



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



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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



PHOTO FINISH
Jordan Metzl, M.D., and his brother Jamie celebrate their stamina. Right: Dr. Metzl at work.

LEFT: BAKKE-SVENSSON/WTC

marathons and 10 Ironman triathlons. Healing, helping others and exercise were the rules of our family.

There are varying distances in this sport. Sprint triathlons, the most attainable, involve a half-mile swim, a 15-mile bike ride and a 5-kilometer run. Distances go up from there: Olympic-level events require a one-mile swim, a 26-mile bike ride and a 10-kilometer run. Half-Ironman-distance races involve a 1.2-mile swim, a 56-mile bike ride and a 13.1-mile run (half marathon). Then there's the big daddy of them all—the Ironman race.

AT 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 of the best. 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 triathletes, 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.

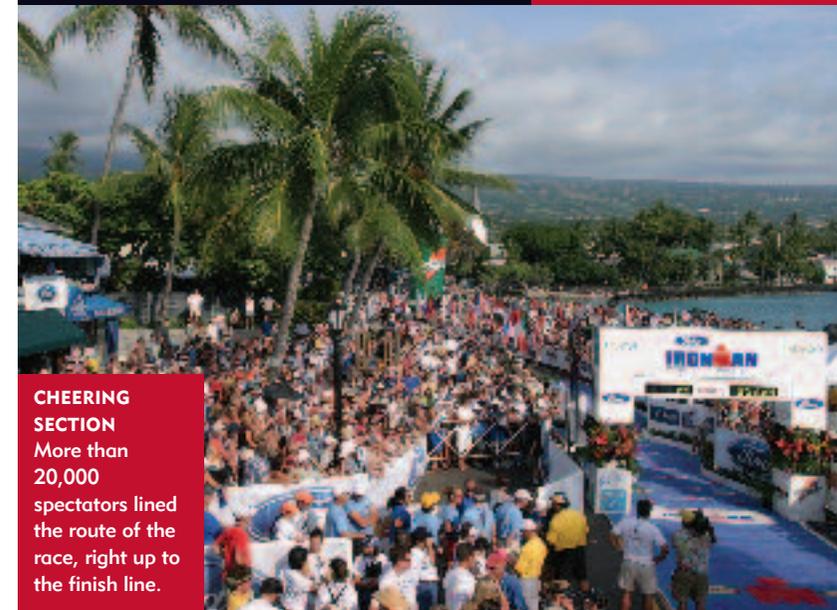
As the day of the race crept closer, we unpacked and adjusted our bikes, practiced swimming in the ocean and tried to acclimate to the heat of the Big Island. Suddenly it was race morning. When the alarm sounded at 5 a.m., Jamie and I were already awake, thinking about the race that would start in two 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 indelible marker, the fitness and dedication of each athlete were clear.



EARLY CALL
At 7 a.m., more than 1,800 swimmers headed for the start line.

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“Over the five months leading up to the race, I dropped eight pounds and converted fat to muscle. I started to look the part.”



CHEERING SECTION
More than 20,000 spectators lined the route of the race, right up to the finish line.

“Competitors from 50 countries speaking many different languages were all there for a common goal—tackling the Super Bowl of triathlon.”

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THE ATHLETES at Kona are all champions. Although they complete the course at different speeds, everyone covers the same distance and faces the same difficulties with wind, heat and fatigue. The athletes ranged in age from a 19-year-old college sophomore to an 80-year-old grandfather. There were people running for causes, people with physical disabilities, even one man diagnosed with ALS who wants to keep doing the Ironman as long as he is able.

Then it was time. My heart was pounding as all the athletes swam out to the start line. Looking back at the shore, I saw a crowd of fans. Ahead, 1.2 miles of orange pylons stretched out to sea. “The Star-Spangled Banner” was played, and then came the boom of the cannon. The race had begun.

Imagine almost 2,000 people swimming to a common point. It can be rough going, arms and legs everywhere, and the experience is not for the faint of heart. As I swam along, I found myself thinking of the many hours we'd all spent practicing in the pool and of the profound dedication that hopefully would be rewarded at the race's finish.

After swimming for more than an hour, the end of the first leg was near. Suddenly I was out of the ocean and rushing toward the transition area to change from swimming to biking gear. In Kona, the 112-mile bike ride is mostly along the Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway. Cut through lava fields, it is one of the hottest roads in the world, with temperatures routinely topping 130 degrees.

Through this six-hour phase, I concentrated on hydration and nutrition. Once conditioned by practice, the body can endure such an environment only if electrolyte levels are kept in the normal range and hydration status is carefully monitored. Each athlete has a formula for making this work, and thankfully, my nutrition plan was successful. Six hours later, I was off the bike and back in the transition area to change into running clothes.

It's difficult to describe the feeling you experience when it dawns on you that you still have to run a 26.2-mile marathon—*after* a 2.4-mile swim *and* a 112-mile bike ride. Yet, probably because it seems pointless to stop after having come so far, you somehow find the strength. As I set out from the transition area, I knew that if I could just keep going, I would make it.

The hours and miles of the run rolled onward, and I found myself willing my body forward. “Move, move, keep the 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. **D**