

The day a city man becomes an Ironman

Editor's note: The following is a personal account of competing in the most grueling of all triathlons — The Ironman. Patrick Griskus, 36, of Waterbury, who lost a leg in a motorcycle accident in 1967, competed in the event on Sept. 8, 1984.

By PATRICK GRISKUS

IN A BORROWED sweatshirt to ward off the morning chill; I stood waiting on Craigville Beach. In a few minutes it would be 7 a.m. and the waiting would be over. By the day's end I'd know if I had become the first amputee to actually do an "Ironman."

The Cape Cod Endurance Triathlon wasn't "The Ironman," but it's 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike and 26.2-mile run were the same distances as the infamous Hawaiian original. Of course, I would've gladly swapped this 61-degree swim with Hawaii's any time — and so would have the 270 or so triathletes gradually inching their way toward the Cape Cod water's edge.

Still, the waiting was almost over. I had trained everyday for the past year for his moment. Well, not exactly for this, but for "The Ironman." After having been "invited" in so many words to Hawaii, I was, at the next to last minute, "uninvited." And so here I was, without major TV network coverage, no tanned wahinis and not a single Hawaiian shirt in the crowd.

All the same I was scared. The Cape event was still an "Ironman" in distance and there was so much I had to prove. I knew how hard I had trained and even though I had 17 hours to finish, I figured I should be able to make it in 14½ hours or less. I had even gone public with that prediction. I wish I had kept my mouth shut.

But that was behind me now. I was in the water. The starter's horn had blared and the waiting was over. I was wearing two bathing caps on my head in an attempt to retain more body heat and I had greased myself up for the same reason. But the water still chilled me to the core. I had passed up a chance to wear a wet vest because most of the other swimmers weren't wearing them. I didn't want to look like a sissy. But that little touch of bravado came expensive; after about a quarter-mile of swimming, I was already becoming numb. I wished I were a faster swimmer or, failing that, a fatter swimmer. For lack of both, I continued to stroke freestyle as hard as I could. My normal time on open water for a 2.4-mile swim was between 100 and 105 minutes. With the impetus of the competition, I was hoping to do 95 minutes or better. A five-minute savings would not only get me on my way that much faster, but it would get me out of the cold water sooner — no small consideration in a situation where hypothermia for these athletes was only a matter of time.

I continued to stroke, trying to project myself an hour into the future, and out of the water and onto my bike. At the same time I cursed my lack of speed. Everything else had so dramatically improved for me in the past several months. My running was always getting better. My bicycling was reaching the incredible and my transition time between triathlon segments seemed to be getting shorter with each

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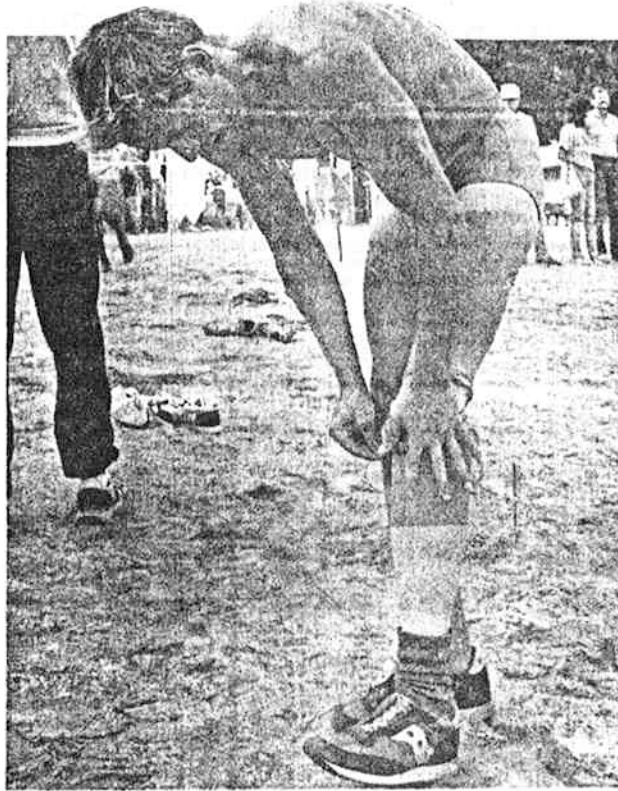
race. My swimming, though, remained the same. At best, it was average. But in a race like this, average became awful because there was no hope for mediocrity over the length of a 140-mile course.

Of more immediate concern was my fear that I wasn't swimming as hard as I might expect because I was numb. As it turned out, that concern was very real. It took me one hour and 45 minutes to finish the swim. When I think about it now, I'm disappointed that my time was longer than I realistically thought it should have been and I'm a little astounded that I stayed in that water for 105 minutes and came out ready to go. Well, almost ready to go.

