

07

training day

Trailblazer

Through his remarkable **ACHIEVEMENTS** as a triathlete, Scott Rigsby serves as an *inspiration* to other amputees... and to **ABLE-BODIED** athletes, as well.

By **Brian Cook**

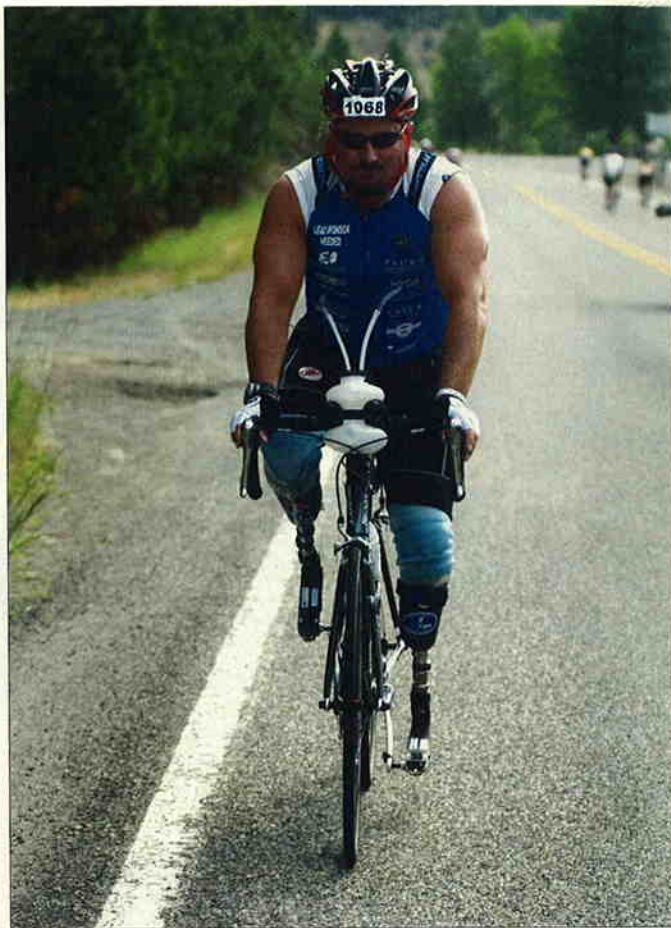
CONSIDER THE STAGES of the humility-inducing event known as an Ironman triathlon: a 2.4-mile swim, followed by 112 miles on a bike, then, just to see what you're really made of, a marathon run—literally—of 26.2 miles.

Now, consider Scott Rigsby. The 39-year-old Atlanta resident has the powerful build of a football player (he was one, back in high school), not the more sinewy physique that you might expect of a triathlete. Only a year and half ago, he raced in his first triathlon of any distance, having had limited running experience and never having cycled or swum competitively.

This month in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, Rigsby will be in the starting field at the Ford Ironman Triathlon World Championship. It's an improbable achievement, especially for someone whose life was changed so dramatically in a horrifying few seconds one July afternoon in 1986.

Just 18, Rigsby was working a summer landscaping job near the farm where he grew up with six siblings in tiny Camilla, Georgia. He was riding in the bed of a pickup truck pulling a trailer of lawn mowers when it was clipped by a semi that tried to pass on a narrow two-lane road, knocking him out of the vehicle. Rigsby was dragged along the asphalt for more than 300 feet, then pinned beneath the 3-ton trailer. Among his most serious injuries: third-degree friction burns on his back and two mangled legs. Once at the hospital, his right leg was amputated below the knee, and he'd soon undergo the first of 25 surgical procedures to reconstruct his "good" left leg.

Rigsby went on to graduate from the University of Georgia in Athens, but his life revolved around hospitalization, rehabilitation and various jobs he took just to make ends meet. So in June 1998, still struggling to walk and perform some of the most basic tasks of daily living, after 12 years of physical and emotional anguish and some serious introspection, Rigsby



ordered his 26th surgery and became a double amputee.

