

Call Her Nuts, or Call Her Ironman

By VIVIAN MARINO

AT 4:30 a.m., with her family still in bed, Dawn Marinelli is getting dressed. She's out the door by 4:50 a.m., headed in darkness to the Y.M.C.A. in Bridgewater, N.J., for an hourlong swim and a run of about seven miles. By 7:35 a.m., she's home fixing breakfast for her two children, then on to work in her pharmaceutical marketing business. If there's time at lunch, she'll squeeze in a bike ride.

"My husband thinks it's nuts," Ms. Marinelli, 44, said of her weekday regimen, which prepares her for even longer workouts on weekends. But she knows better: by mid-summer she must be ready to swim 2.4 miles, cycle 112 miles and run a marathon (26.2 miles), within 17 hours, as she competes in her second Ironman triathlon.

Until recently, participants in these grueling endurance races, which are held worldwide, were almost exclusively men, but more women are striving for that higher pinnacle of fitness. Where's the cachet in a mere marathon?

Ms. Marinelli, who has also run marathons, will join 504 other women, 27 percent more than last year, at Ironman USA in Lake Placid, N.Y., on July 25. Many are amateurs like herself, juggling schedules during their months of incessant training, which can exceed 20 hours a week.

"Women keep setting goals higher and higher," said Benjamin Fertic, president of the Ironman Triathlon Corporation in Tarpon Springs, Fla., which licenses Ironman events.

Last October, at the 25th anniversary of the Ironman Triathlon World Championship in Kona, Hawaii, 375 women were among the 1,575 finishers, up 10 percent from 2002. Only 47 women finished the race in February 1982, when Julie Moss's gut-wrenching crawl to the finish line was captured on television and put the sport on the map.

"You don't know you're a trailblazer when you're blazing a trail," Ms. Moss said. "You're just trying to get from point A to point B."

John M. Duke, the publisher of *Triathlete Magazine*, credits the rise in women's participation to the growing popularity of the triathlon, which became an Olympic event in 2000, and the emergence of women's-only shorter-distance races. About 30 percent of the participants in triathlons are women, Mr. Duke said, up from 20 percent two or three years ago. The Ironman, he says, was a natural evolution.

Women have proven they can withstand 12 hours or more of vigorous activity. But stretching the bounds of endurance comes with health risks.

Like men, women can suffer from muscle fatigue, energy depletion, dehydration and hyponatremia (too much water and insufficient electrolytes). But specialists in sports medicine say that prolonged training and subsequent weight loss can make women more prone to what is known as the female athletic triad: eating disorders; amenorrhea, or cessation of menstruation; and bone density loss. All that can lead to impaired performance, premature osteoporosis and infertility.



Susan Spann for The New York Times

START Julie Moss, right, training for the 2.4-mile swim that opens a triathlon.



Frank Curry for The New York Times

MIDDLE Susan Dell training for a race's second leg, 112 miles of cycling.



FINISH Paula Newby-Fraser completing a marathon, the last leg of a triathlon.

"The main thing is to encourage proper nutrition and a healthy outlook toward exercise," said Dr. Margot Putukian, director of athletic medicine at Princeton. "Often-times, women don't take in enough calories to account for what they've burned off."

Few people may comprehend that more than Ms. Moss, who was the women's leader in the Hawaii Ironman 22 years ago when she collapsed 440 yards from the finish line.

A competitor passed and beat her by 29 seconds.

"I was mentally prepared to keep on going — my body just wouldn't make it," said Ms. Moss, 45, of Santa Cruz, Calif. "Your stomach doesn't feel like eating when you're in that kind of heat and perpetual motion, and all they offered on the course were cookies and bananas."

A lot has changed since then. Nowadays, competitors load up on fortified sports drinks and energy bars on race day. They can burn as much as 5,000 to 6,000 calories. Still, some busy women fail to maintain adequate nutrition during training.

"I see so many women lacking in levels of protein and fat," said Paula Newby-Fraser, eight-time winner of the Ironman world championship. The coaching business she co-founded, Multisports.com, emphasizes a balanced diet as part of the curriculum offered through its online coaching programs and training camps, where 40 per-

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cent of attendees are women.

"Ironman training is about nutrition and pacing; you don't have to be excessive, just consistent," said Ms. Newby-Fraser, who recommends starting with shorter races.

She and other coaches extend that advice, of gradually increasing the intensity of workouts, to more moderate exercisers. "Once you make those little steps it becomes easier to make bigger steps," she said.

Four years ago, Ms. Marinelli could barely swim. "I could doggie-paddle, but I could never put my face in the water," she said, adding that she took swimming lessons and hired a coach before venturing into triathlons. She finished her first Ironman last summer in around 14.5 hours.

Susan Dell, of Austin, Tex., gradually progressed toward her first Ironman as well, though she didn't have to work as hard honing her skills. A gifted athlete since junior high, her main quandary was finding time to train. "Having balance in one's life will always be a struggle," said Mrs. Dell, who runs a clothing design business as well as the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. She also has had to sneak in predawn workouts.

Her husband, Michael S. Dell, the founder and chief executive of Dell Computer, got her a slot in the 2003 Hawaii Ironman as a 40th birthday gift. He bought it in an online charitable auction. She finished the race — her four children running beside her in the final stretch — in around 13.5 hours, despite breaking her toe during the swim.

For Mrs. Dell and other women, it was worth the pain and sacrifices. What they have received in return, they say, is an inner strength and confidence, not to mention slimmer, toned bodies. "Last year I felt like I was invincible," Ms. Marinelli said.