Alumni

Ask an Alum: How to Be a World-Class Athlete… at 78

John Weber ’65DM, a retired dentist and professor at Cornell Medical College, started running triathlons in his late sixties. Last year, at age seventy-seven, he became an Ironman All World Athlete champion.

By
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|
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John Weber (Lori van Houten)

What’s an Ironman Triathlon?

The Ironman is a 2.4-mile swim in open water, a 112-mile bike ride, and then a 26.2-mile run. It’s one of the most difficult one-day endurance challenges in the world.

How did you get started with the Ironman?

I began running marathons first. My children had grown up and I was single again at sixty and thinking about retirement. My two oldest were living in Boston and training for the marathon, and they convinced me to start running, too. I thought I was too old, but figured that I'd give it a try.

I wanted to get in better shape — for one thing, I was back on the dating market for the first time in a long time — but I quickly found that after a good 10K run, I just felt better. I ended up doing twenty-five marathons before someone suggested a triathlon. The addiction grew from there.

Tell us about your training schedule.

I'm always training. It's too difficult to come back if you stop. But my season really starts with the world championship in Kona, Hawaii. That's in October, but I go out to Hawaii around August 15 to train. When I'm there, I'll do around one hundred miles on the bike twice a week, one 20-mile run, one 15-mile run, and then I'll swim the Ironman distance twice every week. I just do that in rotation. Come race time, I know every pimple on that course.

Are you on a special diet?

I'm not a fanatic. There are some people who live on dried chicken breast and avocado. That's not me. My diet is a mixture of most anything, but nothing in excess. I have ice cream once a week.

What are your goals now?

I won a world championship at seventy-five and my next chance of winning one will be when I age up to the eighty-to-eighty-five age group in 2018. Right now, I'm in the seventy-five-to-seventy-nine group, competing against younger athletes. People think that a few years wouldn't matter in your seventies, but they seem to!

But really, I'm not so concerned with medals. I'm just happy to be able to continue to do what I do and enjoy the company of my fellow athletes — wherever they are in the world.

If medals don't motivate you, what does?

For me, a triathlon isn’t just a sport; it’s a lifestyle. I’m seventy-eight years old, and when I go for my annual physical, my GP shakes his head and says, “This is really just a well-baby exam.” That feels good.

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