



# **TRIATHLON** TRANSFORMATIONS

# YOU'RE MAKING YOUR MOVE

toward greater fitness, so why not do it in a big way? Discover why triathlon is proving to be such a popular and worthy fitness goal — even for swim-bike-run beginners.

By KARA DOUGLASS THOM

WATCH A LOCAL TRIATHLON and you'll see that the sport is hardly the exclusive domain of sinewy, speedy, natural-born racers. In fact, you'll see triathletes whose entrée into fitness was huffing and puffing their way through a slow walk on a treadmill set to zero incline. You'll see people who wanted to be accountable to a specific, magnificent fitness goal rather than a number on a beige bathroom scale. You'll find folks who went in search of a surefire approach to cross-training and got hooked on the thrill of competition. And still others who made fast friends of more experienced training partners and "just kind of got dared into it."

Across the board, you'll see people who've earned the privilege of calling themselves *triathletes*, many of whom would never have predicted — even a year ago — that they'd ever carry that title. All of this is part of triathlon's mystique, and an equally important part of its broad-based appeal. For while triathlon is well known for transforming bodies, one of the truly remarkable aspects of this sport is how it transforms identities — even lives.

## Triathlon Makeover

Ten years ago Judy Molnar, now 40, wouldn't have dreamed she'd one day call herself a triathlete. She weighed more than 300 pounds and lived a high-stress life as a marketing executive who sustained herself by eating fast food. Every year, her doctor told her to lose weight. "I knew I should," says the Palm Harbor, Fla., resident. "What I didn't know was how." At one visit, she saw two words in her medical record: *morbidly obese*. "That's when I realized I was slowly killing myself."

Molnar's first step was joining a health club and hiring a personal trainer. She began walking, and within three months she was training to run in local 5Ks and 10Ks. "My racing goals made me more accountable to my workout schedule, and they also kept it fun."

Two years, countless fun runs and one marathon later, she saw a triathlon flyer at her gym. "I hadn't gone swimming since childhood," she says. "And I didn't even own a bike." Still, Molnar was eager to try an event that demanded less pounding on her knees. She found an ad for

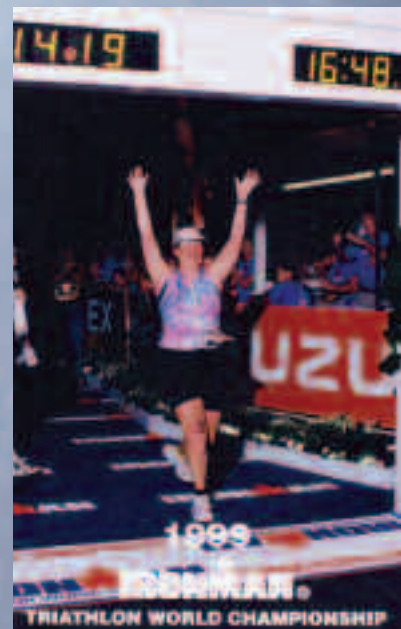
an online triathlon-coaching program and signed up immediately. "When my coach faxed me the first training schedule, it was the scariest, most involved thing I had ever seen in my life," she recalls.

But once Molnar began training, she realized that becoming a triathlete wasn't as far-fetched as she thought. "I knew that if I was fairly fit, I could comfortably do a sprint-distance tri. Maybe I wouldn't win — but I could finish and not hurt or throw up at the end." And in fact, as soon as she crossed the finish line of that first race, she was ready to sign up for another.

Molnar was so busy training, racing and learning how to fuel her healthier body with healthier food that she had little time to step on the scale. "I felt so good, the number wasn't magic any more," Molnar says.

"I was waking up with energy and a new sense of purpose. My body wasn't weighed down with fat and bad food. I felt balanced." Molnar, who typically races in the "Athena" division (for women weighing more than 150 pounds), doesn't expect to be svelte. "Now my doctor tells me I'm 'healthy as a horse,' and I think that's a *great* analogy."

