Who is the Ironman?
Competing is a lifestyle for these athletes

BY MICHAEL LAMENDOLA

Facing 2.4 miles in the water, 112 on the bike and 26.2 more pounding the pavement, an Ironman competitor needs to train for months ahead of the race so he or she is prepared physically and mentally to conquer 140.6 miles in 17 hours or less.

Who are these athletic specimens who train for hours, day in and day out, sometimes for years, to withstand the unimaginable rigors that one single day can bring upon them? The Ironman competitor is human no doubt, but for those on the outside looking in, the Ironman competitor is often seen as a superhero. For 2.4 gut-wrenching miles in the water, 112 more on the bike; and when you think someone wouldn’t be able to take anymore, a full marathon pounding the pavement, the Ironman by all stretches of the imagination very well might be superhuman.

“I would say it’s the ultimate long distance race before you get into things where you have people that have issues,” said John Korff, whose sports promotion company organized Ironman U.S. Championship and is a long-distance endurance runner, participating in races up to 100 miles in length. “All these people are healthy, positive people with a can-do spirit. It’s all about the personal experience. If you’re going 12, 15 hours and you cross that finish line, you are the winner. If you do this [Ironman] you’ve really done something significant in your life.”

The fact is that Ironman competitors are men and women that range in age from 18 to 80. They are lawyers, doctors, teachers, policemen and homemakers. “They are just normal, everyday people,” said Elizabeth Kaplanis, who owns multi-sport training company and tri club, Ridgewood Tri Athlete, with her husband Chris.

Elizabeth and Chris caught the bug years ago and it grew on them so immensely that their corporate jobs took a backseat to helping others compete. They quit their day jobs and started Ridgewood Tri Athlete in 2010. Everything in their lives rotates around the thrill of the competition. They were engaged on an Ironman course.

“I remember thinking Ironman was absolutely impossible and you will never get to that level,” said Kaplanis, who has competed in nine Ironman events and qualified for the World Championships in Kona twice. “Everyone starts as a newbie; then you just become seasoned. You get the bug. It’s like car lovers. You get a four-cylinder and a six-cylinder. Once you have the eight-cylinder then you want the 12-cylinder. Ironman is the 12-cylinder.”
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The road to Ironman is not for the faint of heart. Training typically runs nine months to a year ahead of a competition with six days a week in the water, on the bike and out on the road, according to Kaplanis. There are several phases of training: initiation, base, speed and technique, race simulation and tapering. Bergen County Multi-Sport owner Andres Herrera, a USAT Level 2 Triathlon Coach and NASM private trainer, has trained multiple athletes for Ironman competition. He said someone who has participated in triathlons before can train in as little as 24 weeks for an Ironman.

"At first, I train people very individualized and test them on how they bike, how they run and how they swim," said Herrera. "It all depends on the individual. With an Ironman athlete, you want to build a strong aerobic base. Then you build up to pre-competitive and competitive training. If you are doing Ironman training, 5-6 days a week is the rule of thumb. The average is three swims, three bikes and three runs in a week - minimum."

With the physical demands of training comes the risk of injury, as well. Gary Flink knows about that personally. Flink is a co-owner of Excel Orthopedic Rehabilitation, which has offices throughout Bergen County. He is also a competitive triathlete, having completed four Ironman events, qualifying for Kona twice. He made the trip to Hawaii only once however because in one qualifying year, he was victimized by the unpredictability of an Ironman injury.

"I had an undiagnosed stress factor going into Lake Placid. At about the 20-mile mark on the run, I got this searing pain. I thought it was a cramp. By the end of the race, I could barely walk," said Flink. "I thought it was a cramp. I had fractured my fibula. It went from a stress fracture to a full fracture. Your body's not meant to go through that."

Flink said even the most experienced triathlete can sustain injuries during Ironman training and through the course of the event. He's treated everything from shin splints to tendinitis. He said three major attributes to preventing injury is always stretching to keep joints loose, practicing proper nutrition to keep caloric intake and hydration up, and not introducing too much volume or intensity in your training too quickly.

"A lot of our injuries stem from just being out there; the repetitive nature of the beast will lead you down the road to a possible injury," said George Samala, president of Personal Best Rehab in Ho-Ho-Kus. Samala, who will be competing in the Ironman U.S. Championship, his first full Ironman event, said he treats a lot of triathletes and aspiring Ironmen who have ailments such as soft tissue breakdown, lower back issues, calf strains and iliotibial band problems. Taking ice baths, stretching, wearing compression tights and proper use of new equipment will all help stave off injury, Samala said.

Flink said on race day, nutrition is one of the greatest factors. Many triathletes can lose 500 to 500 calories an hour, not taking into account salt. Ironmen have come to rely on electrolyte-packed gels, calorie and carbohydrate hardy bars and salt pills to get them through the race. If you're not prepared to fuel properly for your body type, Flink said you might as well not even try starting the race. "You can be the fittest person in the world, but if you get your nutrition wrong on race day, you're going to垮 to the finish line," said Flink.

The rigors of being an Ironman competitor are more than just physical - mental composure and inner drive are two key components that must supplement the physical abilities of a competitor to make it to the finish line.

"If swim, bike, run and nutrition are right on, the only thing that can stop you from having the best day of your life is your mind," said Kaplanis. Herrera said that while it does cross the mind of many competitors that dropping out may be the most feasible option miles into a race, most overcome it by thinking about the will that got them there.