After hopping out of the water,

some big guy grabbed hold of me as if I weighed nothing and told me I had to warm up in an ambulance. I told him I didn't have time and that I was OK. He said that I did have time and I wasn't OK. There were several other athletes shivering in the ambulance and I guess I was shivering too, but my prosthesis, shorts and transition gear were given to me while I was warming my body. As soon as I completed the change I left the ambulance and ran to my bicycle. The swim was over and I had 138 miles to go. So far so good.

I shivered for the first few miles of the bicycle course, but my body warmed as the sun rose higher in the sky. I had allowed that the bike race would take me 7½ hours, but that had



BILL BASTENBECK photo

PATRICK GRISKUS adjusts his prosthesis between swimming and running events at a recent triathlon in Middlebury recently.

been a best-case scenario and now that I was behind schedule I told myself not to worry about it. At this point, I was far behind the leader as well as the main body of competitors. Just make Provincetown, I reminded myself, and see what happens then. As I pedaled along I managed to pass two other racers over the first 45 miles of the course. But when my chain jammed in the rear derailleur and I had to stop to free it, they both passed me. I knew I wasn't running last, but I was afraid that I was getting closer to the back group in the race with every mile.

After repairing my bike and hitting the road again, I soon passed the two bikes that had gone by me earlier. The sand dunes near P-town then came into view and I began to pump harder. At the 56-mile turnaround, I grabbed a banana, cookies and a jelly doughnut and tried to push them down my throat as I rode. Inhaling the doughnut in a single gulp, the jelly squirted out the other end and onto my arms. But that turned out to be fine because it gave me something to lick while I rode along.

During the second half of the bike race, I began to regularly overtake other riders. It gave me a lift and made me ride just that much harder. In all of my races, I've always tried to finish as quickly as possible and beat as many people as I could. This may seem like the obvious thing to do, but because I am an amputee many people think it's enough that I just show up and complete a race. I'm not about to say that there's anything wrong with such thinking. But, speaking for myself, I can't see that there's anything right in it either.

After 100 miles of riding, I still felt strong on the bike. Even though I was pretty sure my stump was cut up, I still felt pretty good. I hadn't expected to be able to ride so well for so long, but 12 miles later when I coasted back into the Craigville Beach transition area — some eight hours and 40 minutes from the beginning of the swim — I calculated that I had completed the 112-mile bike event in a little over 6½ hours, an hour ahead of my projected time.

Following a prolonged transition, where I had a great deal of difficulty adjusting my prosthesis for the marathon portion of the race, I finally began the 26.2-mile run. I was surprised at how good I felt and the cheers and encouragement from the crowd made me feel even better. Prior to the triathlon, I had assumed that once I got to the run I would be doing quite a bit of walking with whatever running I was still capable of doing. But once into the road race, I simply kept running. To be sure, I just took things a mile at a time but I found that I was able to maintain a steady if somewhat slow pace and I was even catching up with and passing a few people here and there.

One mile into the race, I passed, going in opposite directions, Marc Suprenant, the Cape Cod Triathlon's eventual winner. He finished the course in 9:04:10, the third best time ever recorded over an ironman distance. At about eight miles into the run, went by Walt Tajmajer of Prospect, also heading in the other way.

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Ironman

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That morning, it was Walt who lent me the sweatshirt before the start of the swim. It was good to see him doing so well. As I continued to run I began toying with the idea of perhaps being able to run the whole marathon distance. It seemed like the noblest goal imaginable after all that had happened so far.

I was also at this point that it occurred to me that, no matter what happened in the miles, I was really going to do it. After all, this was my seventh marathon and while it was by far my slowest, I felt as if I were on home turf. The marathon turnaround came at Sandwich, 13.1 miles from the Craigville Beach finish line. I was still running, but the first vague cramps were beginning to grip my legs. I continued running, reminding myself that the worst thing I could do would be to give in to the pain and stop to massage it. What usually happened then was that the dam would burst and cramps would lock onto every moving part of my body. I kept telling myself this as I ran — until at 20 miles my left hamstring stiffened and grabbed the heart right out of my chest. I tried to will myself to keep on running but the pain willed otherwise. I hadn't even stopped at (the) Boston (Marathon) this past spring — where I managed to

lose a few layers of skin from the bottom of my stump and the bleeding in that compact space had been slightly amazing, all while running my best marathon ever — but I stopped here.

As soon as I bent over to massage the hamstring, I felt and even saw the muscles in my right leg cramp up and begin to pulsate every which way. I tried massaging them but as soon as I would stop, the spasms would start up again.

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I could no longer run. I began to walk. It was dark by this time and I had just over six miles to go. I periodically tried to run, but couldn't. In addition to my legs, my abdominal and even my neck muscles were cramping up. Every half-mile or so I found myself doubling over. I was so close, but I could barely move without some kind of muscle problem.

