



Official photo of Hilary Matte finishing the Ironman Triathlon

Hilary Matte

Hilary Matte est une jeune athlète canadienne qui raconte ici son expérience dans le triathlon "Ironman" qui s'est tenu à Hawaï en Octobre 1982. Courageuse et déterminée, Hilary, qui s'exerce dans les trois disciplines: natation, course à pied et vélo, cherche maintenant à être parrainée pour son entraînement en vue du prochain triathlon.

I can see myself on the Kailua Pier, the starting and finishing point of the Big Race on the Big Island of Hawaii. I'm looking at the count-down clock: 9:49 to go. Getting up at 4:30 a.m. on October 9, 1982, at the Kona Surf Hotel on the day of the Ironman Triathlon is no big deal for me. I have been doing that in Toronto throughout my training period. A good breakfast at the King Kamehameha Hotel has shortened the life span of any butterflies which have dared to invade my stomach space. Dave drives me to the pier in our rented car. I dig deep into myself, a process I am to repeat many times throughout the day — mentally facing the 2.4-mile swim, the 112-mile bike ride, and the 26.2-mile marathon run. I think about Shirley MacLaine's book *You Can Get There, from Here!* As I watch the volunteer paint my number, 592, on both my arms for identification purposes at the completion of the swim, I know that 592 will pull through.

The clock marks 5:05:45. I am up to my knees in the warm water of Kailua-Kona Bay. I like the water. I like my pink bathing suit. I like myself, and most of all I like what I am about to do. I adjust my blue-tinted Barracuda goggles. I push my short, blond hair under my bright orange Bud-Light bathing cap. Bud-Light sponsors this unique event. Captain Bean's glass-bottom boat is anchored in the distance, exactly 1.2 miles away — the turnaround point for the first segment of the race, the 2.4-mile swim. Swaying, bright orange buoys mark the course. They are strung 400 metres apart in a straight line that appears endless until the buoys blend with the boat. My heart is pounding. The ABC Wide World of Sports helicopter flies above us, filming the crowd. The event will be telecast sometime in February, 1983. I am no longer the nineteen-year-old athlete watching the event on television for the first time and dreaming that someday I too would be a contestant. No, I have just turned twenty-one on October 5. I have a fifteen-year-history of athletic endeavours and five months of concentrated, solid, disciplined training behind me. And here I am in Hawaii, in the water, ready to begin and finish what has been recognized as the "most gruelling endurance contest in the world."

Ten seconds to go! The crowd watching the world-wide original Ironman shouts the countdown — "3 - 2 - 1!" The cannon booms. We are off. I'm not alone. Facing the challenge with me are 923 superbly trained triathletes — yes, TRIATHLETES. We are swimmers, cyclists, and runners trained to compete in all three disciplines in consecutive order on the same day, under the same conditions, and subject to the same rules.

Starting brings on a sense of relief. The adrenalin is flowing in abundance. I am most anxious to see the field of 96 women and 827 men smooth out so that there will be more room. The mass start of 923 competitors is an incredibly suffocating experience. At the first buoy, I can feel the pack breaking up. At last, I can control my stroke

rhythm and cadence. A natural flowing pattern is emerging.

As I approach the second buoy, I can see the Hilton Hotel. Every time I breathe out, the luxurious tropical landmark moves slowly but progressively behind me on my left side. I know that my steady strokes have carried me halfway to the turnaround point. I frequently look up to sight on the boat. I am on course. Always keeping the buoys on my right, I swim with vigour, maintaining consistent rhythm and breathing patterns yet struggling against the strong ocean swells.

My thoughts drift back to the Warren Stevens complex at the University of Toronto, where I had spend five days a week religiously training in the 50-metre pool, stroking away the hours lap after lap: broken 800s, kicking sets, and arms-only sets. The ocean is no King Neptune-size pool. There are no walls to kick at every 50 metres. There are no lines to follow on the bottom. Conquering the swells of the ocean and orienting myself in a straight path are of the utmost importance. If I can't succeed, I risk the chance of swimming an extra quarter mile in vile-tasting salt water. I simply cannot afford to do that.

The turnaround point is tight. Twenty or more swimmers trying to make the corner around the boat can be hectic. The encouragement from the photographers, the journalists, and spectators on the boat is timely and uplifting. There I am, skilfully manoeuvring around the boat, and before me appears the King Kam Hotel, where I will finish the swim.

At that moment, I realize that my two weeks of training in Hawaii prior to event day are paying off royally. The period of acclimatization to the salt water, the oppressive heat, and the capricious winds has been essential. You see, I had never trained in salt water — or in any open water, for that matter. I had trained in a pool in Toronto; the ocean is another kettle of fish. I had followed an aerobic program of total fitness tailored to meet my needs. My level of physical fitness, heightened by bodybuilding at Nautilus Total Fitness on Yonge Street, is my ace in the hole. The swim is a lot easier than I had anticipated. The only trouble I encounter occurs during the last 200 metres. An upset stomach, a gift from the ocean swells and the taste of salt, makes the finish a bit more challenging. I simply tell myself: "Press on, Hilary. Don't give in to the ocean now. You're too close!" I bear down. I touch the pier. The swim is over.

