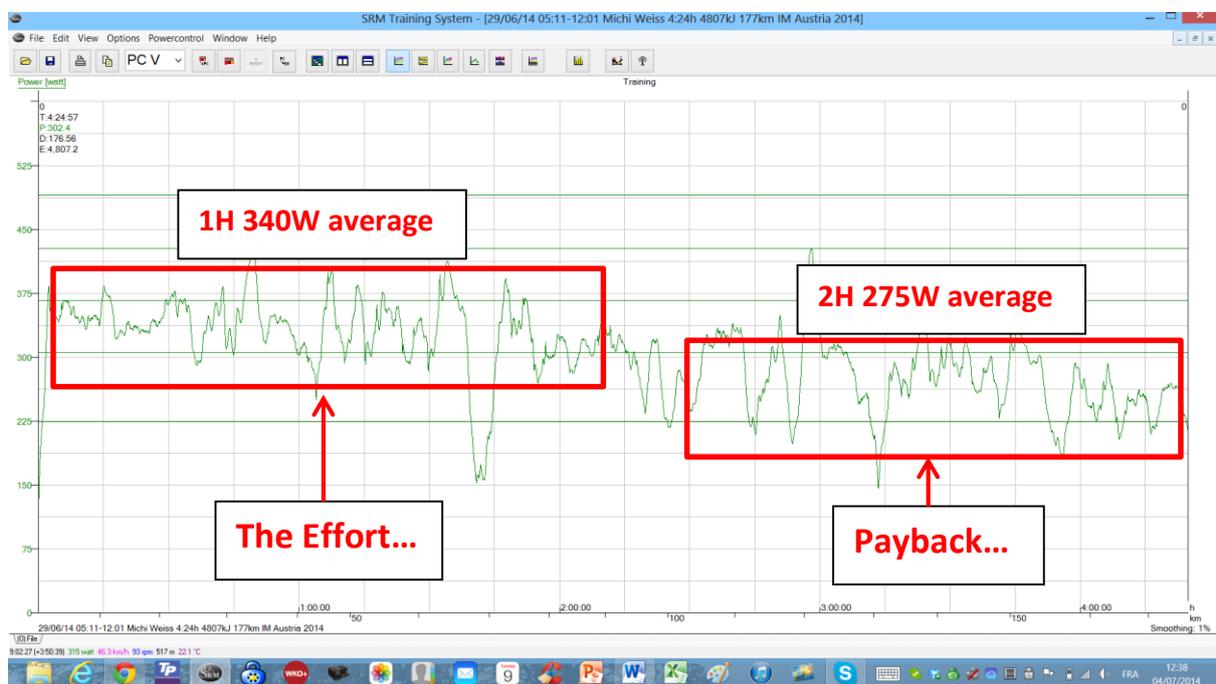


Michi Weiss – IM Austria 2014 – Top 5 Bike Split

SRM sponsored Ironman pro-triathlete Michi Weiss, delivered his third consecutive top 10 Ironman placing in 7 months at IM Austria last weekend grabbing his Kona slot in the process. He also produced his best ever Ironman swim and the 5th best bike split of the day. Another solid day of work at the office. However, I am going to take a look at his SRM power file from the race and highlight just how race tactics can play havoc on an athlete's metabolic efficiency and disrupt even the best laid plans. It also provides a nice reminder that long course triathlon takes every athlete on race day, irrespective of training status or ability, to the absolute outer edge of their endurance capability.

