

THE IRONMAN



Peter Worford is all smiles after finishing his first Ironman triathlon.

For most people, swimming 2.4 miles is a lengthy and difficult workout. For **Peter Worford**, it was just his first leg. He then biked 112 miles. After that, he ran a full marathon 26.2 miles. Thirteen hours and 35 minutes after he began, Worford finished his first Ironman triathlon last September in Cambridge, MD, placing 14th in his age group. It was a long way from where the now-64-year-old began.

In the early 1990s, when Worford was living in Lynchburg, VA, a group of guys got him into running.

“At some point, I got pretty fast,” he said, and worked his way up to completing the prestigious Boston Marathon in April 1996. By 1999, he completed his fastest marathon ever in just under three hours in the Richmond (VA) Marathon, coming in second in his age group. The following year, he completed the Umstead 100-mile endurance run in 23 hours.

After those accomplishments, Worford didn’t run much for many years, participating in only an occasional marathon. Later, when he lived in West Virginia, he started running again with a group in the mornings. They were triathletes, competing in triathlons consisting of swimming, cycling and running over various distances.

The group was training for a difficult triathlon called the SavageMan in Mary-

land, and they wanted him to train and compete with them. He wasn’t a swimmer and his biking was largely limited to neighborhood rides with his family, but Worford decided to give it a try.

He picked up a bike from a friend who was trying to offload one, and he took some swimming lessons. Soon, he did the short distance of the SavageMan in the hills of West Virginia. That included Olympic triathlon distances: 0.93-mile swim, 24.8-mile bike and 6.2-mile run. “That was a big deal for me,” he said.

When he moved back to Richmond and signed on as a letter carrier in late 2019, he signed up for a half Ironman, training on his own, especially for swimming. He also does strength training as well as yoga to help with flexibility and to prevent injuries. Someone at the pool told him he should join a training group called Endorphin Fitness to help, so he did.

Worford gives the group of triathletes and coaches credit for helping him get through the long runs and bike rides, and he appreciates the camaraderie of teammates.

“That Ironman—I couldn’t have done it without them,” he said, adding, “They also taught me the value of nutrition, both before and during the event. That was a whole new world for me. I didn’t think any of that was all that important. I figured the most important thing was just to get out there and put in the miles.”

Worford, added, “I look at myself now, and I think, I’m a better overall, all-around athlete than I’ve ever been.”

The Richmond Branch 496 member works in collections (both from businesses and blue boxes around the city) and doesn’t begin his workday until 10:30 a.m., so he fits in his workouts in the morning, waking up around 4:30 a.m., doing a strength routine to stretch and loosen up, then working out.

The carrier works out seven days a week; some days he’ll swim or use an indoor training bike and then run a mile or two. “I’m also what the triathletes call a ‘streaker,’” he says, explaining that he’s got a current streak somewhere north of 1,350 days in a row of running of a least a mile.

The carrier didn’t grow up running track, and his sport of choice before picking up running was tennis with his son. But he’s happy he’s added to his running skills.

And although he’s intimidated by some of the swimmers he competes against—some of whom have tried out for the Olympics—because he’s only been doing it for a few years, he enjoys the discipline.

“And the biking is amazing,” he adds, “because we had bikes when we’re kids, but the biking in this world is very high-tech. You’ve got these power meters and cadence sensors and speed meters, and all these metrics around this bike. You get fitted for the bike. That world fascinates me.”

Sometimes he can’t believe that he turned into a triathlete. “If you asked me five years ago, I would have said, ‘Oh no, that is not for me,’—running is just fine,” he said with big laugh.

Though he doesn’t have a lot of time to do things like watch TV, he says, he enjoys spending time with his family when he can, and his supportive wife accompanies him to his races.

There are many moving parts to competing in triathlons, and the preparation on race day is vital.

“It’s a busy morning making sure you’re perfectly set up. My focus on race day is, don’t make a mistake,” he said. “I have to take myself mentally through the transitions and through the race. I can visualize what is it that I’ve got to have and when and where.”

Participants must move from one portion of the race to another, from swimming to biking and then running. There



The triathlon requires participants to switch from swimming to biking to running.

is a transition area where triathletes put their equipment on a mat to switch out.

Worford sets up his area and then prepares himself for the swim, for which he dons a wetsuit.

“When I finish the swim, I’ve got to become a biker,” he said. So he runs to change out of his wetsuit into a “tri suit,” and grabs a helmet, biking shoes, bike computer, gloves, and food and water.

“And then on another section of the mat, I know when I finish the bike, I’ve got to become a runner,” he says, noting that he quickly peels off his helmet and then gets his running shoes, a water bottle, and hat if it’s raining.

“You try to minimize the time in transition—you’ve got to get it down to just a couple minutes. “You’re on the clock!” Worford said. “It’s a learned part of the game. If you make a mistake, it’s a big deal. You can’t forget to put your helmet on.”

He doesn’t have a typical yearly schedule. Last year, he did a half-Ironman about two months before the full event, and he sometimes gives himself time off for recovery. In the off-season, he explained, many people transition back into their preferred disciplines. Worford did some fall races, like a half marathon.

Worford recently did the Shamrock Marathon in Virginia Beach, in which he placed eighth out of 141 competitors. He has only a few events on his

2023 race calendar at the moment. He’s planning to do local fun runs this spring, run a leg of a relay race in July, and do a half-marathon in September. But he’s always up for more.

He had just received an email telling him he’s “on the list” for a potential invitation for the men’s world championship for the Ironman triathlon to be held in Nice, France, this September. To qualify, athletes usually need to have completed a certain amount of Ironmans, but some slots had opened up. Because he had done well at the Maryland Ironman, he’s on a short list to be invited.

“This is the biggest darn deal you could ever, ever imagine,” he said. “That’s like being asked to go to the Olympics. I told my wife, ‘We’re going to France if my number comes up.’ ”

If he’s selected for the world championships, the “game is on,” Worford said. He would need to get to a different level as a triathlete, he noted, but he’ll stay in training mode with his Endorphin group so he won’t ever have to start from scratch. “I will put in the work to be way better than I am now,” he added.

Though it’s sometimes tough to keep a balance, his hobby benefits his job. “Being involved with the mail is a physical job. This makes it easier,” he said. “It makes my work life so much easier to be physically in shape. My mood is better, and my attitude is better.”

And his customers sure seem to appreciate him. At a shirt-printing business that he collects from, Worford’s customer, Sarah Martin, realized it all made sense that he was an Ironman, as she’d watch him lift 2,000 pieces of mail from her shop each day. The business owner contacted the local TV CBS affiliate so they could highlight her carrier for his “tireless work ethic, character and tenacity.”

“He brings us so much joy,” Martin told the TV station, and so along with the CBS news crew, the shop surprised Worford during his daily rounds as part of a CBS 6 Month of Giving segment in December, thanking Worford for all of his hard work for the Richmond community and presenting him with a Dick’s Sporting Goods gift card.

Worford said “it emotionally overwhelms me to get recognized,” but that he appreciated it.

Co-workers at the post office are likewise supportive, especially when he has to put in for an occasional Saturday off on a race day.

One thing that will never change is his love of fitness.

“I just think having your health is a wonderful gift, and I treasure that,” Worford said. “I don’t know that I’ll always be an Ironman competitor, a triathlete, a runner. But I believe that I will always try to find a way to stay healthy. I made that commitment to myself.” **PR**