

A stylized, abstract illustration of a woman in a triathlon suit. The woman is depicted in profile, facing right, with her right arm bent and hand pointing forward. She is wearing a dark purple long-sleeved top and a bright pink tank top underneath. The background is a vibrant orange-red. The text 'WOMEN Who TRI' is overlaid on the image. 'WOMEN' is in a large, white, hand-drawn font at the top. 'Who' is in a smaller, white, cursive font below it. 'TRI' is in a large, dark purple, hand-drawn font on the woman's chest.

WOMEN
Who
TRI

A RELUCTANT
ATHLETE'S
JOURNEY INTO
THE HEART OF
AMERICA'S NEWEST
OBSESSION

Alicia DiFabio

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PROLOGUE

Greater Than the Sum of All Fears

I had as many doubts as anyone else. Standing on the starting line, we're all cowards.

—ALBERTO SALAZAR

I stand on the bank of a lake in the calm of morning, bare toes tickled by the sparse grass. The 7:00 a.m. sun has not yet warmed the fresh summer air, but it makes the lake's surface shimmer like a diamond. To my left, a growing group of spectators aligns the overpass bridge. To my right is the finish line I hope to cross in less than two hours. Directly ahead is my biggest fear and greatest weakness—the quarter-mile open-water swim. The first of three events comprising the Queen of the Hill Sprint Triathlon. Surrounding me, over 300 women of all shapes and sizes, ranging in age from 14 to 75. Despite the diversity of the group, little distinguishes us from one another, clad as we are in matching black-and-pink tri suits, hair tucked beneath swim caps, faces free of makeup. In our caps, color-coded by age groups, we look like a moving rainbow. Some women in the crowd are confident and focused; others are tearful and nervous. The quiet buzz among us contains everything from excited, giggly chatter to softly whispered prayers.

Today is race day. For some, this is just one of many races on their schedule this season. For others, like me, today is our very first triathlon. Today

is bucket list day. It's the day when our dreams will prove to be just a little bit greater than the sum of our fears.

Cheers erupt as the first age group wave is called to the water's edge. Instead of the chaos of a "mass start" typical of most triathlons, the Queen of the Hill Sprint Triathlon avoids the fury of splashing arms and legs by bringing each of the nine waves of competitors out to the water and letting them jump into the lake one at a time. Timing chips strapped around our ankles will take care of the rest. It's all quite civilized, and newbies like me appreciate anything to keep the anxiety level down.

First to go are the orange caps. As I watch them parade down to the water, I feel my stomach churning. I hug my arms across my chest to stop from shaking. My eyes wander out across the lake. Glassy and expansive, Lake Gilman is beautiful and placid, yet somehow today it seems more formidable than serene. I note the final buoy marking the turnaround for the quarter-mile swim. It seems so far. Too far. Did it look that far in my practice swim weeks ago? I know the water will be cold and dark and deep, and I'm a novice swimmer. I know this first leg of the race will be my greatest challenge, not so much physically as mentally. I remind myself that if I just keep my head together, I can do this.

I scan the crowd of onlookers, hoping to catch a glimpse of my family. I can't find them, so instead I picture their faces—four sweet little girls and my husband, who I know is already proud of me before I've even started the race. Who believed I could do this long before I believed it. Even as I try to draw strength from all the people who have supported me on this triathlon journey, I have reached that point where no one else can do this *for* me. Right now, there is only one person I can count on. It's up to me, and me alone.

There are only white-capped women left on the shore. I stand anxiously among them. We are the final wave of the nine age groups—the 45- to 49-year-olds. Though we are not the oldest age group competing, the race directors have put us last in the lineup. The lake is now alive with the splashing arms and bobbing heads of 300 women who have already started

their journey. Some of them are already exiting the water and running up the hill to jump on their bikes. Meanwhile, the white caps are only now filling down the slope of the bank. It's showtime.

As the women in front of me begin systematically disappearing from the tiny dock, my position advances. I'm alive with adrenaline, my head spinning with every fear and doubt I've until now held at bay. I steel myself, filling my head with positive mantras, reminding myself of my sole goal—to finish. Just swim. Then bike. Then run. One thing at a time. One stroke, one step, one mile at a time. I *got* this.

“Call out your number before crossing the timing mat, then jump in,” a race official instructs. I glance at my arm where a volunteer body-marked me with thick black marker earlier this morning. “One-O-six!” I call in a thready voice as I step across the blue-and-orange timing mat. With that one step, my race officially starts.

The worn planks of wood have all but disappeared under my bare feet. I'm at the edge, the splash of the woman in front of me rippling the water. The heat of the woman directly behind me urges me forward. There is no time to hesitate, to panic, to waver, to choose. There is only this heartbeat of a moment.