Molnar's transformation through triathlon affected more than her physical self. Her new lifestyle opened a number of doors for her. To wit, because she had included some personal details on her entry form for the Hawaii Ironman in 1998, the World Triathlon Corporation (WTC) caught wind of her fitness transformation. The WTC put her in touch with Rosie O'Donnell, who invited Molnar to be a guest on the *Rosie O'Donnell Show*. Despite the fact Molnar didn't finish the Ironman that year ("That's real life," the show host told her), O'Donnell asked Molnar to lead her show's "Chub Club" program, which prepared women to run or walk a 5K. Molnar became certified as a



Judy Molnar crosses the finish line of the 1999 Hawaii Ironman Triathlon in high spirits. She says the sport changed her life.

personal trainer and triathlon coach, and went on to finish the Hawaii Ironman in 1999. She wrote *You Don't Have to Be Thin to Win* (Villard, 2000) and now speaks regularly about her journey. In 2004, the WTC asked her to run their Iron Girl division, which organizes events for women.

"What are the odds I'd go from leaving a doctor's office morbidly obese to coming to work for a company like this?" she asks.

## Triathlon's Magnetism

What brings many people to triathlon in the first place is its increasing accessibility. Many people, at some time in their life — even if it was 30 years ago! — learned how to swim, bike and run. Familiarity provides a certain comfort level for taking the plunge.

That familiarity lured Marisa Novak, 35, a mother of three from Naperville, Ill. After her second child was born prematurely, she needed an outlet for relieving stress. So she returned to her spinning classes at Life Time Fitness and began an O<sub>2</sub> heart-rate training program that got her running on a treadmill. All of which was great — for a while.

"I was happy to be back in a routine, but then I started getting bored," Novak recalls. "I swam competitively in my youth, so I started adding that into my workout routine, as well. That's when I realized how close my workouts were to triathlon training." Now she's working toward that goal with her personal trainer and plans to compete in three Olympic-distance triathlons this summer. "This is the future for me," Novak adds. "It's how I will continue to stay fit as I get older."

Indeed, many of us can continue to swim, bike and run through the golden years. "Triathlon is a sport you can now grow up with *and* grow old with," says Siri Lindley, 37, a Boulder, Colo.-based triathlon coach and former world No. 1-ranked female triathlete. "It's certainly a lifestyle sport." Lindley knows: Her clients' ages range from 16 to 64.

Triathlon coach Jared Berg, 32, also based in Boulder, Colo., coaches about 50 athletes throughout the country, including many beginners in health club-based triathlon training programs. He asks his clients why they want to train for triathlons, and nearly all of the responses fall into one of three categories:

**1) CROSS-TRAINING:** The variety of training methods helps to prevent injury; it also thwarts boredom. Either way, the attraction is balance. Single-sport athletes are prone to muscle imbalances and repetitive-use injuries. Triathlon provides balance by strengthening the upper body with the swim and the lower body with the bike and run. It also offers a nice continuum of weight-bearing exercise, from low-impact swimming to high-impact running.



# WHERE TO BEGIN

Thinking about competing in a triathlon? Plenty of resources can help get you to the starting line.

- Get recommendations for a coach from local triathletes, or search the USA Triathlon Web site under "Coaching" at [www.usatriathlon.org](http://www.usatriathlon.org). If you're open to cyber-coaching, many coaches work via email and phone.
- If you prefer to be self-taught or need more information, check out these titles:
  - Triathlon Training Basics* by Gale Bernhardt (VeloPress, 2004)
  - Triathlon Training in Four Hours a Week* by Eric Harr (Rodale, 2003)
- Or search these Web sites that provide training and racing information, and encouragement for beginners:
  - [www.triathanewbie.com](http://www.triathanewbie.com)
  - [www.beginnertriathlete.com](http://www.beginnertriathlete.com)
  - [www.trinewbies.com](http://www.trinewbies.com)
- Must-have equipment includes swimsuit and goggles, running shoes, and a bike and helmet. Other helpful gear includes a watch that records splits (the time it takes to complete each leg of the triathlon), a heart-rate monitor, aerobars and bike shoes, a tri belt for race numbers, and a training log.

Plus, there is a synergy that develops from training in the three disciplines. "Doing a swim session after a run session is a great form of recovery," Lindley says. "The strength you build on the bike will give you more strength for the run and vice versa."

