beautiful setting, spectator-friendly middle distance course and plenty of deer are highlights of the 220 Triathlon Woburner. One reader told us how his race went

WORDS GARETH MATTHEWSON IMAGES SECRETSTUDIO.NET





I

t's 350m into the 1.9km swim of the 220 Triathlon Woburner. I've another red buoy coming up for left turn number three in Woburn

Abbey's lake. Getting to here has been one of my easiest middle-distance race starts. Visibility is about a metre and I'm already in a decent rhythm. I swing a left at the buoy with only two other athletes around me. And then, all of a sudden, the world disappears...

In a split second, my adrenaline-fuelled brain assesses the possibilities. Is my swim cap covering my eyes? Nope. Are the reeds masking my goggles? Happily not!

I lift my head to sight the last of the left turn red buoys, take a breath, a stroke and thankfully the world flashes clearly into view. I plunge my head back into the darkness and conclude that the first three morning waves of swimmers have kicked up enough mud to kill visibility in this part of the lake.

Now I've had to contend with numerous adverse tri swim conditions in the past. I've dealt with rough seas at 70.3 Weymouth, cramped up in the cold waters of Exmoor Lake and have even swallowed diesel-laced docklands water in London. But I'm not sure I have the navigational skills to contend with swimming in the dark!

A little panic sets in, my pace slows and I'm sighting the buoy every second stroke, and cursing the fact that I didn't spend more time practising sighting in the pool. I execute left turn number four and start heading into the heart of the lake. My trepidation turns to sheer joy as the water clears and visibility is restored.

GARETH MATTHEWSON

Gareth is a "fair-weather triathlon addict" by weekend and an area manager for a bank by day. He's been competing in triathlons for nine years and has since become "obsessed" with 70.3-distance racing; the Woburner being his fourth middle-distance triathlon.

RACE-MORNING BUZZ

With 11 years of racing on these distinctively-iconic grounds, and with the Abbey itself as a backdrop and wild deer roaming the park, Human Race's Woburn Abbey Triathlon has been building in popularity year-on-year. There are sprint and Olympic-distance races, as well as junior triathlons and scootathons for the kids. The middle-distance 220 Triathlon Woburner itself was introduced only three years ago, and is already attracting a range of triathletes of



varying abilities and multisport experiences. The weekend also raises money for tri for life, so we're doing good things for charity as well as racing!

Standing on top of the hill overlooking the swim start, it's easy to understand the appeal of the event. The panorama really is special. On my left, the Grade 1-listed Abbey overlooks transition and, as I sweep my eyes right, I can see the large lake, and then the run course sloping gently down behind it, until it disappears into the distance behind a tree-lined path.

It's race morning and I wake, rested, at 5:30am, determined to get to Woburn before the access road closes at 7am. A black coffee and pain-au-chocolate have become my staple pre-race breakfasts, with a banana and water to follow. I'm feeling exceptionally calm, park up and head into transition to feel the excitement mounting. There's a buzz of activity.

The referee announces over the Tannoy a final call for the first wave, and familiar butterflies swarm as the day's racing becomes real. I rack my bike and organise my gear just the way I like it.

Speaking to my fellow athletes, I'm amazed to discover that of the 10 or so athletes nearest me, only one has completed this distance before. Everyone else is trying the challenge of middle-distance racing for the first time. Steve, a fellow Woburner, informs me that he's a veteran

Olympic-distance competitor, but was drawn to the Woburner by an advert he saw on Facebook.

"I guess you could call me a virgin again," he chuckles.

I soon find myself standing on the bank of the lake with 30 or so middle-aged men in wetsuits. There are two minutes until the race start. There's the usual arm-swinging, leg-stretching and head-bobbing, warm-up routine while listening to the final instructions from the race official. A quick joke to try and settle the nerves, and we're in the lake. ▶





Our man Gareth enters T1 to prepare for the 90km Bedfordshire bike leg



DISTRESSED PENGUIN

The course in the lake loops around the outside, before cutting back in on itself, with two right turns, and back to the start. At the end of the first loop, I sneak a look at the course in the middle of the lake and I'm happy to see I'm not bringing up the rear – a very real fear of mine on the swim.

The rest of the swim plays out like a training set, with two swimmers overtaking me and me doing the same to two others. After 46mins of patches of reeds and darkness, I exit the swim proud to have conquered the Woburn lake.