The words of Eleanor Roosevelt nudge me with a gentle whisper. *You must do the things you cannot.* So I jump.

In an instant, I am swallowed whole and the world goes cold, dark, and quiet. The voices in my head clamor, then hush.

I rise. I breathe. Then, I do the only thing left for me to do.

I begin.

A SPANDEX REVOLUTION

*Never underestimate the power of dreams
and the influence of the human spirit.
The potential for greatness lives within each of us.*

—WILMA RUDOLPH

It's February 1982 and I'm glued to my 20-inch tube television—the kind with rabbit ears and a round dial that clicks loudly when you turn it to one of five stations. An obscure event called the Ironman Kona® is being broadcast on ABC's *Wide World of Sports*. I have never heard of the Ironman, but because I'm a cross-country runner, my dad figures I'd be interested in watching the marathon leg of this three-part race. So I tear myself away from the impossible act of trying to tape my favorite songs off the radio without the DJ talking over the entire ending, and join my parents on the couch.

My dad read about the Ironman in *Sports Illustrated* a few years ago, so he fills me in. It's something called a triathlon, which strings together three athletic events. First, the competitors swim 2.4 miles in the ocean, then bike 112 miles, and finish up by running 26.2 miles . . . all in a row. *As if!* Even I know, at the tender age of 14, that this Ironman thing is completely

nuts. My mother corroborates my thoughts by muttering, “These people are completely nuts.” Naturally, we’re riveted.

The competitor of most interest to us is a young woman named Julie Moss. Julie, a 23-year-old graduate student, is embarking on the Ironman for the first time. She is a non-elite athlete—an unknown, regular, “ordinary” competitor—who somehow has secured the female lead during the final leg of the race. Julie is one of only 47 women competing in the Ironman this year, and since she is the underdog and a girl, we are rooting for her. She’s in the lead, and it looks like she’ll have no trouble keeping the elite athlete Kathleen McCartney, trailing her by a good distance, at bay. Victory seems firmly in Julie’s grasp as she closes in on the finish line.

But something happens to Julie in that final mile. After 10 hours of continuous swimming, biking, and running under the unrelenting Hawaiian sun, her body starts to break down from immense fatigue, poor nourishment, and serious dehydration. In the final mile of this nationally televised, 140.6-mile race, Julie Moss seems to hit a wall. She staggers and sways, her legs turn to jelly, and her body collapses into a heap on the ground.

My mother, father, and I stop fidgeting. Stop talking. Stop breathing. We suck in one collective breath and hold it. My initial fear is that Julie may have suffered a massive stroke or heart attack. Or, perhaps someone from the sidelines shot her because that’s how suddenly she went down. Confused and then concerned, we watch Julie rise on shaky legs. She is like a rag doll, head bobbling, her physical being relinquished to a twisting, uncooperative pile. Yet on her face there is intense focus and unrelenting determination. Despite her heroic efforts to propel her body forward, she collapses again. The tremendous effort it takes for her to rise again is heartbreaking.

I can’t understand how someone could be so healthy and strong one moment and so utterly broken the next. I’m too young to fathom the incomprehensible distance of an Ironman race, the physical pain the body endures, and the mental fortitude required to press on. Confused, I barrage my parents with a string of questions, scared we were watching this

girl die. “What’s wrong with her? Why does she keep falling? Where’s the ambulance? Why isn’t someone helping her? Why doesn’t she just *quit*?” My mom loudly shushes me, eyes fixed on the screen, mouth covered in shock and concern.

Julie is moving forward. In fits and spurts, she stumbles and staggers closer to the finish line. A steeled mind inside a crumbling body. The finisher’s tape is illuminated by bright lights, flanked by hundreds of cheering fans who have fallen into a collective silence at her struggle. She knows she will be the first female to cross the finish line and win Ironman Kona . . . if she can just make it those final measly yards. She is inching her way there, slowly, painfully. In my living room, we are rooting for her. We found out later that an entire nation was rooting as well.

Julie had been managing an inebriated-looking stumble, but then she breaks into a light jog. The crowd erupts into cheers. Just as my heart soars for her miraculous recovery, she collapses to the ground again, and the crowd’s roar quiets into a concerned hush.

This is the part where she stays down, I think to myself. I wait for her to succumb, for the stretcher to come from the sidelines and whisk her away because there is no way she can carry on. Besides, why on earth would she want to? Anyone would just pack it in at this point. Anyone, apparently, but an Ironman.

When Julie Moss can no longer stagger or stand, she does the only thing she can manage—she crawls. It’s more of a drag, really. Slow and purposeful, in spasmodic motions, she crawls those final 10 yards down Ali’i Drive, fueled by nothing but sheer, invincible will.

