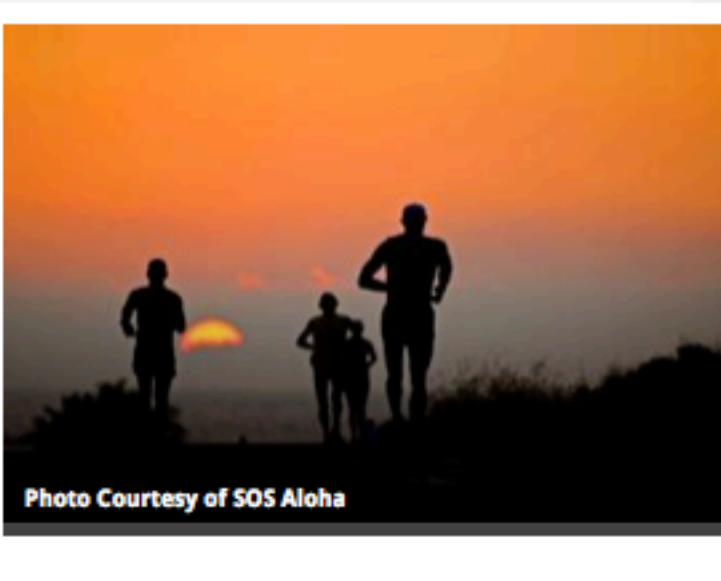


Multiple Sports

Ironman World Championship Kona 2012: Racing for Hope

By Ben Stepansky (Featured Columnist) on October 12, 2012 2,756 reads 0

Perseverance. Inspiration. Selflessness. Hope. These four badges are the most faithful form in which to represent the stories of Rob Verhelst and BethAnn Telford, two Ironman athletes who will be competing at the World Championship in Kona.



They were both selected as two of eight winners in the Kona Inspired contest to participate along with some of the best athletes in the world.

Their narratives are motivational, an impetus for one to strive for more and to reflect on all that is good in one's life.

Rob is a firefighter from Madison, Wisconsin who still finds himself working 24-hour shifts. His story began after the September 11th attacks in 2001. Rob described his rescue team's call to action as something that was "written into [his] life and has impacted [his] life ever since."

He gained invaluable perspective during the time spent at Ground Zero. In search of a purpose, Rob began running triathlons, and eventually, Ironman triathlons. His story became particularly noteworthy during his participation in the Half-Ironman Race in July of 2011.

For the running portion of the race, and for two half-Ironmans and eight full-Ironmans since, Rob has finished in his full firefighter's gear: his jacket, pants, helmet and oxygen tank.



What prompted Rob to compete in this fashion?

He described it in three parts. The first was to build awareness for the charity "Code 3 for a Cure", which raises money for both active and retired firefighters stricken with cancer. The second part was to honor and remember all those lost during the 9/11 attacks.

And then the last part has developed throughout the years as an inspiration, a passion. When you have something that you want to do and you're passionate about it to grow stronger, the people around you grow stronger. And that's the motto that I've had the whole year: your strength is your passion.

BethAnn's tale encompasses a similar mantra, coinciding with that of the Ironman competition: "Anything is Possible."

BethAnn competed in the 2004 Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C. As she strongly hit Mile 18, a sudden and painful "pop" in her head nearly derailed her. With proper hydration and pure determination she was able to finish the race. However, in the following days, memory trouble and other physical encumbrances began affecting her work.

In December of 2004, an MRI revealed a brain tumor in her frontal lobe.

Now, seven-and-a-half years later, after teaching herself how to walk and then run again, BethAnn is fulfilling her dream to race at the Ironman World Championship in Kona.

Incredibly positive and strong-hearted, BethAnn will be accompanied by one of her best friends and fellow brain cancer warriors.

Six-year-old Anya, a resident of BethAnn's hometown in Pennsylvania, was flown out to Kona to watch her cross the finish line. Their connection began when BethAnn dedicated her Boston Marathon performance to Anya, and raced with the little girl's name beaded on her shoelaces.



