



17 HOURS TO GLORY

Extraordinary Stories from
the Heart of Triathlon

Mathias Müller
with Timothy Carlson

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Boulder, Colorado

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1830 55th Street
Boulder, Colorado 80301-2700 USA
303/440-0601 · Fax 303/444-6788 · E-mail velopress@competitorgroup.com

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INTRODUCTION

Ironman: a fundamental unit of measure

THE HAWAIIAN IRONMAN Triathlon was, just 32 years ago, the frontier of human endurance. When John Collins, Gordon Haller, and John Dunbar took off into the waters near Honolulu for the first one in 1978, they might have been Columbus, sailing over the horizon, making a bet with the elements that they would not sail off the edge of the known in a foolish quest for the New World.

The distances of this event, like many others that became fundamental units of measurement, were a product of human coincidence. Navy Commander John Collins wanted to settle an argument that raged among swimmers, cyclists, and runners: Who was the fittest at the height of the 1970s fitness revolution? So Collins took the three toughest Hawaiian endurance events, which fortuitously started and finished within close proximity in Waikiki—the annual 2.4-mile Waikiki Rough Water Swim, the 115-mile Around-Oahu Perimeter Bike Race, and the 26.2-mile Honolulu Marathon—and threw them into one package. To make the transitions work out, he chopped 3 miles off the bike ride. This summary act was similar to the settling of the modern marathon distance. In 490 B.C. Pheidippides ran about 40 kilometers, or about 25 miles, from the battlefield of Marathon to Athens to announce the Greek army's victory over the Persians, declaring, "Be joyful! We win!" with his last breath before dying. In the 1900 Olympics in London, organizers thought things would be swell if the queen could start the race from Buckingham Palace, so they added a mile and 385 yards to the event, and that's been the official distance ever since.

For a mile, a league, a yard, a foot, an inch, there are similar stories. The origins of our measurements have always been based on human need. But a unit of measure sticks when it becomes a useful reference for significant human enterprise. Humans consistently reach for new frontiers in science—from flying across the Atlantic to traveling to the moon—and the same happens in sports. The 4-minute mile was thought to be the limit of human capacity, and the marathon was thought to be possible for only a select few. Then came the running revolution, and marathons were choked with runners. It took the Ironman distance to ratchet up the sights of the romantics and capture the imagination once again. Now that frontier has moved on, some say to a land of senseless excess. Hawaii had an Ultraman event 2.5 times the Ironman distance. France has established a Triple Ironman in the Alps, and Mexico has scheduled a sort of Tour de France for the insatiable Ironman, with 16 days to cover 10 times the original Ironman distance: 24 miles of swimming, 1,120 miles of cycling, and 262 miles of running.

But they keep coming back to the Ironman.

The race is first measured with the calendar: a year's worth of effort to train your body to do it. Then it comes down to the clock on race day, which reflects in perfect inverse proportion the number of calendar days you put into it. So, in a world where effort is often ignored or irrelevant, if not downright punished, the Ironman creates a kind of justice and meaning. In one day it burns 3,000 to 9,000 calories, and it drains one to seven gallons of sweat and immeasurable depths of your soul. Just to get ready takes four to eight months of training, covering perhaps 5,000 to 8,000 miles on the bike, hundreds of miles of swimming, and 1,000 to 2,000 miles of running.

As a name it's been popular in other arenas, too. Iron Man Ivan Stewart was fabled for racing around the clock alone in the dusty, rocky wilderness of Baja California off-road races. There are life-guard Iron Man lifesaving competitions at beaches around the world.

Lou Gehrig was known as the Iron Horse for playing in 2,130 baseball games until disease took him out, and Cal Ripken Jr. took over that mantle as the Iron Man of baseball for breaking Gehrig's record. On the flip side, iron-fisted Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin was also known as the Iron Man, as was Germany's Otto von Bismarck. Iron is essential to our blood and our health. Iron is metal, metaphor, and also myth. Ultimately it is that interior struggle against the objectively monumental task of the Ironman distance that is important.

