

TRIATHLON

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“My first ocean swim was at Ironman Florida,” recounts veteran triathlete, Tammy Shuler, an oncology nurse at Three Rivers Health. “I was scared of man-eating fish, and jelly fish. But one look at the angry ocean and I knew there was more to fear. Pros always have their own start ahead of regular people. The waves were over five feet, and when the pros started it swept them backwards. Let’s put it this way—I got out alive! Someone did drown at that race. The fact is, I’m just as nervous at the start of a race now as I was at my first one—for different reasons—but still very nervous.”

The swim is the first component of a triathlon because it is the most demanding, where safety is paramount and, theoretically, exhaustion has not yet taken its toll—though other swimmers kicking in the water might knock you in the head or gut.

“I thought I was going to drown at my first Ironman, in Chattanooga,” remembers Jodie Walker, who trains and competes with Tammy. “At Ironman Louisville the swim in the Ohio river was really challenging. There were scary times when I felt I wasn’t going to finish. At one race, I had so much anxiety in the water I was pulled out and didn’t finish.”

“My first Ironman was at Wisconsin,” Tammy recalls. “I really thought the swim would be the easiest, not taking into consideration there would be 2,400 people starting all at once, from treading water for 20 minutes to the actual start. In the first 500 yards I was kicked,

punched and pushed under. At each turn around a buoy—there were eight of them—everyone crushed in to cut the corner sharp, and the pushing, and kicking would start again. They have since changed the starts to a rolling start, which is much nicer, but the first 12 starts I did were all mass starts.”

Swimming is followed by biking and then running, at varying distances, depending on the type of race. An Olympic sprint, for example, consists of a .93 mile swim, 24.8 mile bike and 6.2 mile run. A full Ironman triathlon requires swimming 2.4 mile miles, biking 112 miles and is topped off with a 26.2 mile run—the equivalent of a marathon race, a feat in itself.

Between swimming and biking, and biking and running, are transitions, known as T1 and T2. Before the start of a race, athletes enter a transition area, typically fenced in and secure, to find a spot on metal racks designed to hold bikes. Next to their bike, they place a towel upon which to arrange necessary gear and other items, such as biking and running shoes, sunscreen, water and energy supplements.

Along with swimming, biking and running, triathlon transitions have been called the fourth discipline because the process affords an opportunity to shave off overall time—yet they require skill, speed and mental acuity to master.

“Setting up your transition area with the things you need in order is key,” Jodie says. “You’ve got to be fast in transition, but you also need to keep your focus. If you don’t, you can easily mess up and

add more time.”

Jodie notes that at Ironman competitions transitions are far less stressful because volunteers typically assist the triathletes. “They will even put on your socks for you,” she says.

Depending on water temperature, triathletes either wear a wetsuit, or tri top and shorts. After the swim, the clock is ticking while contestants scurry back to the transition area—starting to remove their wetsuit as they go—then change into biking gear.

Rules are rules, and triathletes can be docked minutes or disqualified for breaking them such as failing to put on and buckle a helmet before mounting their bike or, during the run, forgetting to attach a bib, which displays their race number.

Stocked with some 2,000 bikes during a major half Ironman event, for example, the transition area can become a hectic place where it’s easy to forget the exact location of your bike. The area has four portals—“swim in” (where racers return from the water), “bike out” (where they head out to tackle the cycle leg), “bike in” (where they return) and “run out” (where they exit to the course). Not going through these portals in the correct manner can result in penalties. Many a racer, myself included, has dashed through the “bike out” exit only to be turned around and sent back through the “run out” portal losing precious time in the process.

“One time I ran out of transition still wearing my helmet,” Tammy remembers. “I would have continued on my way, but a volunteer pointed out my

oversight. Stuff happens.”

Biking poses its challenges, too. Weather conditions can make the roads slick and triathletes are often contending with loose gravel and traffic as well as each other. “The wind at the World Championships in Kona (Hawaii)—up 70 miles an hour—was so terrible there were bike crashes everywhere,” says Tammy about her time competing in the most prestigious Ironman triathlon of all.

“Last year it was 47 degrees and raining at Ironman Louisville,” she adds. “We had to go to the start at 5 a.m. and the race was delayed, so we stood around shivering in the rain for three hours.”

Why, a person may ask, undertake a triathlon in the first place if it poses so many challenges and hazards?

“Of all the races I compete in, the triathlon is my favorite because of the variety in training,” Jodie says. “Still, I can’t tell you how many times right after a race I’ve vowed never to compete in one again. It’s mentally and physically challenging from the time you sign up and train until the finish line and recovery. It gives your training a purpose.”

“Triathlons take a lot out of you, that’s for sure” Kerry agrees. “But they give back way more. The multi-discipline training, confidence building, camaraderie, finish-line pride—it all goes into making you a better athlete and a well-rounded person.”

Tammy—who has a knack for getting to the heart of the matter—sums up the triathlon experience this way: “It really let’s you know you’re alive.”

FABULOUS FOUR

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But pain and various ailments did not prevent Tammy and Kathy from finishing the Boston Marathon earlier in the year, or Tammy, Kathy and Jodie from traveling to Seattle in July to compete in the Jack & Jill marathon—a fast, down-hill Boston-qualifier on one of Washington’s most scenic trails where it rained the entire race—or Bridget from venturing to Guatemala with her son, Evan, to serve on a church mission, then returning to hit the CrossFit gym as hard as ever.

No, quitting is not an option and there’s no slowing down, either. Tammy and Jodie competed in the inaugural Ironman 70.3 Traverse City, and Tammy entered yet another triathlon just two weeks after that grueling long-distance race, then she and Kathy took off for the Bourbon Country Burn, a 250-mile bicycle tour over three days in a picturesque area of Kentucky. It was scorching hot. Next, the two ran Rock N’ Roll Savannah, a marathon held in Georgia amid steamy, energy-sapping heat.

Be advised: Go up against these four women in a marathon, triathlon, duathlon, trail run, cycle race or relay—and any variation thereof—know they go all out to win. See them at the gym, however, and they’ll encourage you to

achieve your goals with smiles as big as their hearts.

Ultimately, the Fabulous Four support and motivate each other to stay the course. In their ongoing pursuit for personal records and first-place finishes—with all the ups and downs, injuries, laughs and tears that entails—they have forged lasting friendships.

Staying fit and competing is a priority, but they never take their eyes off the big picture. They have demanding careers, serve their communities and care for loved ones.

Together and individually, the Fabulous Four embody the determination, passion and can-do spirit of Women on the Go.

The Fabulous Four mini-series begins with a profile of Jodie Walker, triathlete and owner of Jaywalker restaurant.

Women on the Go is an ongoing series by local writer and journalist William Allen Baltz.

DEATH NOTICE

TODD MICHAEL GRIESER

Todd Michael Grieser, age 49, of Three Rivers passed away on Wednesday, December 7, 2019. Arrangements are in the care of Hohner Funeral Home.

Corrections/Clarifications

The Three Rivers Commercial-News is committed to accuracy. This spot is reserved each day for any corrections or clarifications to items that appear in our newspaper. If you see something that needs correction, please contact Managing Editor Alek Frost at 269-279-7488 or Alek@threeriversnews.com. Please indicate whether you are responding to content online, on social media or in our print products.

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