2026 Ironman 70.3, Cascais, Portugal

Gillian McMahon's Race Report

Why this race?
I have been doing triathlons since 2010 and have raced at home and abroad, across all distances. After seeing our 3D members do the race last year, I had severe FOMO so I booked Cascais 70.3 straight away as it looked amazing! However, it had been ten years since I had raced this distance so I knew it was not going to be easy.

The Buildup!
January to March: I kept up the club sessions (running on Mondays and swimming on Wednesdays) all through the Winter so I started 2026 from a good base. I began including a strength class once a week, and continued doing my Friday bike rides. I upgraded my TT bike and put it on the turbo for indoor sessions and used my road bike until the summer race season started.

April to June: I asked Danny to start coaching me and did the 3D Algarve Training Camp with Sean at the end of April. I signed up for both the Spring and Summer Women's cycling series of races, most of which took place at Corkagh Park. This meant I was doing at least one snappy bike session per week and increasing my confidence on the bike because of the drafting aspect. The Howth aquathons and the Wicklow 100 cycle were enjoyable because I got to do them with club members which definitely boosts morale! In my first two NS races - TriAthy Olympic and Harbourman Tri - I came 4th in my AG so the season was shaping up well.



Howth Aquathon



Wicklow 100

July to September: After months of doing three runs a week as per Danny's schedule (one threshold, one long, one VO_2 max), I was starting to see improvements in my running as evidenced by my time at the Frank Duffy 10 mile race where I held a 5:14 average pace which for me is very strong. In terms of cycling, I was seeing progress there too. After some wins in the B group at Corkagh Park, I was moved up to race with the A group (eek!). No more podiums for me but

probably more useful training as I desperately tried to cling on to *any* of the A riders around the track every Tuesday. The Two Provinces National Champs and DCT went well for me and finally in September, it all came together with a 1st place in my AG at Pikeman mainly down to a fast bike split! I also knocked 6 min off my time at the Frank Duffy half marathon race compared to my March and May half marathon times! Those 10-12 hours a week of training were paying off.



Two Provinces (Lanesboro)



Frank Duffy 10 mile

Two days before the race

October had finally arrived and I was clinging on to my training by my fingernails (remind me never to book such a late race again!). There was a lot to do but first I needed to check in to my hotel – and thank you to John Brady for recommending this hotel as it was in the centre of everything! I also registered at the Ironman Village (and got number 1111 – which I took as a good omen) and collected my bike from TeamTruck. In the midst of all that, Dave and I somehow managed to find our way into the Parade of Nations that evening and the Irish contingent made up the fifth largest group attending the race! It was a great atmosphere and Cascais was buzzing!



Irish Group at the Parade of Nations

One day before the race

When I was about to go out for a practice spin on the bike, I noticed that the saddle had been raised in transit. The queue for the mechanic was about a mile long so I asked for help at the Nirvana tent and they kindly looked after me (phew!). I had a quick look at the mount and dismount lines and examined the route map for the

bike. The course was due to be hilly for the first section (just under 800m of climbing) but fairly flat after 35km. After that I did a little leg loosening run. At bike check-in, I left my blue (bike) and red (run) bags in transition as well as racking my bike for the morning. Once that was taken care of, I did a mini swim to get a feel for the water (17-18 degrees) and then headed to the briefing. It was lucky that I attended as there were some unusual rules such as not being allowed to wear your race number under your wetsuit – that was an automatic DQ!

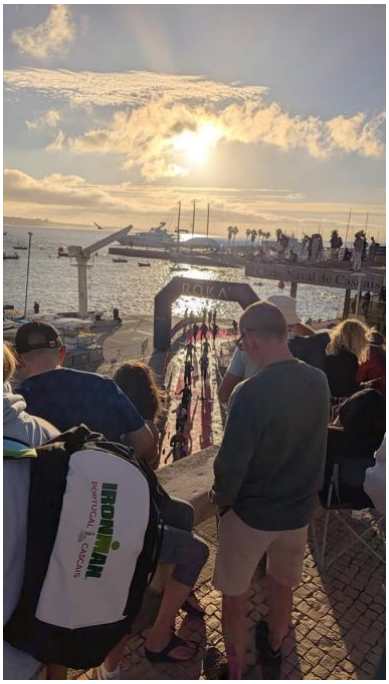


Route map for the bike leg

The race itself!

There were 5,500 athletes from over 100 countries racing in total, about half of those in the 70.3 distance! I didn't sleep a wink the night before so when I found myself at the 5.30am breakfast with stinging eyes and a churning tummy, I was seriously starting to question my life choices. There was a lot to do so I had to get moving. We were allowed to add drinks and nutrition to our bikes, so that was the first thing because I wanted to be entirely self-sufficient and avoid the bike aid stations with weaving bikes and flying bottles.

<u>The Swim:</u> Time was allotted for a warm-up in the sea which I took advantage of to calm the breathing. After the female pros started, the age-groupers had a rolling start. I swallowed a gel and set off. I had clear water around me for most of the swim but my ankle was grabbed and pulled back twice (why do people do this?). The buoys on the course were easy to see, the bay was well protected resulting in calm sea and it was a perfect scene with the sun rising beside us as we swam.



Running up to T1

<u>The Bike:</u> The run up to T1 was full of spectators and, after I mounted my bike on the cobbles without taking a tumble (phew!), it was great to get going. Immediately, the climbs started and went on for a long time and wound through small villages, some of which had aggressive speed ramps! The wind was very strong and, with me being light, I got tossed around a bit in the hills which was scary so I eased off my speed on the descents. Once we got past the hilly section, there was a lap of the Estoril F1 circuit which was epic! Even though drafting was not allowed, there were definitely packs working together on the route and it was really intimidating when they would swarm past me, swallowing me up and leaving me in their wake! It was very disheartening to have spent half an hour working hard to overtake two women and then to have them sail past in a peloton a bit later!



Out on the bike course

<u>The Run:</u> After T2, the day heated up creating tough conditions for the run but there were some cooling showers along the way, and I poured a cup of water over my head at every aid station! The hardest moment was passing the finish area and watching other athletes cross the line, knowing I still had another lap to run. It's at this point that I have to give a huge shout out to the 3D orange army who flew over to Cascais especially to support me, Juan, Lee and Dave who were competing in the race. I can't tell you how much of a boost it gave me when I saw their friendly faces cheering me on! That's the sort of stuff that makes 3D Tri Club special. So even when I was feeling low out there, I just had to smile going past the lads! And by the way, coca cola really works – I started drinking it from around 12km and it literally kept me going until the end!



Out on the run course



The 3D corner!



Crossing the Finish Line



The 3D corner!

After I crossed the finish line, I collected my gear, showered and met up with the gang in an Irish Bar (of course!). This was a lot of fun as we were all able to relax and have a few beers, some lovely food and a good laugh! Thanks so much to 3D for the club coaching sessions and to Danny for helping me to come on in leaps and bounds, especially in my running. It was great for me to have someone to be accountable to and get advice from as I travelled the triathlon road to Cascais.

Final Reflection

My goal was to finish in under six hours and I did it (5:58 to be exact), coming fifth in my AG. I missed out on 4th place by two seconds but let's not go there. I didn't feel it was any harder than the last one I did ten years ago so that means that the training definitely worked and that age really is only a number. Getting to the start line happy and healthy was a win for me before I even jumped into the sea. Would I do another half Ironman – let's just say 'never say never'!