Mark Allen, six-time Ironman champion, said, "The Ironman is a test of people within themselves. It's so difficult, it works slowly inside you. It forces you to open up your eyes a little bit, and your soul. The way the island is, particularly the Kona side, strips you of everything you put around yourself. You're out there really raw. If you go out there thinking that you're going to crush your competitors and dominate the course, it will slap you down. You have to respect this island and look inside to find your strength."

No matter the difficulty, if the Ironman did not touch the soul, it would not have its enduring popularity, nor would it have created a worldwide phenomenon—there are currently millions of triathletes in over 80 countries. And unless it struck a universal human chord, it would not attract 10 million television viewers in America every year, many of whom rarely get off the couch.

The Ironman event has no intrinsic meaning in itself. Why it still captures the imagination has everything to do with what the people who have done it have brought to it, and its meaning grows every year with the telling of more stories.

And so lies the difficulty and the pleasure in choosing 17 extraordinary persons out of the 50,000 or so who have done Ironman Hawaii. This book—which owes a great debt to the stories of the Ironman that came before, especially Barry McDermott's *Sports Illustrated* epic about Tom Warren's 1979 Ironman victory and Mike Plant's beautiful book *Iron Will*—seeks to explain it all by telling the stories of athletes of extraordinary talent, character, and spirit.

Some—such as Mark Allen, Greg Welch, Thomas Hellriegel, Peter Reid, and Normann Stadler as well as Paula Newby-Fraser, Karen Smyers, Natasha Badmann, and Chrissie Wellington—are among the greatest endurance athletes to ever walk the earth. Others, such as Julie Moss, virtually gave birth to the sport by virtue of their inspiring struggles simply to finish. Some, such as Robert McKeague and Sister Madonna Buder, pushed back the perceived limitations of age with a quantum leap. Others, such as Andreas Niedrig, threw off the shackles of crime and addiction to embrace freedom in the self-discipline of sport. And physically challenged athletes—what a politically correct understatement!—such as Marc Herremans, David Bailey, Carlos Moleda, and Sarah Reinertsen, show us that loss of limb, paralysis, and life-threatening injury cannot defeat the indomitable human heart. All of these stories tell us something important about the human spirit, which does not simply endure but prevails.

In a world where the speed of communication has served to isolate us, where 500 channels of cable have fractured a sense of a shared community, where a high-speed, franchised world has eliminated meaning along with meaningful differences, there remain a few acts that by their very difficulty re-create a more rugged past and renew the fervor of a quest.

The people who tried it were eager for the moral equivalent of a personal war, for acts of individual heroism. They wanted to share the road with others who had caught their admiration, people like the extraordinary athletes in this book. Mark Montgomery, who has started 13 Ironmans, said that the Ironman field reminds him of the kinds of people who settled Australia and America. “The Ironman doesn’t interest the average person,” he said. “He thinks this is crazy and doesn’t give it a second thought. It sorts out those people who have something different going on upstairs. It draws people who have something exceptional.”

Sally Edwards, a pioneer in women’s endurance sports who had a 2nd, a 4th, and a 5th in the Ironman, said what still excites the

imagination of elite athletes who tackle the Ironman is its speed. “The title ‘world’s greatest endurance athlete’ some writers have given to the Ironman champion is wrong,” she said. “I don’t want to sound egotistical, but it is not that hard a race to finish. I have done the Western States 100-mile run and the Iditasport, 100 miles on snowshoes in the Alaskan wilderness. Both of those involve much less intensity for a much longer time. The thing that is truly difficult about the Ironman is the intensity. The Ironman distance demands a lot, but what sets it apart is how fast they go. No other race gets that good an athlete on that kind of course. You add the fatigue from the swim, the fatigue on the bike, and the fatigue on the run, and what results is a huge fatigue, an exponential multiplier of fatigue.”

Greg Welch of Australia, who won the race in 1994, agreed. “It’s so hard because it’s no longer a pace; it’s no longer take-your-time-to-change-your-clothes. It’s swim 2.4 miles in world-class time, get out and change in a minute and a half, and bike for four and a half hours at Tour de France pace with your heartbeat at 170 beats per minute, and then run as hard as you possibly can without putting yourself in the hospital, without dehydrating, without losing all your salt, without running out of glycogen, trying to do it not only in record time but first. Because it gets faster every year. It is the ultimate test for a triathlete.”

