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**BAKER INSTITUTE IRONMAN 70.3 GEELONG KICK STARTS 2020**

The Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute IRONMAN 70.3 Geelong (23 February) kick starts the 2020 IRONMAN Oceania series, when the world’s best elite triathletes and thousands of age group athletes converge on Geelong’s stunning Eastern Beach.

Leading the charge are two time IRONMAN 70.3 Geelong champion Sam Appleton, former IRONMAN 70.3 World Champion Tim Reed, three time IRONMAN World Champion Craig Alexander, IRONMAN champions Tim van Berkel and Josh Amberger, Kiwi star Hannah Wells, Western Australia’s athlete on the rise Matt Burton and local champion Grace Thek.

After making his full IRONMAN debut at IRONMAN Western Australia late last year, Sam Appleton is back on the more familiar shorter distance of 1.9km swim/90km bike/21.1km run, and is keen to blow off the cobwebs and start racing.

"Training has been going reasonably well over the last month or so. I took December off after my IRONMAN debut in Western Australia, so it is still very early in my season for me. Geelong will be my first race of the season and a good fitness test to see where I am at. It is going to be a long season culminating with the 70.3 World Champs in Taupo in November, so I want to make sure I am not peaking too early in the season."

"I love the race in Geelong and I look forward to racing it. In my opinion it was one of the best events on the calendar I have raced the event in Geelong five times, including two wins and a second place. It has been a happy hunting ground for me in past, and always a race I look forward to doing. It usually attracts a strong field as it is the first Australian race of the year and a lot of people are looking to get a solid first up performance. I am excited for the battle that will ensue," Appleton said.

Second place behind Javier Gomez last year after mechanicals derailed his race, Josh Amberger is keen to finally grab the number one spot on the podium.

"My off season has been great. Geelong is always positioned as the first race of the new season for the Aussie athletes. That normally gives us eight weeks of prep fresh from the end of season holiday but the silly season always drags out quite a bit, so maybe it's really more like five weeks of good prep. This short window normally has me feeling rejuvenated and has given good fortunes in Geelong over the years."

"The best thing about Geelong for me is the dynamic course. Conditions vary from year to year, and generally some wind on the bike makes for a harder strength focussed day. The run course is challenging, and we normally see some tight racing up the front of the men's
race, which makes it exciting. I've run second three times in a row here, I'm gunning for 2020 to be the year I take the top spot," Josh said.

Perth’s Matt Burton’s second place at IRONMAN Western Australia, behind the legendary Alistair Brownlee, and going well under eight hours has set him up for a wonderful 2020 and he is keen to return to Geelong for an early season hit out against some top competition.

“Summer at home in Perth has been great. I have been spoilt by training partners and general weather. Given the great result at IRONMAN Western Australia late last year I enjoyed the opportunity to go with training and spend majority of the time on the bike through December as some good mates are also home for the summer and preparing for Australia’s summer of cycling.”

“I enjoy racing early in the year in Australia, so some ‘local racing’ in full flight and training consistent weather makes it easy to turn out the hours. A lot of people love to make out they are “Not sure how they are tracking so early in the year”. I don’t get fooled by this, as summer in Australia where the large majority of people, let alone athletes, are far more active than normal, so everyone’s always in good shape.”

“I have only raced in Geelong once and the weather was far too cold for “summer” so I’m giving it a second chance. Be great to return to Geelong and I hope for the weather in the photos I see of the sunny bayside to be on full display,” Matt said.

For Tim Reed it is long awaited return to Geelong and his memories are of a strong performance in very tough conditions.

“I've only raced Geelong once before in 2014, where I finished second. I recall it was a super hot and windy year. With the weather around home in Byron Bay, at the moment, being super humid and hot, I actually hope we get similar conditions in Geelong.”

“I had a great offseason and it was my longest break in many years of racing, as I really needed it. Now I am fully refreshed and motivated. It will be hard racing off the back of easier longer base training but I'm looking forward to a really fun hit out and seeing where I'm at.”