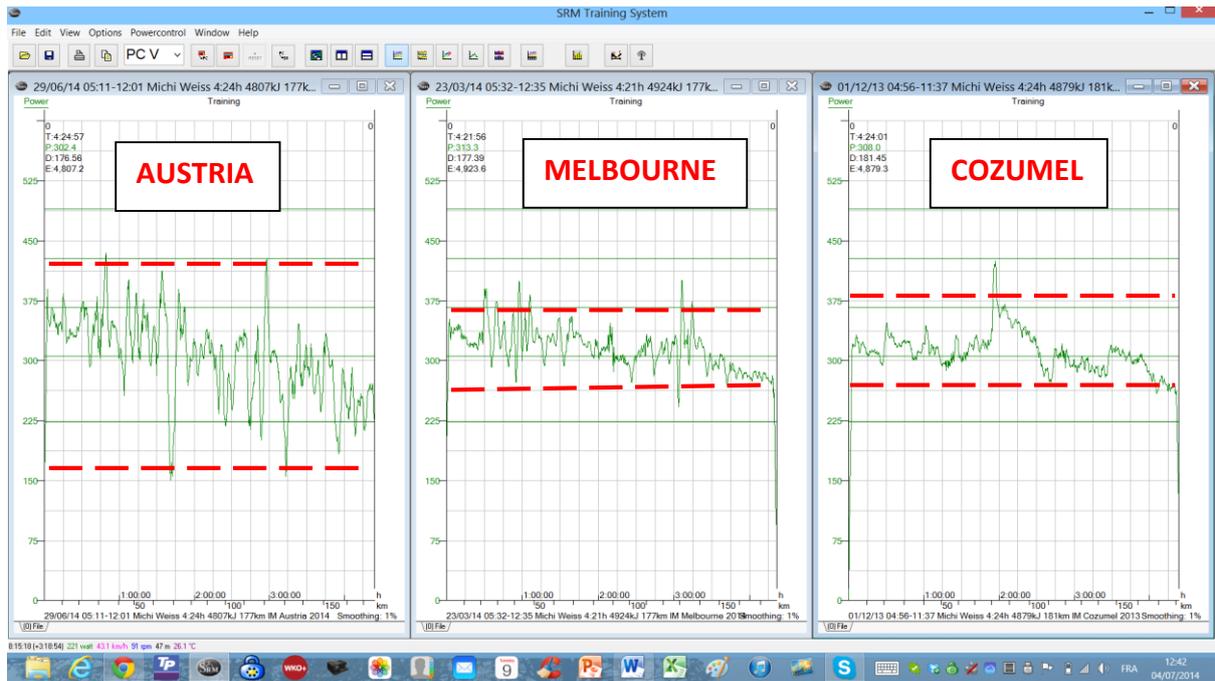
As age groupers, we have the relative luxury of making a race plan and sticking to it. Thus, if we have prepared well and we know the watts we can hold for the bike leg, as long as we meter out the power smoothly and with as few power spikes along the way as possible, everything has a chance to fall nicely into place. An even pacing strategy is the best way to ensure that we remain as metabolically efficient as possible, maximise our body's ability to use fat as a fuel source, and spare precious glycogen reserves for the marathon. But if you are a pro exiting T1 with the lead group 4 minutes up the road and apparently working effectively against you as a group and winning is your goal, then you have no choice but to drill it on the bike and close the gap. As we can see from the SRM trace below, Michi was forced into doing exactly that for the first half of the bike leg putting out the same watts as he would in a 70.3 race (he averaged 340W for the first 2hrs!). Ordinarily this effort would be worth the metabolic gamble because an aerodynamically optimised cyclist putting out 340W for 90km is a very hard thing to put time into. But, and this is where Michi's roll of the dice came to nought, the lead group did just that putting another 5 minutes between themselves and Ironman triathlon's most uber biker. Michi's final bike split was 4h24m versus 4h15m for eventual winner Ivan Rana. This not only highlights the role of an even power output in the pursuit of an optimal pacing strategy, but also what a quite extraordinary cycling performance the front group of Rana et al were able manage together.