It is no accident, either, that in a world where many sports have gone mad with fame, money, drugs, violence, and power struggles, triathlon has remained largely immune. Most professionals make less than the amateurs who hammer themselves every weekend for the fun of it. Few speak ill of one another. There is little jealousy for those who do prosper, however modest those fortunes may be when compared to those of Shaq or Michael or Montana or Tiger. It’s because when it comes down to race day, there is no lying. It is your body and the work you have put in. There are very few upsets, especially when it comes to the Ironman. There are no shortcuts, and, unlike in cycling, track and field, and swimming, there is a

remarkably low percentage of cheating. Their God-given talent is just the tip of a huge pyramid of work done over years. The pros and amateurs alike often feel part of a common mission, a quest for the Holy Grail. And nowhere is it more clear than along the finish line on Ali'i Drive at the Ironman. That's where the elite athletes return after their trials and cheer all the others who are finishing up to 9 hours later. "As a professional, I feel honored by the average people on the course with me," said Mark Allen. "Of course, no one who does the Ironman is an average person."

And that is precisely why they do it. It is an occasion for finding out if you have the capacity to be a hero, and it requires the inner strength and physical discipline to be one. And it carries over into the rest of the athletes' lives. The Ironman has value because it demands value. It cannot be done in one blast of self-destruction or prodigal effort. What sets it apart from bungee jumping or other dares is that it cannot be done on a whim. And it is so hard that you cannot simply do it and risk damaging your body as a cheap price to pay. It demands a long-term physical and mental discipline, a careful accumulation of hard work, and control over the mind and emotions to allocate your energy to the last drop.

When you have asked that much of yourself and delivered, you see that your potential is unlimited. For everyone who gets to run toward the lights within the cutoff time of 17 hours, the feeling is ecstatic. As most come in, it is dark, and they run toward a bright light down a long canal warm with cheering on either side. "It is like what I imagined being born is like," said one Ironman.

"Why do I smile?" said a Japanese man as he finished. Pointing back across the line, he said, "It is because back there is hell, and on this side is heaven."

—*Timothy Carlson*



ONE | **JULIE MOSS**



“Winning means reaching the finish—reaching the finish means winning.”

ASK ANYONE FAMILIAR with the early days of Ironman about the race’s signature image, and they will all mention the same thing. Not winners in flowered leis. Not swimmers churning through Kailua Bay. Not cyclists bent over their bikes like insects moving across the sun-baked lava fields. The image in everyone’s head is that of Julie Moss crawling to the finish line. Moss’s never-give-up determination to reach the ribbon embodied the defining ethos of the endurance athlete, and in her Ironman debut she was immediately embraced as a full-fledged member of the triathlete pantheon. Surprisingly, though, Moss was only an accidental triathlete. At heart she was a surfer.

In 1981 Julie Moss was studying physical education at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo when she met life-guard Reed Gregerson at a Carlsbad beach. Gregerson had caught the bug of the new sport of triathlon, which had originated in nearby San Diego, and he was talking about competing at the Ironman Hawaii, then three years old.

Her curiosity piqued, Moss tuned in to the ABC broadcast of the 1981 event, which had just moved from Oahu to the lava fields on the Big Island of Hawaii. As she watched triathletes struggle in the heat and wind, she was intrigued. “I remember Scott Molina collapsed, and Olympic cyclist John Howard looked strong on the bike but awkward on the run as he won the thing. But I do not remember seeing a woman. I thought it was both compelling and ridiculous at the same time. And it had parts I could relate to, like the swim in the ocean and the marathon. Afterward Reed contacted a friend and started training for it, and all of a sudden it looked like a doable thing.”

Moss had been a desultory high school athlete. “I liked being part of the basketball and volleyball teams for social reasons,” she

said, “but I didn’t want anybody to throw me the ball. I didn’t like the pressure!”