"I was ready to retire from being a professional patient," he says of his decision to have his lower left leg removed. "I just needed to put a very painful past behind me and start living again."

Just six weeks after the second amputation, Rigsby was not only walking but jogging on a set of high-tech prosthetic limbs. While things were looking up, he desired something more—physically and professionally—out of his new life. He even tried to break into the prosthetics industry as a salesman. "I was told the company wanted to get able-bodied people to sell their products," he recalls with amusement, "and I'm like, 'OK, that makes a lot of sense.'"

Drawing on his athletic background, he decided to become a "trailblazer" and an inspiration for other amputees, just as he'd been inspired by Sarah Reinertsen, who in 2005 became the first female above-the-knee amputee ever to finish an Ironman competition—and the most difficult one at that, the Ford Ironman World Championship in Hawaii. With the support of corporate sponsors (including Delta Air Lines), Rigsby now trains and competes full time. In 2006 he completed 13 triathlons, five road races and one duathlon, a run/bike/run event, setting assorted world records along the way. That summer he became

"Scott is very driven," says Tony Myers, Rigsby's coach. "You can't go through what he has since his accident and not end up a very resolved individual."

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the first double amputee on prosthetics to complete the Olympic-distance New York City Triathlon (1,500-meter swim, 25-mile bike ride, 6.2-mile run).



"There's really no excuse for anyone not to be active," says Rigsby. "You're not going to get any sympathy from me. It's a privilege to be able to run, swim and bike."

Last June, he finally tackled an Ironman, in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where the sponsor, Ford, honored him with its Everyday Hero award. Rigsby had hoped to become the first double amputee to finish an Ironman, but the intense pain of a back injury caused by an over-the-handlebars spill during the bike portion forced him to drop out at mile 11 of the marathon. "It was one of the hardest decisions I ever made," he says. Still, "It was an amazing experience; I did the best I could and went as far as I could."

Less than two weeks later, he was racing again, and this month (October 13) he'll be in Hawaii, one of only five disabled athletes chosen to participate in the world's best-known Ironman competition.

Rigsby's "journey," as he calls it, has been fueled by fierce determination, his Christian faith, a ready sense of humor

and a "big piece of granite" in place of the proverbial chip on his broad shoulders. "I work best when somebody says I can't do it or when they doubt me," he says. "I just get out there and figure out a way to do it."

But attempting an Ironman indicates just how far Rigsby has come in the two years since he was referred to the man who would become his coach. "So Scott calls me up, and in all honesty, the biggest

issue was not that he was a double amputee, but that he was a double amputee wanting to do an Ironman—and he didn't bike and he didn't swim competitively," says Tony Myers, owner of Athletic Training Services in Atlanta, another of Rigsby's sponsors.

"And I'd never run a road race either," Rigsby adds. "I told Tony what I was going to do, and he didn't hang up on me, so I figured I'd work with him."

"The next day," continues Myers, "Scott came over, and I could tell by talking with him that his motivation and sense of direction were so strong. I thought, well, it's possible he could do this, but the odds were stacked against him." After Rigsby jogged a few laps around the parking lot wearing his curved, cleated carbon-fiber running blades—which resemble upside-down question marks—he had himself a coach.

"Scott is very driven," says Myers. "I think it's just part of his personality in general, but also, you can't go through what he has since his accident and not end up a very resolved individual."

"When I walked in [to see Myers] back in 2005, I just prayed a simple prayer," Rigsby says. "I said, 'God, if you open some doors for me to run through, then I'll run through them.' And that's basically what happened. So be careful what you pray for," he adds, grinning



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sheepishly, “because I’ve done a lot of running, more than I probably would’ve liked to.”

In Myers’ estimation, Rigsby’s main obstacle to becoming a competent triath-

lete was the bike riding: “Cycling is very much a mechanical endeavor. That’s what worried me about Scott. I knew he could swim, I knew he could run, but on the bike there were some issues, because he’s not connected to the pedals directly, and he lacks the feet that are necessary to transfer the power.” The prosthetic limbs Rigsby dons for riding slide into cycling shoes, which are then attached to toe clips on each pedal. Since Rigsby can’t actually sense when he’s securely attached

to the pedals, Myers drew white lines on the toes of his cycling shoes as a visual guide.

