

ONE WOMAN'S VISION OF FUN

Extreme Adventures With Ironman Cathy Tibbetts

by Diane McManus >>> Photos by David Balch

The journey is so dangerous that a “corpse repatriation fee” is collected from those who choose it.

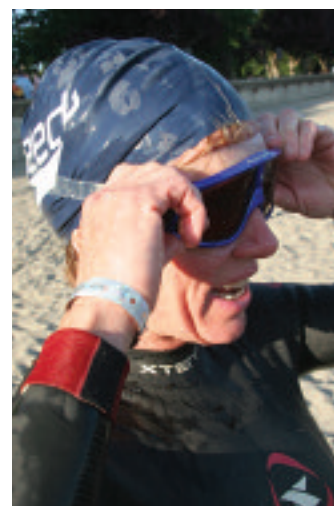
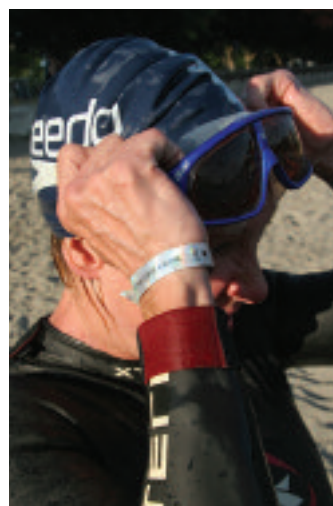
En cas de décès, the event’s French-language web site warns. Travelers carry their own food, water, bedroll and

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supplies—including a venom pump, since snakes and scorpions regularly crawl into sleeping bags. For seven days and more

than 150 miles, they toil across the Sahara on foot, braving sandstorms, 125-degree daytime temperatures and freezing nights. Soldiers on a military exercise? No. Try participants in the Marathon des Sables (“marathon of the sands”), a stage race beginning and ending in Ouarzazate, Morocco, winding its way through the Sahara Desert, shedding runners mercilessly along the way.

In 1996, Cathy Tibbetts—optometrist, ultra-runner, and, more recently, triathlete and Masters swimmer—survived this winnowing process and finished. That in itself is remarkable, given the grueling conditions the race presents and the fact that she was a first-time participant. During the race, she was certain she’d finish last, if she completed at all. Yet, to her surprise, she crossed the finish line as the third female overall. The experience was a “confidence



builder” for Tibbetts. “I came back a changed person,” she says, “never afraid to sign up for things again. Nothing scared me after that.”

Not the 135-mile Badwater foot race from Death Valley to Mount Whitney. Not the prospect of the Hard Rock 100-miler with 12 passes above 12,000 feet. Not the series of 100-mile

races—including Western States, Vermont, Leadville and Wasatch—that qualified her for Grand Slam status in 2004, the only woman to achieve the feat that year. And not the prospect of changing gears, refreshing her swimming and biking skills to compete in an Ironman triathlon.

“If it sounds like fun, I’m

going to do it,” Tibbetts, 51, explains. Only a courageous few, however, have quite the all-encompassing sense of “fun” that Tibbetts embraces. It helps that her husband, Marc Witkes, a national-class cyclist and triathlete, shares her passion for outdoor sports and is her number one fan. Twelve years younger, he claims he



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can hardly keep up with her. “She’s the star,” he says, deflecting a question about his own accomplishments. “I met her on a trail run three years ago, and we fell in love.” Clearly, they share a vision of what life should be like.

Vision is key to Tibbetts’ life, whether she’s at work on the technical aspects of her optometry practice in Farmington, N.M., probing outer boundaries in mid-desert during the Marathon des Sables or mid-ocean in an Ironman competition.

When your first swimming lessons take place in a dammed-up pond that you share with leeches and other creatures hidden in the murky sediment, you become adventurous by necessity, Tibbetts relates. When being on a college swim team (in pre-Title IX days) meant no particular swim

training beyond the enforced lap swimming you’ve already had in junior lifesaving classes, you become self-reliant by necessity. When the demands of work and school make three to four hours of sleep each night the norm, you develop endurance by necessity—or perhaps, more accurately, you discover your innate endurance. And you learn, she says, that “life is more than working 60 hours a week.” As soon as she had paid off her student loans, Tibbetts cut back her work hours to make more time for her favorite sports.

Although originally a swimmer, Tibbetts entertained a dream of running a marathon when she finished school and, of course, realized her dream, discovering in the process how much she enjoyed long-distance running. Career and other life

demands diverted her from running for several years, until, living in New Mexico, she discovered the state’s trail system and fell in love again with running—and more running.