Although she disliked the spotlight in team sports, her surfing played a crucial role in the development of her self-reliance and courage. “When I was in college I paddled out at a secret break in central California near a spot called Killers. There were really big sets, and as I tried to push through I was thinking, *I may get washed up on the rocks, and I might not get out of this one.* This was a situation where I had to rely completely on myself, and I managed to survive.”

And so, with her new boyfriend, Gregerson, Moss was drawn into long bike rides and running to go with her surf-honed swim. Ever practical, Moss decided to kill two birds and write her senior thesis on training for and competing in the Ironman, then held in February each year. A self-described “born procrastinator,” she put off the start of a training regimen until the clock was about to burst, relying on her belief that “you do your best work under pressure.” So it wasn’t until September 1981, with the February 1982 race a scant five months off, that her training got seriously under way with a half-iron-distance triathlon in Santa Barbara. The triathlon went well, but she received a dose of reality in December when at mile 20 of the Oakland Marathon she experienced the phenomenon that marathoners refer to as hitting the wall and dropped well off her sub-3:30 pace. With her self-confidence hurting, she penciled in a second marathon just three weeks later in Mission Bay.

But first, less than two months before the Ironman—on Christmas Eve, no less—Gregerson broke up with her. “I was devastated and would not have done the event if I didn’t have to finish my thesis to graduate,” said Moss. “My mom was single and raised us on a teacher’s salary. She had paid for my college, and I owed that much to her to finish.” Cornered by her commitment to graduate, she decided she was doing the race for herself and plunged ahead.

At Mission Bay she covered the 26.2 miles in an encouraging 3 hours 33 minutes. Then, to polish her bike training, she drove to

Santa Barbara, planning to ride 200 miles back to Carlsbad with a midway overnight stop at her grandfather's house. She cut the ride short at 150 miles.

With two weeks to go, she traveled to Kona, planning to put in some long bike training sessions. Those rides were intended to give her a final boost of confidence leading up to the event. But there was a catch: She was staying about 35 miles outside Kailua-Kona, where the course started and finished and most athletes began their training rides. Indomitable, she added her commute to the distance and ended up riding over 135 miles one day. Combined with some shorter rides back and forth to swim training in Kailua Bay, she pedaled more than 340 miles in the week before the race—a disaster in waiting from a scientific training standpoint.

But as she faced the awesome challenge of her first Ironman, her most important preparation was attitude. She had no ambition to do anything more than finish and certainly did not anticipate any attention except from friends and family. “I didn’t have a concept that I actually would be seen,” recalled Moss. “Nor did I care about what you wear. So on race day I wore a ridiculous bubble-shaped bike helmet and a huge John Deere–style hat with the Ironman logo on it that came with the race-day schwag. And I wasn’t as lean as I would become, so my face was round, and I looked like this big-eyed kid with freckles playing dress-up with a grown-up’s hat.”

She had also planned to wear regular bike shorts and a tank top signed by Olympic skating hero Eric Heiden. But she was rescued by a man she met on a pre-race ride in Kona who found a more modern Lycra skinsuit for her to wear during the ride.

While most of the attention was focused on the coming duel between Scott Tinley and Dave Scott, the women’s field had two competitors of note: professional cyclist Pat Hines and Kathleen McCartney, a member of the first professional triathlon squad, Team J David. Moss was a rookie—a college student writing her thesis on training for the event and the ultimate dark horse. “Starting this

thing, I never pictured myself as any kind of good athlete,” she said. “I gave myself a pat on the back for being gutsy enough to go out and do it. But I never thought of myself as a top-level athlete. So it was actually good to not have that burden of seeing myself in any particular way. All I asked of myself was to find a way to finish.”

Moss now sees that her unknown status was a plus. “I was really unburdened by any sense of being competitive or preconception of being good at this,” she said. “My own personal reason I was there was to find myself. The importance came from sticking with it, and finishing. And the challenge of Hawaii allowed me to melt away expectations.”