Fortunately for the sturdy, 6-foot Rigsby, he has well-developed quadriceps—the large muscles at the front of the thighs—which partly compensate for what he’s missing. “Scott has to be a ‘masher’ on the bike and maximize his quad usage,” Myers explains, “because that’s where all his power comes from. He has a bigger task of stabilizing his body, because he’s really on stilts.”

One might assume that Rigsby hits the weight room pretty hard. “Actually, I don’t,” he admits. He says he lifts occasionally with a friend who’s a personal trainer, primarily to keep his joints flexible and strengthen his shoulders for swimming, “but we don’t do anything heavy, and we don’t do anything very long.”

His coach points out that Rigsby’s approach is hardly unusual. “The main reason triathletes do weight training at all—and some don’t do any—is to keep their strength balanced around the joints,” says Myers. “It actually doesn’t help performance. Resistance training builds fast-twitch muscle fiber, and even shorter triathlons are slow-twitch muscle fiber events.”

For swimming, Rigsby’s gear for some time was decidedly low-tech: a short neoprene sleeve for each leg. Now he uses a pair of carbon fiber prosthetic sockets with waterproof sleeves; they don’t lengthen his legs but help him walk in the transition from swimming to biking. In the water, he’s not at nearly as much of a disadvantage, since triathletes train to swim with minimal kicking, saving their legs for the latter stages. But running poses a new set of challenges. Not only is Rigsby missing the complex foot and ankle structures that distribute the weight and help absorb the impact, notes Myers, but the lower portions of his legs can’t be cooled by the normal method of sweat evaporation, and they can take a pounding from all the motion. Thus, Rigsby often has to stop and empty the perspiration—and sometimes blood—that pools in the cups his legs sit in, making him prone to bacterial infections.



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Rigsby says race organizers don't cut him any slack for the time it takes to change or maintain his prosthetics during or between stages—the clock keeps ticking. But almost always, as during last year's South Carolina Half Ironman, he is given extra space to accommodate his array of special gear. Good thing, he says, "because it looked like a mannequin store had blown up in my transition area."

As for his regular training regimen, Rigsby rides just about every day, mixing in hourlong Spinning sessions (high-intensity stationary-bike workouts), 30-minute jogs, three-hour run/walk sessions and one-hour swims a couple of nights a week. But it's during the weekly seven-hour, 100-mile rides away from the city that he builds his endurance and stamina and fine-tunes his riding technique.

Oftentimes he trains with friend and fellow triathlete Mike Lenhart, founder and president of the Getting2Tri Foundation, which uses triathlons to bring together the physically challenged (including war-wounded military veterans) and able-bodied athletes. "I get a lot of personal inspiration working with a guy like Scott," says Lenhart, a West Point graduate and former Army officer. "He's opened doors for other challenged athletes, because they see what he's doing."

Of course, triathlon training isn't for most people, challenged or otherwise, so Rigsby's recommendations are more modest. "Find an exercise you enjoy doing," he says. "Spend time with it, get really good at it and then be proud of what you've done. There's really no excuse for anyone not to be active. . . . You're not going to get any sympathy from me. It's a *privilege* to be able to run, swim and bike, it really is.

"I'd encourage people to try to set realistic [fitness] goals, so you can meas-

ure progress with small steps. If you aim at nothing, you're going to hit it every time. Find something you love, aim at it and achieve it. You'll feel great about yourself, and you'll impact all

those around you."

In Atlanta, Rigsby's impact is felt even at Georgia Tech, where he often volun-

teers as a study subject in one of the nation's top prosthetics research and development programs. "I'm a Georgia graduate configured by Georgia Tech," he says. Unable to hide his true (school) colors, he adds, jokingly, "I always put on as much red and black as I can before I go over there." The way Rigsby figures it, "they get a two-for-one special with me."

Writer and runner Brian Cook is a former senior editor of Sky.

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