The volunteers are there to assist each and every competitor up the ramp and out of the ocean. I look at the clock. It reads 1:17. I have done better than I had predicted. I hear a volunteer calling "592" to the girl who is fetching my cycling clothes. I move up the ramp and dash into the fresh-water showers. It is imperative that I wash off the salt water. What an exhilarating feeling! The taste of fresh water and the feel of fresh water prompt instant recovery. I run from the showers, grab my bag from a volunteer, and enter a change room. Because fewer women than men participate in the event, I have one-to-one service. A female volunteer empties my bag and organizes my clothes: jogbra, shorts, shirt, cycling shoes. Although the damp body resists skin-tight clothes, I change as quickly as possible. I relive those many changes of clothing from swimming to cycling during training. But the difficulty is there — dry on wet and fast — a difficulty to be

surmounted calmly, swiftly. I rush out of the tent toward my bike, taking a glass of water, a banana, and an orange *en route*. I know, but most of all remember, the importance of keeping hydrated. Drinking and eating in the triathlon are a must!

The pink handlebars of my bike catch my eye and I deftly slip into my cycling shoes. The 112-mile, cross-country bike course lies ahead. At 8:25 a.m. I wheel into a six-and-a-half-hour bike ride. It seems like only yesterday that I bought my Italian racing bike from Howard Chang at



Sandra Owen

Bikenergy in the Beaches. It was March, 1982, and my grade 7 teacher, Ken Junkin, had called my mom and told her that he had arranged a deal and that I should visit Howard's shop as soon as possible. I was in second-year university and Ken Junkin, the English teacher-cum-cyclist, was there when I needed a bike. Can you believe the influence good teachers can have? I had never raced on a bike before. I learned the skills during my training period. George Stewart . . . Howard Chang . . . James Wilson . . . they were there to teach me, to guide me, to ride with me at 6:30 a.m., to meet me at the end of an endurance encounter with transport trucks. Here I am some five thousand miles later, cycling up on my first climb of countless climbs on my way to Hawi, the turnaround point of the cycling segment of the race.

Fresh supplies of adrenalin are surging within me. I control my speed at first in order to prevent an immediate lactic-acid build-up. For a while, at least, the long stretch of highway is smooth and fast. With the trade winds behind me, I almost believe that I am flying on a bicycle. Hallucinations? Positive thinking? Reality? Whatever! I am passing other cyclists. I maintain a high cadence and tuck into an aerodynamic position all the way out to the hilly section of the cycling course. Imagine 18.5 miles of hills. Imagine a fierce head wind coupled immediately with identical cross winds blowing at forty miles per hour. You're on a light racing bike. That's the way it is! At times, I will my bike to stay on the road and I get the distinct feeling that I am cycling through an invisible and invincible wall. The last 7 miles to the turnaround are straight up, with no sign of level ground until Hawi. The winds whip me severely through this stretch. Holding the aerodynamic position, I doggedly press on until I reach the summit.

It is downhill from Hawi back to Highway 19. However, I contend with a head wind for the next 35 miles or so. I do not allow myself in the heat of the race ever to forget that drinking water and eating bananas and oranges at each and every aid station spell survival. Dehydration is not a part of my game plan. The competitors who forget to adhere to the general rule of drinking one bottle between every aid station pay for it during the marathon run. The ride back along Highway 19 makes the many hours of training worthwhile. The series of six hills conquered at least once a week near King City had been steeper than the hills on the Kona course. I find myself constantly fighting the fierce head winds along the sizzling lava fields and the excessive heat of the afternoon sun. The temperature is somewhere in the upper 90s, but the heat penetrating into the lava and cement increase the temperature. The feel of sponging freezing-cold ice water down my back is indescribable. I keep the sponge that is on the back of my neck soaked at all times. This helps me to keep my core body temperature as low as possible.

Passing the airport provides a psychological lift of sorts. Since I know that there are 8 miles from the airport back into town and then 7 miles from the town to the Kona Surf (the finish of the bike segment), the wheels turn more

This fine athlete needs a sponsor who will assist her with her costs in training for the next Ironman Triathlon. Can you or your organization sponsor Hilary Matte?

quickly. Simultaneously, knowing that I have to run to the very same spot in a couple of hours jolts my mind and body. I promptly work much harder to get to the Kona Surf as quickly as possible. Riding through the industrial part of the bike course is great because it is downhill! Then the last 7 miles extend through a residential section. Thousands of spectators line the streets, cheering us on as we ride by, knowing that within the hour we will be running past them again on the last trek . . . the marathon.

I have never done a marathon but I am as confident as someone who has run ten marathons. I can do it. I know I have the endurance and the mental capacities that are required to complete it. The marathon has been considered the yardstick to my finishing the triathlon by so many people. "You haven't completed a marathon and you think you can finish the triathlon?" How many times have I heard that statement from fitness experts, sportscasters, sports reporters, runners, and my friends on campus? But I know myself and I know what I can do, and that is my yardstick. I stick to it. As long as my energy stores stand up, there will be no problem!