"They need to think positively and think about all the training that was involved," said Herrera. "A lot of people get there because of an inspiration from something else to challenge them. A lot of people draw on that inspiration."
Boisterous Crowd Support Can Make All the Difference

BY JOSEPH RITACCO

Spectators at Ironman are encouraged to be energetic and loud so the athletes stay motivated.

Those who have seen dozens of triathlons in their day have yet to see one quite like this year’s Ironman U.S. Championship, which will be held in the New York metropolitan area for the first time in its history.

Participants in most events of this kind usually compete within a series of concentric circles, but the course layout for this year’s Ironman is far more diverse, beginning with a swim in the Hudson River, continuing with a bicycle ride along the Palisades Interstate Parkway in Bergen County and Rockland County, N.Y., and ending with a run across the George Washington Bridge towards Riverside Park in New York. The setting will make things far more adventurous for spectators, according to John Korff, owner of Korff Enterprises, the sports marketing company organizing the event.

“Most races of this kind are held in little towns where you get two miles of something and 138 miles of nothing,” he said. “This will be different. We’re in a densely-populated area and we’re expecting more spectators and a rowdier atmosphere.”

While the competitors will obviously be doing the day’s most strenuous work, it would be wise for spectators to put forth some effort of their own beforehand, ensuring that they are in the best position to view the event and provide the necessary encouragement to its participants.

Elizabeth Kaplanis, who co-owns Ridgewood Tri-Athlete with her husband Chris, has participated in nine triathlons and is coaching seven competitors in this year’s Ironman U.S. Championship. She recommends that family members and friends of athletes wear bright colors, carry balloons and/or hold signs to ensure they stand out from the crowd.

“The athletes,” she said, “will often see you before you see them.”

Early birds who wish to see the start of the competition, a 2.4-mile swim in the Hudson River, must obtain pre-purchased all day ferry wristbands. Ferries will depart at 4:30 a.m. at the 39th Street Ferry Terminal in Manhattan and the Lincoln Harbor Ferry and Port Imperial Ferry terminals in Weehawken. There is only one departure at 4:30 a.m. from the three terminals, and spectators will be transported to the Ross Dock transition area in Fort Lee. From that vantage point, they will see the swimmers head towards the finish line, or they may walk along the shoreline and view the swim from there. The transition from swim to bike, and later from bike to run, will also take place at that location.
Half day ferries, which also require wristbands, will run from 10-1 a.m. Half day ferries will provide transportation between the finish line area and the Fort Lee transition area throughout the day and evening. Those with wristbands are free to come and go as they please.

New Jersey residents will have the inside track on the best views for the bike race, as Fort Lee is the location of many key points on the route. Bikes will exit the Ross Dock transition by climbing south to Hudson Terrace, then riding north one mile on Hudson Terrace to the Palisades Interstate Parkway southbound access. Cyclists will complete two rolling 54-mile counter-clockwise loops on the southbound side, then exit back onto Hudson Terrace and return to Ross Dock transition. Those who park in the Fort Lee municipal lots will be within one mile of the Fort Lee turnaround on the Palisades, just south of the Englewood Cliffs border. It is the “place to be,” according to Korff, as plans for entertainment, food and beverages, and a public address announcer are in the works. Hudson Terrace will also provide an exciting vantage point to watch cyclists and, later, runners speed by.

River Road and Hudson Terrace are two key locations on the Jersey side for the final leg of the competition, a 26.2-mile run. Competitors will begin their run in Fort Lee, proceed to the George Washington Bridge and head towards Riverside Park, the event’s final destination.

Bergen residents familiar with the landscape of New York City should have no problem finding their way around via public transportation. Spectators will also be able to park in New Jersey and head across the George Washington Bridge on foot if they wish, and all levels of the bridge will remain open for traffic.

An ideal New York City destination is 179th Street and Cabrini Boulevard, where runners will exit the bridge and proceed towards Riverside Park in Manhattan. The 9-mile route is expected to have a celebratory atmosphere.

"In a perfect world," said Korff, “the exit from the George Washington Bridge to the finish will have a ‘Tour de France’ feel, with people all over the place. Riverside Park is heavily populated on any Saturday afternoon, so people just need to be aware.”

Numerous food vendors will also be present in and around the finish line, and the park’s Manhattan location opens up numerous dining opportunities throughout the day and evening.

Crowd energy is of utmost importance during the final stages of the race, as exhausted competitors will rely heavily on support provided by spectators.

"People will need that encouragement at the end.,” said Korff. “Spectators can get very emotional, too. It’s intense because you’re so close to the field of play. It’s like having a pitcher throwing a no-hitter in the bottom of the eighth inning, and you can touch him and help him.”

Family members and friends of a particular competitor will want to see as much of the competition as possible, starting with a ferry ride to see the start of the Hudson River swim. From there, some may continue on to the bike turnaround, or others may head to New York City to grab a bite to eat and set up camp closer to the finish line. Casual spectators are more apt to gravitate to key points closest to where they live. Either way, it’s important that they make their presence felt.

“When you’re racing, it’s such a long day,” said Kaplanis. “You have so many thoughts in your mind, and most of them are negative. You’re in pain and you’re uncomfortable, but the crowd can lift you up. When you hear those cheers, it makes you feel like a professional athlete.”