





A little thing called hope leads Telford to Ironman

Oct 15, 2012 11:10 AM ET | By **Anna Katherine Clemmons**
ESPN The Magazine

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Iron Woman
BethAnn Telford continues to battle cancer, but that is not stopping her from competing in Saturday's Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii.
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BethAnn Telford's day begins at 3 a.m.

She wakes up, dresses, grabs her gym bag and leaves her Fairfax, Va., townhome. Depending on the day's training schedule, she might walk the one-mile distance to the pool, where she logs one or two miles up and down the lap lane, her long, black hair pulled beneath a swim cap. Afterward, she may lace up her running shoes and set off on a 45-minute jog, moving at a 9:30-minute/mile pace alongside her longtime training partner, John Carmichael. Or maybe they'll bike 80 miles together, weaving their way through the streets of Northern Virginia, their reflectors blinking in the pre-dawn darkness.

The petite, energetic 43-year-old is home by 6 a.m. to shower and get dressed before riding either with friends or her boyfriend of 11 years, Bob Latin, into the nation's capital and working a full day as the special events coordinator at the U.S. Government Printing Office. She's home by 6 p.m. and in bed by 7 p.m. so she can repeat her cycle the next day.

Telford knows so many people, it's rare for her to run or ride without waving to a familiar face. During road races, marathons and triathlons, she interacts with the crowd, smiling and offering the international sign language symbol of "I love you" with her left hand. Just below the sign, on the inside of her left wrist, onlookers can see the tattoo she got after her first Ironman, which reads "Hope."

What those watching don't see is what Telford hides -- the catheter she has to wear because of bladder failure; the vocal cords closing up inside her mouth, making it almost impossible for her to swallow; the discomfort and itchiness of a pacemaker implanted in her lower back; the seizures that occur at various times, causing her to fall down or black out; the 97 percent blindness in her left eye because of a malignant brain tumor.

Seven and a half years ago, when Telford's doctor discovered that tumor, the lifelong athlete made a bucket list. She knew this was a diagnosis she could not outrun, so she wrote down what she wanted to achieve: the Boston Marathon (she's crossed the finish line three times); the Marine Corps Marathon (she'll run it for a third time this October); her first Ironman (she completed Lake Placid in 2008). But unlike before her diagnosis, when she competed simply for the joy of running, she had another purpose: to raise awareness and funding for brain cancer research. She has subsequently run hundreds of races as part of Team BT (Team BethAnn Telford), raising over \$250,000.

But her biggest bucket list dream, the Ironman World Championship in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, eluded her. Every year, she applied for a lottery spot; every year, she was denied. She had decided not to give it an eighth try last winter, but one of her training partners had an idea.

That idea, carried forward by thousands of supporters, is why Telford will finally be racing in Kailua-Kona on Saturday.



Courtesy of BethAnn Telford

'I was literally living in a fog'

While running the Marine Corps Marathon in 2004, Telford was rounding the corner of Mile 19 when she heard a loud pop behind her left ear. She finished the race without any problems, but kept bumping into furniture and losing her balance for several weeks afterward. She visited an ears-nose-throat specialist, assuming she had a problem with her eardrum. Doctors spent weeks studying Telford and couldn't figure out what was wrong, so they sent her to get an MRI.

A few days later, Telford was working in her office when her cell phone rang.

"BethAnn? Are you sitting down?" her doctor asked.

She explained she didn't have time to talk because she had an important meeting. "Can it wait?" she asked.

"No, it can't," he said.

He delivered her diagnosis: Telford had a large frontal lobe brain tumor behind her left eye.

"I remember I went out into the hallway, into the stairwell and I sat there and just cried," Telford said. "I didn't know why because I had never known anyone with a brain tumor. I didn't even know what it was."

She called Latin and gave him the news. Over the next month, they visited the country's top oncologists. The first four refused to operate, saying it was too risky given the tumor's location (it was wrapped around the major blood vessels to the brain); Telford could bleed to death on the operating table. Her last appointment was with Dr. Henry Brem at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore; he explained he wasn't sure what he would find during the surgery or if he could remove the entire tumor given its position. But Dr. Brem told Telford he would still perform the operation. "We can get this," he said.

"Talking to him, I started feeling like, 'OK, I have this, but I'll be OK. Let's get on with life and out of this fog,' because I was literally living in a fog," Telford recalled. "He gave me hope."

She told Dr. Brem about her love of running, how she couldn't wait to train again. Her surgery was scheduled for April 12, 2005. That morning, Telford got into the car with Latin and her parents. They drove toward Johns Hopkins, everyone quiet during the ride. Telford's head was shaved and marked with black ink where surgeons would cut. "That was really, really difficult, because I thought I wasn't going to make it," Telford said.