Thank goodness transition is close. Despite applying copious amounts of anti-chaffing lube to my ankles, I can't seem to pull my wetsuit off my legs smoothly. I must look like a distressed rockhopper penguin. I bounce around attempting not to fall over until I get both limbs free from their rubber bonds. Bike shoes on and I'm at the mount line.

TRUE GRIT

A major draw of the race includes a circuit of the grounds before

heading out. This is brilliant. I'm able to settle in on the bike, make sure my nutrition and drink are accessible and get my cycle legs going. Finishing the initial lap, it's out onto the roads of neighbouring settlements into quintessentially-English surroundings, with late-season cricket matches taking place on village greens.

Sadly the road surface is anything but smooth. The recent rains and vehicles on the roads have scattered endless grit and stones all over the tarmac and I see a roadside puncture within 400m!

REFUEL AND REPEAT

I race down two fast yet short descents on the way to Tingrith, and then into the century-old village of Eversholt. The Bedfordshire course undulates before hitting the home stretch back to Woburn, and the welcome sight of rolling hills filled with wild deer.

I stop to help one triathlete who's forgotten to load any spares at all (a mistake I'm sure he'll never make again), then it's eat, drink, refuel and repeat the circuit again, twice. After 3:44:14 of riding, nothing▶

TACKLE WOBURN

1 Get as much LOW practice as possible, including sighting and buoy turns. Pool swimming only will make this a challenge on race day.

2 Take the time to ride the course ahead of race day. The 30km lapped route has many turns, uneven surfaces and lively road conditions.

3 Every athlete wants to avoid the dreaded DNF – remember your spare tubes and puncture kit.

4 The bike course is technical, with few open stretches or straight descents. Consider racing your road bike instead of a TT.

“The course undulates before hitting the home stretch back to Woburn, and the welcome sight of rolling hills filled with wild deer”





beats the exhilaration of coming down the final and fast descent into transition, spinning my legs to prepare my body for the 21.1km of running ahead.

HIDDEN DEPTHS

The run start is a slight downhill out of transition and it feels like a godsend. I'm able to take my foot off the gas, but still keep a happy 5:30min pace. I speed down another hill and turn right onto another unique feature of the Woburner, a closed footpath that takes me out past an unseen lake that's truly a sight for my tired eyes. It's usually closed to the public we're told at the race briefing, but by racing we get to see the beautiful Woburn Abbey 'evergreens'.

The looped nature of the out-and-back run course – with four laps of 5.25km to complete – is brilliant for my racing psychology, as it helps me break up the effort and makes everything feel more manageable. I also get to see all the competitors and share the experience. Steve from transition passes by on the other side, with a pained expression. "Cramp," he grunts, but soldiers on.

I've hydrated and fuelled as per my pre-race plan, but I too begin to cramp after 11km of the run and I walk it out at the beginning of lap three. The kilometre-long wall of supporters from transition out to the gates comes alive and I can hear encouragement from every direction. 'Come on number 100!' It's enough to get me shuffling forward again.

THE BELL OF LOVE

I stumble through the next 10km, putting in as much effort as I can without initiating the cramp again, and complete my final loop. In a final twist of dark humour, the



finish line is right on top of the highest hill on the Abbey grounds. I tell myself I can run this and get at least 10 strides out when my body informs me that I actually can't.

Thankfully it flattens out 100m before the line, and I retrieve my pride and break into what feels like a sprint, but I must look like a wounded buck limping across the finish line to finish in 142nd place out of the 183 starters.

I remember to ring the 'bell of love' that's hanging across the finish line, a unique way to end what's been a quietly-demanding but personally-fulfilling race. Ringing that bell feels like both a

WOBURNER KEY INFO

First race 2016

2018 starters

183

2018 finishers

163

Next date

7 September 2019

Entry fee £120

Nearest station

Woburn Sands

Website

humanrace.co.uk

personal and public celebration of an amazing achievement. Okay, so I crossed the line in 7:15hrs, well short of my middle-distance personal best, but the rolling hills ensure that this certainly isn't a PB 113km course.

I immediately ask myself, would I race again? You bet I would. There's great support throughout, it's well organised, has an amazing triathlete spirit and exists in a beautiful wilderness setting. And now a week after the race, my legs have pretty much forgiven me and I've just seen an early bird Woburner offer for 2019 on Facebook. I might just see you there in September. **220**