One hundred eleven miles into the bike race, with only one mile to go, the course is richly endowed with one stark, steep hill. At this point in time, climbing that particular hill is staggering. My friend Dave is there to cheer me on as he had been during my training at home and in Hawaii. "Push, Hilary, push!" At the sound of his voice I spring off my saddle and push down on my legs harder than I have ever done at any time, anywhere. I keep my head down and really work my leg muscles to their "max." What a sensation! My muscles are screaming the effects of six hours-plus on the bike. Up the hill and round the corner and I am home. I have completed this section at least twenty times since I arrived in Hawaii. I know I am there. I turn right down the hill into the Kona Surf. I glide into the finish area and jump off my bike. It is 7:41. Someone is there to take my beautiful machine which has served me so well. I go directly to the "Port-a-loo"; needless to say, the opportunity to relieve myself is more than pleasurable. My bag is waiting for me in the change room. Release from that head gear, the wet shorts, the shirt, and the shoes — AHHHHHH! It is nothing short of ecstasy.

In clean, pink shorts and a pink singlet, I dash out of the change room, grab a drink of water, and take off. Only four hours to go. Amazing! I start out like I had hundreds of times before, only this time it is for real. Imagining the triathlon is a thing of the past. This is it. I run a steady but slow pace, letting my body adapt. I get stronger and stronger over the first 8 miles. "Press on," I think, "press on," I feel, "press on," I repeat, and it works. Spectators look up my number in the program and call my name. "Hilary, you look strong," they say, "keep it up, Hilary," they cheer. What an uplifting feeling! With that kind of support a triathlete can "press on." The aid stations are my focal points. Each time I reach one, I think of the next one. It is the only reality out there, particularly up on the highway, because that's all there is — lava fields dotted with aid stations. Some 2,800 dedicated volunteers cheer us on and feed us all the way: water, ERG, defizzed coke, bananas, oranges, cookies, and guava-jelly sandwiches.

At approximately 18 miles into the marathon, my left quadriceps muscle starts to ache. It seems that I somehow

put more pressure on the left leg when I'm cycling, especially on climbs. I attribute the pain in my left leg to that, since my right leg still feels fine. It is only a matter of time. I keep "pressing on." My spirits are high. I feel great. I know I have almost reached my goal. I can feel the excitement and the adrenalin (what is left of it) flowing in anticipation of the finish line.

At the 20-mile mark my right quadriceps muscle has caught up to my left and both are in pain. Somehow I have imagined that the lactic-acid build-up would be more painful than it is. At this point in time, it seems fairly easy to endure. To be quite honest, it is almost a pleasurable pain because I know that I can stop in approximately one hour. What are a mere sixty minutes when I have already been out there for over ten hours? One of the last aid stations is coming into view. I know that finishing the triathlon is almost within my grasp. Determination and persistence have spurred me on, all the way. I want to finish this race more than anything else in the world. "To Finish is to Win" — these words spin in my mind. At 24.5 miles I run down the hill on Palani Road toward the finish. I can smell the finish. I can taste it. I know I have reached my goal. I turn left down Kuakini Highway two blocks to Hualalai Road and finally back onto Alii Drive, the home stretch. I can see the bright white spotlights of the ABC Wide World of Sports equipment glistening down the road. I can hear the thunderous applause and cheers of the spectators. A smile as wide as the ocean breaks out on my face. I have reached my peak, the paramount point of my existence. With my hands stretched up in the air, I cross the finish line totally exhilarated. Dreams can become reality and I have lived mine out to the fullest: I have finished strong and I have done it in under twelve hours.

When the lei is placed around my neck, I accept the title of "Ironman" and know that the months of pre-training, the 2.4-mile swim, the 112-mile cycling, and the 26.2-mile marathon on October 9, 1982, have been worthwhile. Later I am to learn that my official time is 11:45:01.

I look at Dave, who is waiting for me at the finish, and say, "I did it!" He believed I could do it from the day we first met jogging up Avenue Road in Toronto. My heart goes out to that handful of beautiful people back home whose support throughout my training and during the race has strengthened my sense of purpose. All those who had said, "Go for it, Hilary!" had made it possible for me to press on to reach new limits. Throughout my life, let alone during training and during the race, the radiant energy and love of two special women have provided me with every opportunity to learn motivation, self-discipline, determination: my mom, Jackie Matte, and Mary Monette. For a split second I wish they could have witnessed my finish. I know they are waiting for our call, so Dave and I dash to the nearest phone to call home.

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The sun had set on Kona an hour and a half before I crossed the finish line. The long-awaited day is over. For me it marks a new beginning, a triathlete-in-training. Look for me at Kona on October 22, 1983. I'll be competing in the Seventh Ironman Triathlon. The concept of the triathlon will spread in Canada during the next decade, and I'll be in the first seed to pioneer new limits in this field of athletic challenges.