Kona Ironman: The Ultimate Challenge

He’d run 25 marathons and four Ironman triathlons since his internship. Then, in October, Jordan Metzl, M.D., went to Hawaii for the big daddy of them all—the Ford Ironman World Championship.

At Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City, I care for thousands of athletes every year. Runners, gymnasts, dancers, football players and others of all ages come through the door, eager to have their injuries treated and hoping for a quick return to their pursuits.

In my spare time, I am one of them. On October 15, 2005, my brother Jamie and I competed in the Ford Ironman Triathlon World Championship in Kona, Hawaii.

Triathlon—a sport trio of swimming, biking and running performed in succession—is sweeping the nation. There were roughly 1,800 sanctioned triathlons in 2005 in the U.S., approximately double the number held 10 years ago, according to USA Triathlon. Nationwide, more than 250,000 triathletes competed in races in the U.S. in 2005, compared with 90,000 in 1995. Buoyed by the realization that there’s less wear and tear on the body in triathlon training than in running alone, mainly because triathlon training builds core strength and muscular ability, triathletes of all ages (even kids) race in every state. Physicians and other medical professionals are frequent participants as well.

“Are you nuts?” people often ask me when they find out that I’ve run 25 marathons and four Ironman-distance triathlons since my internship in Boston. In fact, triathlons and exercise are what keep me going personally, and they help me take better care of my patients. By experiencing the same training that many of them go through, I can truly understand the aches and pains that come with the territory. And daily exercise gives me the energy and vitality to keep up with my busy schedule.

When I was growing up in Kansas City, Missouri, our household was always active. My father, Kurt, a pediatrician, still rides his bike every day. My mother, Marilyn, a psychologist, is an avid ballroom dancer. My oldest brother, Jonathan, a psychiatrist, is a basketball junkie. Jamie, an attorney and Ph.D. (and the only one of us who escaped med school), and Josh, a fourth-year medical student, are both Ironman triathletes. Among us, we have run more than 50
A DOCTOR’S LIFE

A T FIRST GLANCE, the distance of the Ironman triathlon is ridiculous. Among the world’s toughest sporting events, this race involves a 2.4-mile swim followed by a 112-mile bike ride and capped by a full marathon, 26.2 miles of running. Each year there are 50 Ironman races worldwide, and the world championship is held annually in October in Hawaii.

The race in Hawaii is generally reserved for the best athletes. The top two or three finishers in the sanctioned half- and full-Ironman-distance events—men and women of various age groups between 18 and 80—usually get an invitation to participate. Not surprisingly, the competition is fierce at these Hawaii qualifier races. There are also lottery spots for 200 people, so everyday mortals get a shot at being one of the more than 1,800 participants.

When I found out that I was going to be among them, I started the most intense preparation of my life: nine workouts a week, early in the morning and late in the evening. Weight training, swimming, running and biking were all part of the regimen. My social life was put on the back burner, and so was my love of hamburgers. Over the five months leading up to the race, I dropped eight pounds and converted fat to muscle. I started to look the part.

Finally, it was October. Despite my racing experience, I was nervous. In the world of triathlons, Kona is legendary for its difficulty: The heat and wind have destroyed many athletes. On the flight to Hawaii, I found myself thinking of all the possible fates that might befall me: Dehydration, hyperthermia, hyponatremia and cramping are common. As a physician, I tend to recognize these issues early, and that’s helpful, but like other athletes, I still experience them. In a typical Ironman distance race, around 30% of the athletes will visit the medical tent, many requiring IV rehydration. Most finishers take 13 to 15 hours to complete an Ironman race.

Nothing could have prepared me for the spectacle in Hawaii. When Jamie and I arrived in Kona, four days before the race, the town was already buzzing, the energy overwhelming. Competitors from 50 countries speaking many different languages were all there for a common goal: to tackle the Super Bowl of triathlon, the monster Ford Ironman World Championship.

As the day of the race crept closer, we unpacked and adjusted our bikes, practiced swimming in the ocean and tried to acclimate to the heat of the Big Island. Suddenly it was race morning. When the alarm sounded at 5 a.m., Jamie and I were already awake, thinking about the race that would start in two hours. Seeing almost 2,000 of the fittest people from all over the world assembled in one place was simply incredible. As the competitors lined up for body marking, a tradition in triathlon whereby your race number is inked on the skin with an indelible marker, the fitness and dedication of each athlete were clear.

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The hours and miles of the run rolled onward, and I found myself willing my body forward, pushing my legs going. I thought, trying to squeeze every ounce of energy from within. Even when there is no more left, one finds something in reserve. At mile 16 of the marathon, I passed Jamie. We’d seen each other several times throughout the day. Unlike any race we had done before, however, this time I was in the lead, two miles ahead of him. He was running toward me at a place where the route looped back on itself. "Jamie, please be careful," I told him. I had never beaten Jamie in a race, and even with his desire to win, I knew he wouldn’t catch me. I didn’t want him to suffer any physical harm by pushing beyond his limit.

As I closed in on mile 25, I heard the roar of the crowd at the finish line. My legs lost their heaviness; my body glided forward. As I crossed the line at 11 hours, 59 minutes, 59 seconds, I knew that I had found the strength that makes the Ironman the ultimate challenge of body and spirit. When Jamie came across the line 30 minutes later, I was just as excited. Completing the Ironman with your brother is the best vacation I can imagine.