During the surgery, her father, Bob, whom Telford calls her "hero and inspiration," suffered an anxiety-induced heart attack, overcome with the stress of awaiting his daughter's prognosis. He recovered and, along with his wife, Sue, has been one of Telford's biggest supporters. They have three daughters, one of whom is legally blind. BethAnn, their youngest, "has more energy than anyone we know and is always taking care of everyone around her," Sue said.



BethAnn Telford has had constant support from parents Sue and Bob.

After the surgery, which removed part of the tumor, Telford couldn't stand or walk. Dr. Brem told her there was a 90-percent chance she would never run again. Slowly, she retaught herself to move, taking small steps, then bigger ones. She returned home and began walking laps around her neighborhood. Less than four months after the surgery, she entered her first race, a 5K in her hometown of Camp Hill, Pa. She walked the first half, but after seeing her father cheering on the sidelines, she began to run.

She continued entering races, founding Team BT with the slogan, "Never, never, never give up." But her tumor kept growing. Fourteen months after her initial surgery, Telford had another major operation. "They chop at the tumor, it comes back; they chop, it comes back," Telford said. "There are only so many times they'll continue to operate."

Over the past two years, Telford's tumors have spread to her stomach. Eating is very difficult because food lodges in her throat, where her vocal cords are closing. "I've got this acid reflux with my stomach where, instead of having bowel movements, nothing is happening, and the reflux is coming up my voice box and the voice box is closing," Telford explained.

Digestion is also painful, so Telford eats as little as possible. Her bladder is shutting down because of her brain tumor; anything she drinks comes out of her body almost immediately. A healthy person's bladder can hold, on average, up to 16 ounces. Telford's bladder maxes out at two-thirds of an ounce, which would barely fill a shot glass. She wears a pacemaker to try and her regulate her bladder; during races, she catheters herself. She has lost 28 pounds in the past year, admitting she "doesn't have much to lose to begin with."

In February, doctors will remove her bladder entirely. She has to decide in December whether to undergo another operation for her brain and stomach tumors. Either way, she knows her condition is worsening. "There are some days that I do think about the future and those are the days that I get really depressed," Telford said. Instead, she focuses on raising awareness and funds for brain cancer research through racing.

"Part of the reason she's been around so long and fought so hard is she does not give up," Latin says. "You've seen people with cancer who, once they decide to give up, their body goes downhill. I no longer try to tell her she can't or won't do something. If something does happen to her, it'll happen while she's doing what she loves."



BethAnn Telford, left, befriended 6-year-old Anya Zvorsky after reading about the girl's own fight with brain cancer.

'Kona Inspired'

On an afternoon last March, Caldwell Clarke sat inside the fire station where he works in Fairfax County. The 33-year-old firefighter met Telford through a running club and the two often train together. Clarke was in the midst of preparing for his first Ironman and knew how many times Telford tried to earn a lottery spot to Kona. He saw an online promotion for "Kona Inspired," launched that month by Ironman, which awarded eight Ironman World Championship racing slots to inspiring entrants.

To win, participants had to record a video explaining why they wanted to race. Over 100 potential racers submitted videos. Viewers then voted on 45 semifinalists, which were divided into three rounds of entries. "I showed the contest to my wife and I said, 'How is this not made for BethAnn?'" Clarke said. He called a friend who works as a videographer and organized a brainstorming session with Telford, Latin and Carmichael. They shot the video one afternoon and [submitted their entry](#).

Over the next few months, viewers voted for their favorite entries in each round. The top two finishers in each of the three rounds, as well as two wild-card slots, would earn entry to Kona. Fifteen videos, including Telford's, comprised the third round, which closed voting on July 18. Latin heard about a friend's mother who lived in Florida who had seen Telford's video and voted for her. Another friend stationed in Africa logged on to vote.

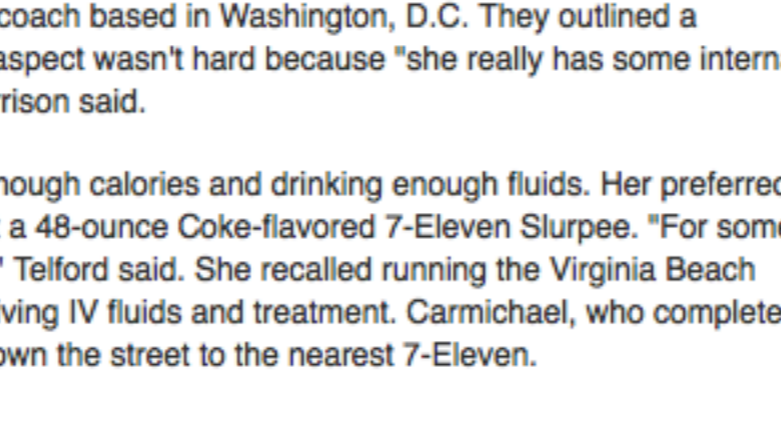
On July 23, Telford received a call from a friend: she had finished within the top two. She was going to Hawaii. Telford called her parents and told her dad the news, asking him if he was proud of her. "Of course I am," he said, crying, before adding with a laugh, "So are you taking me to Hawaii?"