Yards—*yards!*—from crossing that coveted finish line, the elite athlete who had been chasing Moss for miles sails by Julie’s crawling form and breaks the tape. Twenty-nine seconds after Kathleen McCarthy is crowned the overall female winner, Julie crosses the finish line on hands and knees. First-time Ironman competitor and amateur athlete Julie Moss covered 140.6 miles in an impressive 11 hours, 10 minutes, and 9 seconds. The only thing I could do for that long was sleep.

Though she came in second place that night, in the eyes of the nation Julie Moss was the true victor. She was a regular girl who became a hero, and remains an icon in triathlon history. After Julie crawled across that finish line, Ironman would never, ever be the same.



That was my first glimpse into the world of triathlon. Yet, as powerful as it was watching Julie Moss in the 1982 Ironman Kona, I never thought much about triathlons after that. Sure, Julie's dramatic Ironman finish made her an international symbol of determination. It is still considered one of the most inspirational race finishes in televised sports history. Even so, while Julie was being embraced as America's sweetheart, I was hanging up my cross-country shoes for good, convinced I loathed the sport. And just like that, my lackluster running career and Julie's inspirational Ironman finish faded into the primordial stew of my subconscious where I was content to keep them.

Thirty-five years and four children later, I found myself confronted by triathlon once again. Only this time, it wasn't on a rabbit-eared television. This time, it was right in my own backyard. And instead of one young Ironman competitor with a fire in her belly, there were hundreds of them—the young and old, the couch potatoes and fitness junkies, soccer moms, working moms, stay-at-home moms, teenagers, and grandmothers.

I could see the influence of triathlon in my town simply by watching the transformation of minivans in the grocery store and school parking lots. Once unadorned, cars now sprouted bike racks from the rear and were emblazoned with the pink triathlon club car magnet that proclaimed membership in one of the hottest social scenes in southern New Jersey—the Mullica Hill Women's Triathlon Club (MHWTC). What began as a handful of tri-curious women had grown into an army of weekend warriors, peaking at more than 900 tri-zealots, making it the largest all-female triathlon club in the country. No matter where I went or what I did, I couldn't escape "those girls in pink."

Dressed in the club's signature colors of pink and black, they could be found biking and running on every back road, swimming in the local lakes and pools, organizing charity functions, and being quoted in local newspapers. My Facebook newsfeed was flooded with sporty status updates of every mile run, biked, and swum with friends. I'd scroll through reels of photos of sweaty, happy groups of women, smiling post-race next to their \$2,000 pimped-out road bikes, finisher medals gleaming on their chests. As I watched friends and neighbors bond through this shared obsession, I started to feel a tad left out. Although I was a grown 40-something-year-old woman, I felt sort of like that new girl who can't find a seat at the cool crowd's lunch table. But if the cost of admission was to actually *do* a triathlon, I wasn't at all sure that I was ready to pay that price.

I comforted myself with the knowledge that trends in fitness come and go. This whole triathlon craze was probably just a flash in the pan. After all, I remembered when step aerobics, Zumba, P90X, and kickboxing were all the rage. They were soon replaced with hot yoga, barre, TRX, and CrossFit. I was certain triathlon was just another passing fad. Like jeggings, extreme couponing, and ombre hair color, this too would pass.

But triathlons not only stuck, they snowballed. Turns out, my little New Jersey town was simply a microcosm of a far bigger phenomenon. In 2013, approximately 2.3 million Americans competed in a triathlon, representing an all-time high following a decade of unprecedented growth. In 2015, estimates were well over 4 million. Triathlon's popularity has been on a meteoric rise across the nation and women have been leading the charge, representing more than half of the newcomers to the sport. Once an obscure sport for the elite, recreational and subelite triathlon participation is rising among youth, seniors, and women of all ages, sizes, fitness levels, and body types. In fact, it's the female triathlete "weekend warriors" who are the driving force behind the sport's overall growth.

Triathlons have become more than a one-off bucket list goal. More than a fitness fad, weight loss tool, pre-midlife, post-motherhood, or empty-nester rite of passage. Triathlons are a fitness regime turned passion. A

dream turned lifestyle. A bona fide obsession. A new religion. A female revolution clad in spandex.

Although a slew of celebrities, like Jennifer Lopez, Teri Hatcher, Jillian Michaels, and America Ferrera, have been taking on triathlon, the real drivers of the sport's burgeoning popularity are neither the rich and famous nor the elite pros.

