

FINDING YOUR OWN IRONMAN

Carol Shuford works out in preparation for another Ironman.



How One Woman Used Struggle and Tenacity to Turn Defeat into Triumph

BY PATTIE CINELLI

Carol Shuford has always loved working out physically. She even gave up teaching school to become a personal trainer. She swam competitively in high school, relishing the long endurance races that most of her teammates shied away from. Then 11 years ago, she started running, running marathons and got hooked, regularly competing in two a year.

One day in 2005, while watching the Hawaiian Ironman on TV, she began to wonder if perhaps she could compete in one. The Ironman Triath-

lon consists of a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26.2 mile run, run in that order and without any break in between events. It is a grueling test of endurance. Burned out on marathons, knowing that she could swim and confident with running, she thought, "Why not? How hard could it be to ride a bike?"

On a trip back from running a marathon in British Columbia, Carol bought two books to read on the plane – one about ultra-marathons and the other about Ironman races. By the time she got home, her de-

cision was made and she started researching online for coaching help. As a first step, she signed up for her first Olympic length (one mile swim, 26 mile bike ride and 6.2 mile run) triathlon in 2006.

Training – It's All in the Mind

Carol trained with the help of an online coach who lived in Baltimore for about a year. Cycling turned out to be more difficult than she had expected. "I must have fallen off my bike a million times because I kept forgetting to take my feet out of the

pedals," she said. One day while cycling in Bethesda, she saw a woman riding with an Ironman cap on. They talked and she wound up joining Team "Z" in 2007.

"I had no idea what to expect from joining the group," she said. "I had a workout regimen, but once I was joined the team all workouts were planned. I knew every workout I was doing was for a purpose and I knew what to expect. I loved having the structure and comradery. I made really good friends on the team."

Several teammates were training

for the Ironman in Idaho in 2007. When Carol rode the distances with them she often thought, "I could do this 60 mile ride with them, I can do this 90 mile ride with them." And she did. Then in July of that year, Carol traveled to Lake Placid where she wanted to compete, to watch the Ironman and ride the 112-bike course for practice. "I was worried about the infamous six-mile downhill part, but I got through it." She signed up for the 2008 race.

The Race - Disappointment and Perseverance

As fate would have it, the weather in Lake Placid did not cooperate. It was raining and windy. Competitors are given 17 hours (7a.m. to midnight) to complete the race. 2008 would not be the year that Carol would finish the Ironman. Her slow speed on the bike (averaging 12 miles an hour) impeded her running the third leg of the race. She was pulled from the race at the 19-mile mark. For the first time in her life she had not completed a race and she was devastated. But as soon as she caught a glimpse of her husband Tim, she ran to him and said, "I know I can do it!" They woke up a few hours later so they could be in line at 5:30 a.m. to sign up for the 2009 Ironman.

Coming home not having finished was "no easy pill to swallow. I knew I did my best and that helped, but it wasn't easy to tell people." She never thought of quitting during training for the first race. "I loved doing something I had never done. It was so exciting." But the second time around was harder. "I knew what to expect. After I finished every bike ride I'd ask myself, 'Why am I doing this?' But I had my eye on the prize. No one was making me do this. I told myself, 'I'm doing this because I've had this dream for a long time. I had to tell myself to suck it up many times.'"

Carol said she had to dig deep to keep from getting burned out. She was more focused the second year of training and told herself, "It's now or never. If I don't make it this year, I won't do it again."

She applied principles from her life to her training - structure and perseverance. She hired a nutri-

tionist to teach her how to eat and drink on long bike rides, and she saw a sports psychologist to help her get over her fear of the downhill stretch in the course. Many of the suggestions Carol found useful in her daily life. "I was scared on the ride and was holding my breath. I learned to count to three before using the brakes, then count to four, then five, etc. I also realized I was tensing my body. You can't control the bike as well when you're stiff as a board."

The Next Ironman

She said focusing on the finish line kept her going throughout the race this year. "Often I had to go through a mental check list. Physically I knew I could do it. I kept telling myself to give it my all. Then there were my teammates who were not quitting. They were suffering, too." In fact, having the support of the team may be what got her to the finish line. Even though Carol was in the group called the BOPs (back of the packers) or the SMT (slow moving triathlete) she told herself she was faster than the person who never started the race. She was proud of her bike speed, which improved to an average of 25 miles an hour from 12 the previous year. She credits that to her hard work and to her teammates who kept yelling to her from their bikes "Let go of the brakes!" throughout the race.

At 43, Carol has run 20 marathons, six half-Ironmen, 17 triathlons and two Ironmen (minus the seven miles in the one she didn't finish). She is scheduled to do her next marathon in Richmond in November and hopes to compete in the 2010 Ironman in Wisconsin. "I'm hooked. I know I can do better. The same thing happened when I started running marathons." When she met her husband Tim, she was training for her first. He thought it would be the only one. She laughed. "So did I. I didn't lie!" Who knows, with Carol's thirst for challenge and adventure, maybe an ultra-marathon lies in her future.

To learn more about the Ironman race log onto: www.Ironman.com. To see Carol's photos from Lake Placid long onto: www.aforders.com and search for Carol Shuford. ★



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