

TRI AGAIN

The Road from a
Hospital Bed to Ironman



CHRIS SHEARD

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Part 1: Recovery and Reset

Chapter 1

The Awakening

It's a universally acknowledged truth that no one ever wants to wake up in Trafford Hospital; it's simply not the done thing. Especially not when the sky over Manchester is weeping as if to mourn your dashed Ironman UK dreams. As I lay there, listening to the rain patter against the window, the doctor delivered his prognosis with an air of finality.

'You're certainly not going to be swimming, cycling or running anywhere in the near future, except perhaps in your dreams,' he quipped, a twinkle in his eye that seemed wildly inappropriate given the gravity of my athletic heartbreak.

I stared at him, my response a flat line. 'Most likely caught from open-water swimming, probably something in the water,' he continued, almost smugly. The irony wasn't lost on me; all those mornings I'd cursed the rain as I trained, and now here it was, keeping vigil by my hospital bedside.

Bacterial pneumonia – two words that had swiftly become the bane of my existence, usurping 'interval training' and 'energy gel'. The doctor was chalking it up to bad luck, but I knew the grim truth. My body had been waving a white flag while I pushed it into the red zone, and now here we were.

I tuned back in to the doctor's voice, just as he was saying, '... and with a bit of rest and medication, you should be right as rain in six months or so. Well, maybe not rain, given the circumstances.' He chuckled at his own joke, but I couldn't muster the strength to give him even a pity smile.

The rest of the day was a blur of monotonous hospital routines, punctuated by the unceasing Manchester drizzle that seemed to whisper 'get well soon' in the least convincing manner possible. I was stuck in a bed in Trafford, Manchester, the very heart of the North, where

people are known for their resilience. Yet, all I could think about was how my overzealous training had brought me to this point.

Hours turned into days, and the hospital became the centre of my little universe. I was the man who was training for an Ironman but had been taken by something not even visible to the naked eye. My hospital ward bay, with its sterile smell and the constant hum and beeping of machinery, was my new training ground, though the most exercise I got was pressing the nurse call button and shuffling down the hall to a vending machine (drip in hand).

It wasn't just my lungs that needed recovery, it was my pride too. Everyone had known about the Ironman. Work colleagues, family, friends. It was supposed to be my crowning glory, not this. The thought of telling them all about this ignominious setback sat in my stomach like lead.

But as the rain continued to fall outside, I began to find humour in the irony of it all. Yes, I was the man who'd aimed to conquer Ironman UK, only to be conquered by a lake. There was a tragicomic element to it, something almost Shakespearean, if the Bard had been into triathlons and modern medicine.

My wife Briony's visits were the highlight of my day. Her laughter, genuine and warm, filled the room, pushing away the sterile chill. 'So, Ironman, huh?' she'd tease, and I could see the glint of mischief in her eyes. 'You just had to outdo the Manchester weather for drama.'

I grunted in response, feigning annoyance. But the truth was, her banter was a balm to my bruised ego. Would she ever let me live this down? Would she ever let me train for something like this again? She'd allowed me a free pass with the Ironman, letting me spend a small fortune to sign up, and miss even the seemingly most important of family and friends' engagements, flying solo as I went on yet another long cycle ride.

The days in the ward gave me time to think. I mulled over my life choices, the paths I'd taken, and the literal and metaphorical stumbles along the way. My ambition had been a double-edged sword, and I'd managed to nick myself quite spectacularly.

Yet, as I watched the rain streak down the window, I realised that I was undecided about attempting another Ironman. Had the passion for the sport been washed away with the autumn showers, or was it merely put on pause? I wasn't sure, but for now the immediate goals were going to be much smaller, more tangible – to breathe deeply without a wince, to walk the length of the ward without needing a sit-down, and to be allowed back home would be a fine start.

* * *

The rain had become my constant companion, drumming a relentless rhythm against the window pane. It provided a dreary soundtrack to the soap opera of hospital life playing out before me. The characters? A rotating cast of nurses who manoeuvred the blood pressure cuff with the finesse of a Formula 1 pit crew and fellow patients whose snores provided a bizarre bass line to the rhythmic sounds of the machines and hospital dramas.

I had become an unintentional eavesdropper to the soap opera of ward life. By and large the characters on a respiratory ward are not great bedfellows. The hacking, the beeping machines 24/7. Young and old came by. From the curtain-shrouded confessions of a young patient blaming his breathing difficulties on a car accident while sneaking in suspiciously smelling cigarettes, to the brave old men hooked up to so many machines the beeping was reminiscent of a pub gambling machine. It gave some perspective to the hopefully short-term situation I had found myself in.

'Try not to think of it as a setback,' Briony would say, her voice a soothing calm against the antiseptic chill of

the room. 'Think of it as an ... extended rest period.' Her optimism was admirable, but the only thing 'extended' I was experiencing was the wait for the bathroom.

Each day, the nurses would arrive to take more bloods, the doctor would arrive with his clipboard like a bearer of news from the front. 'Making progress,' he'd announce with a nod that seemed to be more for his benefit than mine. Progress felt like a relative term when the highlight of my day was graduating from soup to solid food.

The irony of my situation was almost laughable. Here I was, a man who had weeks before cycled for so long I'd forgotten what a comfortable seat felt like, now considering the shuffle to the bathroom as the day's main event. My Ironman aspirations had been reduced to this: a man waging a battle of wits against the adjustable bed control.

As the antibiotics did their work, I had time to think, and thinking was a dangerous pastime when your body was idle. The thought of diving back into Ironman training was as daunting as the thought of that first post-hospital run. Would my body cooperate or rebel against me like a teenager asked to clean their room?

The incessant rain mirrored my thoughts – cyclical, persistent and slightly annoying. Briony's visits were the only sunshine, her humour the umbrella under which I found refuge. 'At least you're not having to swim today through this weather,' she'd jest, pointing at the downpour that showed no sign of abating.

With Briony sitting beside me, I found the silver lining. I didn't have to decide my entire future while still within the confines of Trafford Hospital. There was no race signup deadline hanging over my head, no training session I was missing. For the first time in a long while I was on a break, albeit a forced one.

And as I lay there I realised that recovery itself was my new training regimen. Breathing exercises replaced hill

sprints, walks down the corridor took the place of endurance cycles, and every spoonful of a hospital dessert was a lesson in overcoming adversity – a taste challenge, if you will.

The week of my hospital stay trudged on, as I began marking time not in hours and minutes but in meals and medication rounds. Each day I felt a little stronger, a little more like myself and a little less like a deflated pool float.

By the time the doctor declared me fit for discharge, the weather had recovered much better than I had. With Briony at my side, we stepped outside and I took a deep breath. The air was fresh, filled with the earthy scent that follows a storm.

‘Home time,’ Briony said, a smile in her voice. ‘And no, we’re not discussing any training schedules on the way back.’

I agreed. For now the only schedule I needed was one that included rest, a bit of telly and maybe, just maybe, the contemplation of what lay ahead. Ironman UK had slipped through my fingers, but the journey it had sparked within me was far from over.

As we drove away from Trafford Hospital, the rear-view mirror framed my past week: a chapter closed. But ahead, the road was open, unwritten and brimming with possibility.

And somewhere in the distance I could almost make out the start line of a different kind of race. One that didn’t require a wetsuit or a bike, but perhaps something a little more intangible – courage, resilience and a good dose of Mancunian spirit.