This attraction led her first into ultra-distance racing, starting with 50-milers and moving up. But running, as Tibbetts admits, can cause a lot of joint wear and tear. After her Grand Slam triumph, she realized that her knees might need the break that triathlon training could offer.

Some break. Her immediate goal upon undertaking triathlon training was an Ironman. Shorter triathlons held no interest. She had done a few when younger, but this time, she wanted something with a

kick. Only an Ironman—a 2.4-mile open water swim, a 112-mile bike trek and a 26.2-mile run—would do.

And since she has added triathlons to her repertoire—rather than substituting them for ultra-running—she continues her ultra training, adding to it cycling as well as three to five swim workouts per week. Her swim coach, Tex Doherty of New Mexico Masters’ Four Corners Aquatic Team, recalls a workout during which Tibbetts was having some difficulty. She mentioned casually that she was a little tired from her run during the weekend. Only later did Doherty learn that the “run” was a 100-mile race.

Through her association with Doherty and the Masters swim team, Tibbetts has found an ideal training partner and friend in Jenny Nuutila, who was training for the USMS National 10K Championship at Horsetooth Reservoir in Fort Collins, Colo., this past August. With similar swimming goals, they began training together, sharing a passion for distance, for swimming and for dogs—both recently adopted new pups, so their conversations range from race nutrition to canine nutrition.

Tibbetts credits Nuutila with helping to keep her motivated and energized. After completing a 2.4-mile swim, following the same course as the one for Ironman Arizona,

Mind Games

Endurance athletes have to be mindful of everything from training to nutrition, hydration, clothing and gear. More to the point, though, endurance athletes have to be mindful. Period.

Of course, in the middle of a long race, athletes will have moments of self-doubt. The pain catches up: the blisters, the chafing, the cramps, the sheer exhaustion. And then, it’s not simply a matter of having the right gear or the right electrolyte replacement drink. It’s a matter of having the right thoughts.

In an interview last year with Tim Bourquin (www.EndurancePlanet.com), Tibbetts described strategies she uses to survive the rough patches.

“I try to change what I’m talking about. Sometimes I’ll have a song that goes through my head. I try to really keep up the positive mental attitude. That’s really important. I’ve seen athletes that are much better than me just get in such bad moods, and they just beat themselves up and quit because they...haven’t figured out what tool they need to pull out of a bad mood.”

Sometimes it helps simply to detach oneself from the bad moods, and become an interested observer of them instead. Tibbetts explained to Bourquin, “I am fascinated with the ultra distances because of the physical and mental changes that happen, and even though it’s a little bit uncomfortable at times, it’s fascinating to see yourself become psychotic, to see your body come in and out of bonks, you know, like you get into a bonk and you just don’t feel like you can move, and you think ‘OK, what can I do to pull myself out of this?’”

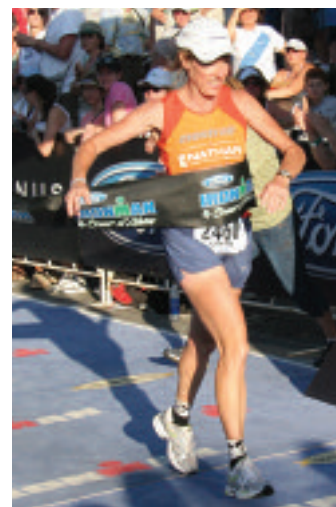


Nuuttilla set her sights on the longer distance.

Nuuttilla says she has benefited from Tibbetts' ability to keep a steady pace and has applied some of Tibbetts' distance run training strategies to swimming. For example, in long swims, Nuuttilla now prefers using a series of pacers rather than a single one, so that each is fresh, thus helping to keep her pace even. Through Tibbetts, Nuuttilla discovered the benefits of Boost and Ensure nutritional supplements as well as green tea to help maintain energy toward the end of a long distance workout.

Tibbetts gets advice from Nuuttilla regarding speed and upper body strength. Both women agree that they have a "fabulous coach" in Doherty. "He goes along with whatever crazy scheme we come up with," says Nuuttilla. "He drafts workouts specifically for us and has been helpful telling us what we each need to work on." (See www.usmsswimmer.com for a sample workout.)

The progression of distance swims Doherty has developed for this dynamic duo is not for the fainthearted. Tibbetts and Nuuttilla have workouts to do on their own that are longer than the ones he gives in his group practices—including 1,800-yard time trials or 2x900s, moving them up gradually to 10,800 yards. The training partners do one distance and



one pace workout per week. Pace work might mean 20x100 on two minutes, trying to hold that pace, and working up to 20x300 yards.