Like his main rivals, the very competitive Tim van Berkel isn't giving too much away early in the year but come race day we can be guaranteed ‘Berks’ will be in the mix.

“The offseason was great, very relaxing and I am well rested for what I hope will be a big year. I have no real expectation for 70.3 Geelong, it will just be a good chance to see where the fitness is at for the first race of the season. I always enjoy coming to Geelong to kickstart the year, it is a great course that always attracts an awesome field,” he said.

Winner of IRONMAN 70.3 Sunshine and Western Sydney last year, Hannah Wells is looking to go three from three in Australia and making her debut at IRONMAN 70.3 Geelong and is set to arrive race fit and ready to go.

“This is my first time racing Geelong 70.3. I have heard great things about the course so am definitely excited to be coming along. Unlike everyone else I am not coming out of an off season, as Geelong 70.3 will be my third race of 2020. I will be going into a bit of a rest period/off season after this race, so it is slightly different timing to many other athletes. However, it has worked well for me to time my season this way.”
“I am feeling really good going into Geelong with plenty of fitness from the summer of racing. I will be doing a half iron distance race only a week prior to Geelong which I have never done before, so it will be interesting to see how the legs show up.”

Victorian Grace Thek was second at IRONMAN 70.3 Geelong in a dramatic debut in 2018 and third last year, so she is looking to keep her podium record intact and possibly steal the top spot.

“Training has been going really well. I have had a solid block of training since IRONMAN 70.3 Taupo at the end of last year, which included a mini training camp in Los Angeles over the holiday period. I am really excited to kick off my 2020 race season at IRONMAN 70.3 Geelong and see where I am fitness-wise at the start of the year.”

“I love racing IRONMAN 70.3 Geelong, it is a great event, a great course, a great atmosphere and I love the support through the day. It is a special race for me as it is where my professional 70.3 journey began two years ago. It is also a local race which means I get to share the experience with more of my family and friends, as well as my fellow training buddies out on course,” Grace said.

Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute is one of Australia’s most established medical research institutes and the partnership with IRONMAN is part of its commitment to share evidence based scientific and health expertise, in areas such as sports cardiology, with the broader community, including IRONMAN and endurance groups.

The City of Greater Geelong is widely recognised as the spiritual home of triathlon in Victoria and with its spectacular waterfront, scenic countryside and fast multi-looped course, the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute IRONMAN 70.3 Geelong will continue to provide a challenging and unique experience for athletes of all standards at one of the most popular triathlon destinations in the world.

Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute IRONMAN 70.3 Geelong is proudly supported by the City of Greater Geelong and Victorian Government.

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About Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute
Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute is an independent, internationally renowned medical research facility headquartered in Melbourne, Australia, The Institute has a strong, proud history spanning more than 92 years, with its work spanning the laboratory to wide-scale community studies. The Institute’s vision is for Australians to live healthier for longer, free from the burden of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. For more information about the Institute visit www.baker.edu.au. For information about the
Baker Institute’s work in Sports Cardiology, visit https://baker.edu.au/research/laboratories/sports-cardiology

About IRONMAN

A Wanda Sports Holdings company, IRONMAN operates a global portfolio of events that includes the IRONMAN® Triathlon Series, the IRONMAN® 70.3® Triathlon Series, 5150™ Triathlon Series, the Rock n’ Roll Marathon Series®, Iron Girl®, IRONKIDS®, International Triathlon Union World Triathlon Series races, road cycling events including the UCI Velothon Majors Series, mountain bike races including the Absa Cape Epic, premier marathons including the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon and other multisport races. IRONMAN’s events, together with all other Wanda Sports Holdings events, provide more than a million participants annually the benefits of endurance sports through the company’s vast offerings. The iconic IRONMAN® Series of events is the largest participation sports platform in the world. Since the inception of the IRONMAN® brand in 1978, athletes have proven that ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE® by crossing finish lines at the world’s most challenging endurance races. Beginning as a single race, IRONMAN has grown to become a global sensation with more than 200 events across 50 countries. For more information, visit www.ironman.com.

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