On February 6, 1982, seconds before 7 a.m., she was treading water along with 579 other athletes in anticipation of the start that would get the fifth edition of Ironman Hawaii under way. When the starting gun fired, it was a release. She was wearing race number 393 and held her own much better than she had expected. After 1 hour 11 minutes she emerged from the water as one of the leading women, with a 21-minute lead on McCartney. Five hours 53 minutes later she finished the 112-mile bike trailing only Hines. She also had an 8-minute advantage over 1981 third-place finisher Lyn Brooks and retained an 18-minute 39-second lead over McCartney, who was weakened by food poisoning suffered two days before the race.

As Moss came into the bike-to-run transition, her bra strap broke, and she persuaded a volunteer to surrender her bra. “When it broke, that diffused any tendency I might have developed to approach the run with too much competitiveness,” she said. “Which was a help because I knew I had a long way to go.” Just a few miles into the run, Hines quit with cramps, and from then on Moss had two escorts—the ABC camera van and helicopter. Still, she said, “I didn’t know I was in first place until we reached the turnaround, about 8 miles from the finish.”

When McCartney hit the run turnaround, she was 8 minutes behind Moss. “I was so stoked,” said McCartney, “but I also knew

I couldn't go any faster." Soon McCartney was trailed by her own media helicopter. "I noticed Julie's helicopter and mine were coming closer together," she said.

About two miles later Moss's competitive instinct had fully awakened. But with every step in the heat of the lava fields, her stride became more labored. Over the final 6 miles she sensed that she was losing strength. She struggled from aid station to aid station, from drinking cup to drinking cup. Again and again she found small reserves of energy in her ever-weakening body that got her closer to the finish. "How far is she behind me?" Moss asked spectators and the camera crew who accompanied her. Each time her voice sounded less confident.

Moss had never expected to win the race, but now that victory was within reach, she was no longer willing to let anyone take it from her. When she reached the top of Palani Road, about a mile from the finish, she still had a 6-minute lead. No one who stood on the side of the road and cheered for her doubted that she would be the first to reach the finish line. But that last mile did not go as expected.

After the steep downhill on Palani Road, she quickly realized that something was wrong. As quickly as night falls in winter, Moss lost control of her body. Her knees buckled, and she stumbled and fell for the first of many times. In that last mile Moss's ignorance of the heavy demands of Ironman race-day nutrition hit her hard. Although she had run a good 3:30 marathon on bananas and sports drinks, her total time on the Ironman course was approaching 11 hours. She was running on empty.

Moss fell four times yet still held her lead. "I kept trying to not give in, but various parts of my body shut down and failed me while I was still running," recalled Moss. "Near the end I kept falling, not because I was near death or hurting. I was simply out of fuel and was too weak to hold myself upright while running."

The last few times she fell, she looked like a doe slipping and falling on ice. Retreating into a tunnel of concentration in which

she ignored the crowd and the cameras, she struggled to think of a way to raise herself back up. “I had more strength in my arms, so I formed a tripod with my arms and legs and pushed off and rolled up,” she said. “The first time I tried it I almost got up, but my legs didn’t hold. I fell and rolled over on my back again. I tried again, and I was up and moving.”

As she turned onto Ali’i Drive, there was a quarter mile to go; she could see the lights at the finish near the pier. “I was aware of the competition, and I thought. *Oh man, I am so close! C’mon, c’mon, c’mon!*” Unable to contain herself, she began to run again. But 200 feet from the finish line, where the big banyan tree arches over Ali’i, it took only the slight curvature of the road to throw Moss off track, and she fell hard.

Moss’s body was out of her control, but her mind was clear and focused on race director Valerie Silk’s warning that competitors receiving outside assistance would be disqualified. Ingrained in every marathoner was the sad story of Dorando Pietri of Italy, who led the 1908 Olympic marathon into the stadium, where he collapsed and fell several times. He was revived and held upright by well-meaning officials who helped him stagger to the end. Though he crossed the finish line first, he was disqualified.

“I made a point of shooing away people who wanted to pick me up and help me because the last thing I wanted was to be disqualified for outside help,” said Moss. “At one point I started to fall back, and I thought if somebody held me up I couldn’t acknowledge I wanted that. I had to show it was all against my will.”