Finally at 24½ miles, I reached back to massage my hamstrings and my stomach locked up so tight that I keeled over face first. I broke the fall

with my hands, but I was now on all fours. It actually felt good to be down. As bad off as I was, though, I understood that if I didn't get up and start moving again immediately I wouldn't know when or if I ever would. I managed to get up and walked for about another quarter-mile, and then I tried to run again. I found that I could. It was about then that Janice McKeown of Prospect caught up to me. She was running strongly and I reminded myself that this was still a race. I picked up my pace and tried to keep up with her. But Jan, bless her heart, wasn't about to humor me. She picked up her pace and I began once again to fade.

But by then, I could smell the ocean ahead. I had to be getting close. I had no idea what my time was, but I was finally getting to the finish. Then down the road I saw lights and heard a loudspeaker. I had about a ½-mile to go. I picked up my pace again and actually started to sprint. The crowd at the finish started cheering and I ran as hard as I could. The final few seconds before crossing the line had become heaven to me. I was going to do it. I was really going to do it. I crossed the line and saw Robin (Dowling), my biggest fan. I had done it. As dizzy and happy as I was, though, I didn't forget to ask about my time. It was 14:28:57. Drained and sore and by now freezing



Patrick Griskus

in the 60-degree night air, I was far too exhausted for a show of emotion. All the same, I knew I had just completed the most important day of my life with a sprint. And how many people can say that?

Fischang-Cicchetti race set for Nov. 4

For the second year in a row, the Al Fischang-Janice R. Cicchetti Memorial 10-kilometer road race will benefit the Children's Cancer Fund at the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington in memory of the race's namesakes.

The two Waterbury residents were both active supporters of the race in its early years and both were victims of cancer. The 10th running of the 10-K race this year will be held, rain or shine, Nov. 4 at noon from the West Side Middle School on Chase Parkway. Once again the event is being sponsored by Colonial Bank in conjunction with the Waterbury Track Club.

More than 400 runners competed last year and Colonial turned over more than \$10,000 in race proceeds and contributions to the Connecticut-based Children's Cancer Fund.

"We believe the Fischang-Cicchetti race has become one of the premier running events in Connecticut," stated Bruce A. Wilson, Colonial senior vice president for corporate communications. "Over the years, our race has attracted many fine runners who have gone on to win world-renowned racing events."

Entry blanks will be available beginning this Thursday at any Colonial office and the YMCA. For more information, call Marilyn Derouin at 574-7207 or Carl Cicchetti at 756-7861.

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Sailing

(From page 5)

Lence was one of those who got stuck around the turns, and was in last place coming off the third turn. He managed to weave his way through the congestion to finish in the top 10 for that race, but it cost him the overall title.

"We had some lousy breaks today," said the mechanical designer who finished third in the August regatta at Quassy. "Next time maybe it'll be different. Every dog has its day."

One dog that just missed having its day was Means Davis. He finished with 19½ points, just behind Lence's 19½ points. "Without the throw-outs, we'd have won the regatta," said Peggy Davis.

Still, the Davis' team was not too disappointed. "It's the first time we've been up to Connecticut to sail," said Means. "It's beautiful up here."

"We love the whole life of snipe sailing," said Peggy. Means said he has been sailing competitively for 26 years, and "I have been since I married a sailboat," quipped his wife. "We love the competition and the camaraderie," Peggy continued. "For instance, this trip was so much fun for us because we recreated Means' first trip to the nationals 25 years ago."

In 1959, four men who had just graduated from high school in Atlanta — Davis, Brad McFadden, Woody Norwood and John Muhlhausen — drove to Oklahoma for the nationals. All four made the trip to this year's masters. And they did

well, too. Davis finished third and McFadden and Norwood finished eighth and ninth overall, respectively.

The regatta was as much a chance for the sailors to renew old friendships as it was a competition. For instance, the eldest sailor, 77-year-old Ted Wells of Wichita, Kan., said he got to see old rivals Harry Allen of Westport, the 1955 U.S. champion, and Buzz Levinson of Indianapolis. They have raced against one another for the better part of 40 years, said Wells, who won the 1947 and 1949 snipe world championships, and the 1952 Western Hemisphere title.

Wells, who still races in regattas about five or six weekends a year, said the race "was a lot of fun. I had a good time."

Wells borrowed Ralph Swanson's boat, and had an enthusiastic crew, Missy Packer of Woodbury. He said the conditions were typical for Quassy. "The wind was very unpredictable — if it seems too good to be true, it is."

Wells won the expert class (70 and over). Dixie Bartlett of Annapolis, Md., with Jonathon Bartlett as crew, won the masters division (60-69). Levinson, with Dan Blodgett as crew, won the senior's division (50-59), and Gram won the junior's (40-49).

Local entrants were Ned Daly of Washington, with his wife Kitty as crew; Tom St. John of Woodbury, with his son Todd as crew; Ray Tyler of Watertown, with Virginia Wright as crew, and Apley Austin of Morris with Ken Bauster as crew.