As BethAnn finishes, a white flag will be raised above her head with the word "hope" surrounded, by the names of children battling cancer.

[T]his is where I ask you to please understand that this race isn't about me, because as I cross that finish line there's hundreds of names of children on that flag that I carry with me and it's about them. It's about the race for a cure for cancer...the best part about the Ironman [is] right there, that last 300 yards of carrying those names. Because to me that's what this whole race is about.

Neither BethAnn, nor Rob, want to be categorized as heroes. Instead, they would like to be optimistic influences on others and have their stories be a blueprint for inspiration.

For Rob, meeting individuals who have been inspired by his story is undoubtedly rewarding.

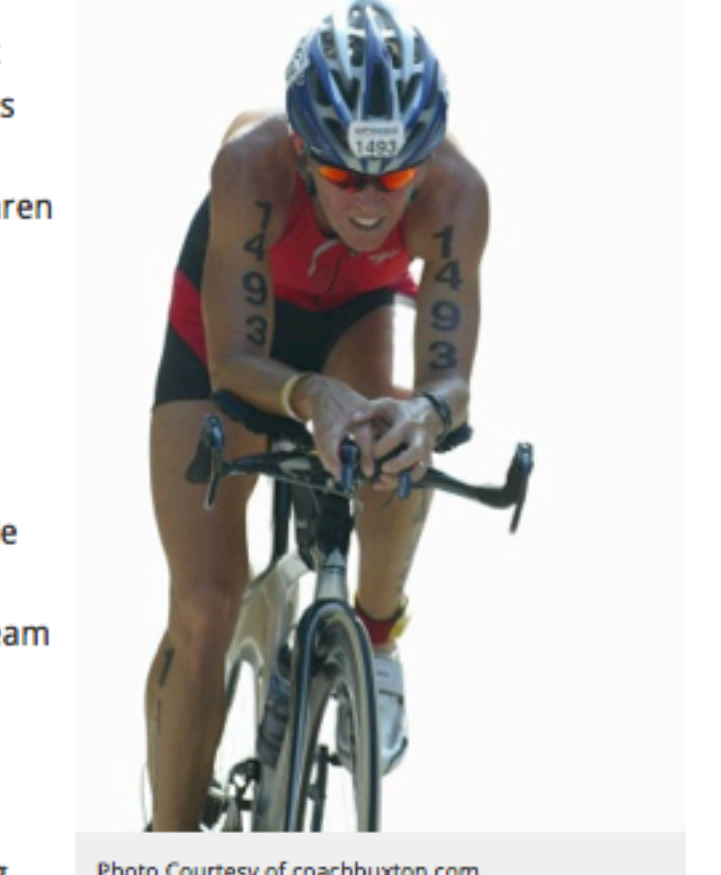
"It drives me more when people are looking towards you for inspiration."

BethAnn fights for a similar cause.

"I hope that I'm an inspiration for them. I don't want to be a hero. I don't want to be classified by that—an inspiration, yes. I want to inspire them to fight on."

There are many others striving for this goal. Like Rob and BethAnn, my friend and seasoned triathlete, Karen Buxton embraced a cause for her 10th Ironman in New York City this past summer.

Karen's brother passed away after a 10-year battle with colon cancer, and six months later her 81-year-old mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. A subsequent routine mammogram for Karen revealed the same diagnosis.



Through treatment and radiation, she raced in memory of her brother and in honor of her mother.

She raced to recognize the immeasurable amount of compassion received from hospice workers, and in turn created "Team Tri for Hospice" to raise funds and awareness.

She raced to prove that cancer does not have to hinder or halt one from reaching their goals.

Though she fell short of qualifying for Kona, Karen was successful for greater reasons. For reasons she shares with Rob and BethAnn: to act as an inspiration, to fight for others and to be a creator of hope for all.

"The mind is a powerful thing," says Karen. "It can talk your body in and out of a lot."

I think both Rob and BethAnn would agree.

For more:
 Rob Verhelst: www.firemanrob.com
 BethAnn Telford: <http://www.teambt.org/>
 Karen Buxton: <http://www.triforhospice.com/>

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