Moss got up again and was walking shakily just 100 feet from the line. She saw the lights and, thrilled by the sight, tried to run once again. Just yards from the finish her mother tried to give her a celebratory lei, but Moss weakly waved away the sweet gesture. Thrown off-kilter by the effort, she fell again 10 yards from the finish.

Again volunteers rushed to her side. One of them pointed a finger forward as if to say, “There’s the finish. You can do it.” It was at

that moment that, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a pair of legs run past her.

They were Kathleen McCartney's legs.

Moss could rise no more. She couldn't stand or walk, much less run. But she was determined to finish. With her last bit of strength she began to drag herself across the asphalt on all fours, yard by yard, inch by inch, crawling her way to the end. After a total of 11 hours 10 minutes 9 seconds—only 29 seconds after the winner—she collapsed over the finish line.

"I realized later I had enough of a lead and could have walked and won," said Moss. "But near the end I got the idea that I needed to respect the effort I had put in and what I had learned about myself that day. And so I could only envision myself running across the line."

Naturally she was disappointed with the outcome. But, as she wrote in an account on the World Triathlon Corporation web site, "I was forced to dig so deep within myself that I was able to see what I was really made of."

Ironically, ABC's *Wide World of Sports* on-site producer, Bryce Weisman, had been so discouraged and bored by the taped footage of most of the race that he had told Silk, "I don't know if I have anything I can use" for the broadcast. Just as he said he did not know if ABC would pay Silk the contracted \$5,000 license fee, all hell broke loose at the finish line. "All of a sudden I hear just this incredible noise and applause and shouting and cheering at the finish line," recalled Silk. "The crowd was going nuts! Then all of a sudden one of the cameramen came to the van and said, 'Bryce, you gotta get out here! You won't believe what's going on!'"

When the delayed segment aired the next weekend on *Wide World of Sports*, complete with a heart-tugging flute accompaniment that underlined the passion of Moss's struggle to the finish, it struck a nerve with viewers. ABC Sports called her struggle to finish a defining moment in sport. The word of the race's drama spread like wildfire, so ABC flew Moss and McCartney to New York for

studio interviews to accompany the segment, which was repeated on Mother's Day.

Many thousands of people swear that watching Julie Moss's crawl inspired them to take up the sport, notably including San Diego life-guard Mark Allen, who ultimately married Moss and became a six-time champion of Ironman Hawaii.

Since that fateful day in February 1982, Moss has participated in many races, including other Ironman events. She proved she was a world-class athlete by winning Ironman Japan in 1985, with a time of 10 hours 4 minutes, and improving her best finish at the distance to 10 hours 13 seconds as an age grouper at the 1997 Ironman Australia. In that same decade she made the qualifying standard for the U.S. Olympic Women's Marathon trials with a time of 2 hours 47 minutes in Boston.

Still, her lasting legacy will always be that inspiring first finish in Hawaii. Again and again she hears from other athletes how her effort and unconquerable determination in 1982 was the reason they were taking part in the world championships. Even today that epic battle motivates thousands of enthusiasts. The Olympic message that participation is everything has nothing on Moss's credo: "Winning means reaching the finish—reaching the finish means winning."

Julie Moss

Mark Allen

Team Hoyt

Paula Newby-Fraser

Greg Welch

Sister Madonna Buder

Karen Smyers

Thomas Hellriegel

David Bailey & Carlos Moleda

Andreas Niedrig

Robert McKeague

Sarah Reinertsen

Peter Reid

Natascha Badmann

Marc Herremans

Normann Stadler

Chrissie Wellington

"The Ironman® strips you of everything you put around yourself. It forces you to open your eyes, and your soul."

—MARK ALLEN, six-time Ironman World Champion

From the moment the starting gun is fired on Kona's sandy beach, triathletes have 17 hours to cross the finish line. Those hours test men and women, forcing them to look deep within themselves and revealing tremendous athleticism, incomparable drive, and an indomitable will to excel.

17 Hours to Glory celebrates the ultimate achievements of seventeen athletes with true strength of character, each compelling portrait building a picture of triathlon's signature event.

Some become champions; some overcome all odds just to finish. But, as *17 Hours to Glory* shows, there are no limits on the possibilities of the human spirit.

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