Telford began working with Alyssa Morrison, a triathlon coach based in Washington, D.C. They outlined a workout schedule for each week. The physical training aspect wasn't hard because "she really has some internal motivation that I haven't seen in my other athletes," Morrison said.

Where Telford proved a difficult mentee was in eating enough calories and drinking enough fluids. Her perseverance after a long workout is not a large meal, but a 48-ounce Coke-flavored 7-Eleven Slurpee. "For some reason, if I'm feeling really low, it brings me back to life," Telford said. She recalled running the Virginia Beach Marathon and sitting in the medical tent afterward, receiving IV fluids and treatment. Carmichael, who completed the race with Telford, knew what she needed and ran down the street to the nearest 7-Eleven.

Telford realizes she is sicker now than she has been before any race and doesn't replenish her body with enough nutrients. Still, she is determined to cross the finish line.

"I think there's someone pushing me through this that I can't see," Telford says. "This is the best thing that's happened so far in my journey, other than the people I've met. I'm excited for the brain tumor community, for the kids, and I hope that I've inspired more people. Just being given the chance to be able to complete it ..." Telford stops herself. "Because I will -- it's in my heart."



BethAnn Telford will participate in her first Ironman World Championship Saturday in Kona, Hawaii.

Her motivation, she says, is children, particularly those afflicted with brain cancer. Because of her tumor, Telford can't physically have children. She isn't allowed to adopt, given her seizure frequency (she also can't drive). Instead, she has befriended many children with brain cancer. Her self-described "bestest friend in the world" is 6-year-old Anya Zvorsky, a first-grader from Shiremanstown, Pa. The two met last spring after BethAnn's father read about Anya and her battle with brain cancer in the local paper. Anya often attends Telford's races; Telford has begun a "Team Anya" in the Philadelphia area in her young friend's honor. After one of their initial meetings, Anya introduced a new tradition: whenever the two part ways, they press their foreheads together for several seconds, connecting the location of their tumors.

Thanks to Her Inspiration organization, which works to "empower individuals living with cancer," Anya and her mother, Karen, will be flown to Hawaii to cheer on Telford during the race. "When I first met her, I thought she was kind, strong and caring," Anya says of Telford. "I am so glad to be her friend."

As she speaks, Anya fiddles with her four plastic bracelets and turns over her left wrist to reveal a fake tattoo, a small match of Telford's. It reads: "Hope."

"I think with a cancer like this, and I hate when people say this, but I think it was just part of her plan," says friend Vanessa Spiller, who met Telford through a local gym six years ago. Spiller was later diagnosed with breast cancer, and Telford encouraged Spiller throughout her chemotherapy treatments and helped her set a goal for a post-treatment race. This past year, they both ran the Boston Marathon, jogging together for much of the course.

"She's inspired so many people to believe they can do something when they don't think they can. I don't think she'll ever stop until her body just can't go," said Spiller.

"Before cancer, you had a goal: you get up, you just live it," Spiller added. "But to beat cancer, you just live. People say, 'Shouldn't BethAnn rest? Should she run a marathon?' And it's like, 'What's the alternative?' BethAnn wants everyone affected with any sort of cancer to know that you're going to be OK. None of us know how much time we have. She makes you feel alive."

'It isn't about me, it's about them'

A few weeks before Kona, Telford's closest friends gathered at her home. During lunch, Telford thanked each of them individually for their support, talking about the impact they had on her life and the brain cancer community. Several people in the room alternated between crying and laughing at her stories and jokes.

After encouraging everyone to stay as long as they'd like, Telford said, "I don't know if I'll be here next year," she said, wiping tears from her eyes. "So I thank you for making this dream come true now."

Telford has never been to Hawaii and looks forward to many aspects of the weekend. But she is most excited for the finish line.

Three hundred yards from the finish, a friend will hand Telford a white flag to wave as she jogs the final distance. Written on the flag are the names of hundreds of children fighting brain cancer. Some have already passed away; others are still battling.

"There's so many people that I wish were still here, so to be able to take that with me to Kona, even if it's just hand-written on a flag," Telford says. "I'll prove to everyone that this wasn't about me, it was about all those people on that flag."

And a flag-bearer who inspires them to never give up.

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Anna Katherine Clemmons
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Anna Katherine Clemmons is a contributing writer for ESPN The Magazine.

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