A Tale of Two Halves



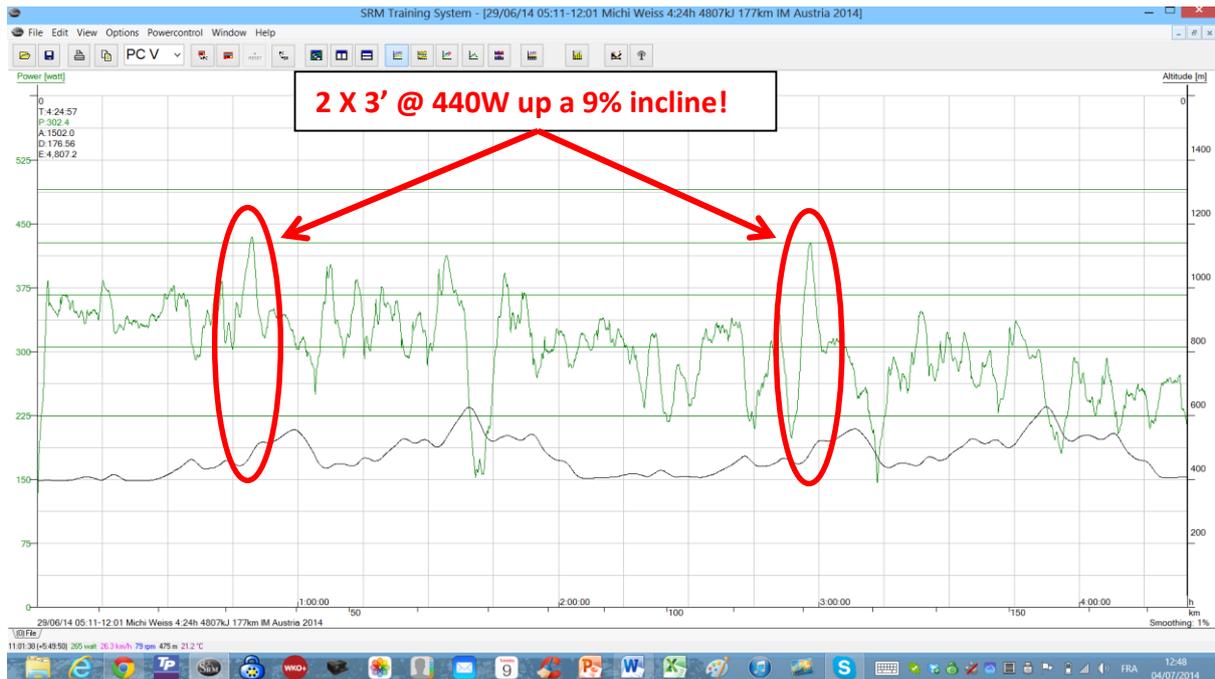
Given the choice, keep the watts smooth and narrow !

Below we can see a very simple comparison between Michi's last 3 consecutive Ironman bike performances. While average power outputs, cadence, and speed are virtually identical for each race (300-320W/88-90rpm/40-41.5km/h), note the particularly ragged power trace in Austria versus Melbourne and Cozumel. This was partly to do with the more up and down nature of the course and partly to race tactics of having to chase while also trying to drop the long tail of pros riding in his slipstream. This necessarily uneven power output (normalised power for the entire bike leg came in at 325W which is the highest I have ever seen for Michi) came a cost on the run as although Michi still ran a sub 3hr marathon, this was far away from his run performances over the last 7 months and represented a real underperformance when you know, as I did, the sort of stella running form Michi brought to the race.



Burning matches hurts running legs..

As we can see below, Michi was forced to go deep into the red zone (above around 380W in his case but would likely be around 250W for most age groupers) on the same short but steep climb in each of the 2 bike loops in order to hold position. Weighing in at 79.5kg versus around 6-8kg less than that for many of the top pros means Michi has to generate huge watts on the climbs (the steeper, the bigger the number needed) in order to keep position and avoid losing time to those ahead. On most Ironman courses this is not a problem because the gradients tend to be fairly mellow and he can climb them at tempo while maintaining his position in the group. However, due to the 9-10% gradients of some of the climbs in Austria, Michi was forced to climb at around 10% above his threshold, which, irrespective of who you are, is an effort (twice in this case!) that is going to come back and bite you in an Ironman. Combined with the constant changes in gradient specific to this bike course and the need to chase hard, hold position on climbs and try to shed those drafting behind, Michi's legendary metabolic efficiency came under real pressure and resulted in an empty fuel tank on the second half of the marathon. Age groupers really must understand and take this concept on board as nothing is likely to earn you an early shower more than spending time above your known (and tested in training!) Ironman target power zone.



Thankyou, as always, to Michi for allowing us to look into his numbers and comment on them freely. Following a 7 month racing period in which time Michi has racked up three 1st places, a 3rd, 4th, 8th and 12th, the next few months are about quality recovery and training ahead of the Kona World Championship in October. Lets go!

Garth Fox – Sports scientist and coach to endurance athletes