Although both women prefer distance, Tibbetts' enthusiasm for learning new skills that initially seem unrelated to her triathlete goals has earned the admiration of her coach and her training partner. In their Masters group, different days are devoted to different sets of skills: stroke work, distance, sprints or kick sets. Tibbetts is as ready to work on her butterfly and her kick sets as she is to work on distance, reports Doherty. "It's easy to tell she's a serious athlete," he says, "because of the way she came out and trained. She's gone from a great ultra-runner to a triathlete."

The training has paid off handsomely for Tibbetts. In her first Ironman—Arizona 2005—she won her age group (50-54) with a time of 12:18:52, qualifying her for the World Championship in Kona, Hawaii. During her swim, she maintained a steady two minutes per 100 pace to finish in 1:15:04, and during the bike ride, her least familiar discipline, her time of 6:25:12 translated into a respectable clip of 17 miles per hour, setting her up for a 4:22:03 marathon.

In Kona, she excelled yet again, with a time of 12:19:39, finishing 12th in her age group. During that trip to Kona, she



found numerous role models: women in their 60s who remained lean, strong and competitive despite the setbacks and challenges of aging. “These women are my heroes,” she says. They clearly had no plans to retire any time soon and neither does Tibbetts. Her next goal, says Doherty, is the awards podium in Kona this October with a top-five age group placing. Tibbetts snagged a spot for this year’s World Championship with a time of 12:09:36 at the Ford Ironman USA Coeur d’Alene in June. She then set a personal best time of 12:05:38 on July 22 at the Ford Ironman USA Lake Placid. Eventually, though, even an Ironman may not be enough for Tibbetts.

Knowing his wife’s enthusiasm for the event, Witkes believes she will eventually attempt a double or even triple Ironman. Masters coach Doherty agrees, even though, for now, Tibbetts’ low body-fat percentage (the happy consequence of being a runner) makes coldwater swims a challenge. Yet, Tibbetts is familiar with challenges.

Although New Mexico is a land-locked state, she finds ways to practice open-water swimming. “Just swim where you’re not supposed to,” she says with a laugh. For Tibbetts, that’s a city reservoir and a lake, both posted with “no swimming” signs. When you learn to swim in a leech-infested pond, other bodies of

water—policed or not—hold few surprises.

Friends confirm Tibbetts’ poise under pressure. Says Montrail teammate Stephanie Ehret, “The night before the 2005 100-mile national trail championships, there was a knock at my door. It was Cathy Tibbetts wondering if maybe I had an extra pair of shorts, jog bra, shirt and/or water bottle carrier that she might be able to borrow. You’d never know it from her calm demeanor, but the airlines had misplaced her luggage,” Ehret recounts. “I can’t remember what I was able to pull together for her but I *do* remember thinking how calm, cool and adaptable she was—taking it all in stride.” Fortunately, Tibbetts’ bag arrived during the night. But Ehret remembers how well rested her teammate looked on race morning, noting that the waylaid baggage didn’t impede Tibbetts’ race—she placed as the second overall female.

“She’s efficient and focused in her workouts and her work,” Doherty observes.

That’s likely because Tibbetts’ vision of fun transcends lost luggage, scorpions, murky ponds and the reservoir swim police to embrace life’s adventures. With competitive Ironwomen in their 60s and beyond as role models, it’s likely Tibbetts will be at it for years to come. <<<

A Week in the Life

How does a typical training week shape up for Cathy Tibbetts? As might be expected, it’s not easy to categorize, partly because her schedule changes depending on the phase of the training and partly because of Tibbetts’ outlook. “I always try to make it fun and don’t get too hung up on a schedule,” she says.

However, she offers some general principles for triathletes in training: “The key workouts are one slow distance workout and one speed workout in all three disciplines.” Her routine also includes “weights three nights a week, working different muscles each night.”

An overview of her week might—with variations—look something like this:

- Monday: 60- to 90-minute swim, 5 miles speed work at the track, 90 minutes weights
- Tuesday: 90- to 120-minute hard bike ride, 90 minutes weights
- Wednesday: 60- to 90-minute swim for distance, 10-mile run, 90 minutes weights
- Thursday: 60- to 90-minute swim (intervals), one hour easy on the bike
- Friday: 10-mile run, two-hour bike ride easy.
- Saturday: 80- to 100-mile bike ride
- Sunday: 20- to 30-mile run

“But,” she adds, “some weekends I might head to the Grand Canyon for a rim to rim to rim (yes, that’s across and back) or do a three-day bike tour in Colorado.” And sometimes she will simply enjoy a rest day if she feels the need.