**2) CAMARADERIE:** Triathlon is as much a lifestyle as it is a sport. Like-minded people provide a support network for physical goals and a social network outside of workouts. "Triathletes quickly form bonds out of mutual respect," Lindley says. "There are no shortcuts to getting fit for triathlon, so people respect one another for taking on the challenge and for their drive to finish the race." These friendships are further solidified through group training sessions and competing together.

Molnar, for instance, is grateful to have restored her health through triathlon, and she is most appreciative of the friends she has made along the way, including meeting her husband on a training run. "Triathlon offers a social



## SIGN ME UP



Beginner-friendly races are typically small events (fewer than 400 entrants), or they're larger events that offer several races of varying distances. Some races offer a training program leading up to the event. Find a race at [www.trifind.com](http://www.trifind.com) or [www.active.com](http://www.active.com). Triathlons to consider:

Find women-only events at [www.danskin.com/triathlon.html](http://www.danskin.com/triathlon.html) or [www.irongirl.com](http://www.irongirl.com).

TriAmerica offers many sprint options at [www.triamerica.com](http://www.triamerica.com).

The Life Time Fitness Triathlon, Saturday, July 15, in Minneapolis, caters to beginners and pros. See [www.ltftriathlon.com](http://www.ltftriathlon.com). Also, check out the other tris in the Life Time Fitness Triathlon Series at [www.ltftriathlonseries.com](http://www.ltftriathlonseries.com).

aspect and a way to belong to something. Sure, you want it to be competitive, but the aspect of camaraderie can change your life," she says.

**3) CHALLENGE:** Setting goals makes you accountable to your fitness program; achieving goals keeps you motivated to continue setting new ones. In fact, triathlon's high retention rate — what people refer to as "getting hooked" — comes from the satisfaction of reaching a goal.

Dan Rudd, PhD, a psychologist and triathlete in El Dorado Hills, Calif., wasn't an athletic youngster. "I was overweight as a kid, so whenever I played sports I got teased." He had learned to swim in college, however, so when a friend asked him to be the swimmer on an Olympic-distance relay team, he agreed. Finishing that first race was enough to convince Rudd, 38, to return the next year, and the next, and eventually to finish the whole race on his own.

That kind of enthusiasm makes a strong impression, explains triathlon coach Berg. "When you accomplish something, whether it's achieving a certain heart rate or riding your bike a certain distance, there is a pride in accomplishment that carries over," he says. Molnar can attest to that. "I was constantly improving, and each of

those breakthrough moments gave me a thrill that I had just done something I thought I would never do," she says.

## Call Me a Triathlete

There's something about becoming a triathlete that engenders not just enthusiasm, but real admiration. "When I say I'm training for a triathlon, people's jaws drop," Novak says. "They give me profound respect just because I'm trying to do it." Perhaps that's because

being a triathlete connotes more than just being a competitive athlete. It also suggests that a person has a certain character, a focus and a determination to persevere under difficult circumstances.

Rudd, coauthor of *Health in a Heartbeat: A 6-Week Program for Emotional and Physical Fitness* (Heart Zones, 2004), said he had to get beyond his core belief that he wasn't an athlete. "I had to change that about myself," Rudd says, who has since finished numerous triathlons, including four Ironmans. "I still can't throw or catch anything," he jokes, but he knows he's come a long way. "I get such a thrill out of reminding myself: I am an athlete."

Molnar loves the reaction she gets when sharing her triathlon accomplishments. "When people say, 'You're nuts,' I take it as a compliment," Molnar says. "Sometimes what it means is, 'I can't believe you can do that.' That's my fuel — it makes me want to say, 'Yeah? Watch.'"

Kara Douglass Thom is a transformed triathlete and author of *Becoming an Ironman: First Encounters with the Ultimate Endurance Event* (Breakaway Books, 2002). Her writing has also appeared in *Fit*, *Sports Illustrated for Women* and *Women's Adventure*.

**WEB EXTRA!** For health tips from triathlon medical director Brad Moser, MD, check out the online version of this article at [lifetimefitness.com/magazine](http://lifetimefitness.com/magazine).