A new breed of triathlete is taking the sport by storm. Women between the ages of 35 and 55 are flocking to this sport by the thousands. Most are not the sinewy, chiseled, competitive athletes featured on Nike commercials. The large majority actually look a lot like the regular people you see in the mall or a PTA meeting. They are the young mothers changing diapers and chasing toddlers, and the seasoned mothers chauffeuring their preteens to a million activities while juggling a career. They are the women working 60 to 70 hours a week, and the stay-at-home moms who put their career on pause. They are girls as young as 8 and women as old as 80. They have survived cancer, battled depression and anxiety, and lost spouses, mothers, fathers, and siblings. They have found sobriety, lost weight, let themselves go, and found themselves again. These women come to triathlons as new mothers, veteran mothers, and grandmothers. They may be single, married, widowed, or divorced. They may be out of shape, unable to swim, or recovering from a major injury or illness. They may be competitive collegiate athletes or self-proclaimed couch potatoes. They come filled with both anxiety and determination. They come in every age, shape, size, athletic experience, and fitness level, yet they all share some common bonds—the desire to do something slightly outrageous, to push themselves further, to face their fears, to dig deep and test their mettle. They are “ordinary” women who want nothing more and nothing less than to swim, bike, and run in between the heaps of laundry, the crying babies, the piles of dishes, and the long days at the office. They pledge their new fitness sorority insecure and daunted, but they emerge empowered and addicted. *They* are the newest faces of triathlon.

As I watched my own town's triathlon club morph from a little spark into a blazing white-hot sun, I could no longer ignore the phenomenon occurring right before my eyes. Sure, it felt like the women in this town had lost their marbles, but it also felt like magic was happening.

Given my front-row seat to all of this, you might think I would be one of the first to catch the tri-bug. Yet, while tri-fever burned all around me, I remained largely immune. But although I had absolutely no desire to *do* a triathlon, my cerebral interest in the topic was piqued. The psychologist in me was fascinated by the seductive lure of triathlon among women. I was intrigued by the popularity and addictive nature of the sport, the personalities of the women who loved it, and the subculture they created. Mostly, I was curious to uncover the greater meaning triathlon held in their lives.

This book was born out of that curiosity. As I watched triathlon seduce hundreds of women around me, I wondered: What makes them so willing to invest their limited time and discretionary income into this sport? What makes them want to plunge into cold oceans and lakes, spend thousands of dollars on racing bikes, and get up to train before the sun even cracks the sky? After all, there were no cash prizes waiting for them at the end of the race, no date with Ryan Gosling or a brand new car. From what I could tell, there was nothing waiting at that finish line except immense exhaustion, high fives, and some Facebook bragging rights. And yet, clearly there was something that held these women captive and fed their passion. Whatever it was, I was determined to understand it. Even if it meant that I might have to do the unimaginable. Even if it meant that to truly understand their hearts, lives, and minds, I would (somewhat reluctantly) have to become one of them.

About the Author



Alicia DiFabio, Psy.D., is a member of the Mullica Hill Women's Tri Club, the largest all-female triathlon club in America, and sits on its board of directors. She earned her doctorate in clinical psychology from Loyola University Maryland and worked as a clinician in the field for over a decade; she is currently staying home to raise her young children. Her articles and personal essays have appeared in various newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. *Women Who Tri: A Reluctant Athlete's Journey into the Heart of America's Newest Obsession* is her first book.

Dr. DiFabio lives in New Jersey with her husband and four girls, one of whom has multiple disabilities. She chronicles her adventures in motherhood, running, triathlon, surviving breast cancer, and parenting a child with special needs at her blog, *Lost in Holland*.

"I'm alive with adrenaline, my head spinning with every fear and doubt I've until now held at bay....There is no time to hesitate, to waver...I jump. In an instant, I am swallowed whole and the world goes cold, dark, and quiet. The voices in my head clamor, then hush. I rise. I breathe. Then, I do the only thing left for me to do. I begin."

How does a middle-aged, out-of-shape, exercise-phobic mother of four find herself on the start line of a triathlon? Her New Jersey town is home to the nation's largest all-female triathlon club, and resistance is futile.

In *Women Who Tri*, Alicia DiFabio dives deep into the triathlon mania that engulfed the women in her small town and swept the nation. As entertaining as it is informative, her journalistic memoir explores the sport's unique seductiveness, subculture, and transformative power. Weaving together the insights of a psychologist, the research of a journalist, and the insecurities of a daunted newbie, *Women Who Tri* tracks DiFabio's journey from nervous newcomer to exuberant triathlon finisher. Alongside her own evolution from exercise naysayer to body-marked, spandex-wearing athlete, DiFabio takes on the sometimes controversial topics of triathlon—from steep price tags, phobias, and divorce rates to empowerment, charity work, and deep bonds of friendship.

Packed with research, interviews, and profiles of "ordinary" women accomplishing extraordinary things through triathlon, *Women Who Tri* will entertain, enlighten, and inspire any triathlon enthusiast, from tri-addict to tri-curious.

You never know until you tri

Alicia DiFabio, PsyD, has a doctorate in Clinical Psychology and writes on health and wellness, women's issues, parenting, and education. She is a triathlete and the mother of four girls.

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