

# A DESTINATION AND A JOURNEY

Kona Beckons Ironman Elite and Everyday Athletes

by Cathy Tibbetts >>> Photos by John Segesta



**K**ailua-Kona is a peaceful village nestled at the base of the Hualalai Volcano, welcoming vacationers who've come to Hawaii's Big Island for a week or two, but are soon fantasizing about staying forever. Sandals, shorts and a swimsuit are all you need pack. Mornings begin with fresh tropical fruit and incredible Kona coffee, followed by

leisurely days on the beach, watching the blue ocean from beneath drowsy eyelids, or swimming in the warm, clear water, surrounded by brightly colored fish. You can snorkel or sea kayak. Or if you want to get in a car, there are volcanoes to visit and lava pouring into the ocean to behold. Hike a bit, and you'll discover dozens of waterfalls as well as barren black lava fields.

Back at your home base, the

local brewpub makes a beer from passion fruit and another from coffee. As you watch the sun go down in full splendor, you know it's just another day in paradise.

A few weeks each October, the best triathletes in the world start to arrive in Kona for the Ford Ironman World Championship. They're the people you've seen on TV and on the covers of magazines. They are buff and beautiful,

Cathy Tibbetts, a member of New Mexico Masters, has competed twice in the Ford Ironman World Championship, rubbing elbows with the elite triathletes and turning in some respectable times herself.



### Tips for the Ironman Swim

As a Masters coach and a swimmer intimately familiar with the Hawaii Ironman's 2.4-mile swim, Steve Borowski, with Kona Aquatics, offers these tips:

- Start way off to the left side; then when it spreads out, come in and find a draft.
- Seed yourself where you belong.
- Don't go out too fast.
- Build your speed on the back half of the race.





and they've done their homework and their training. The cool part about it is that they are great people: confident, self-assured and good sports. In the days leading up to the championship, you'll overhear snippets of coffee shop conversations: "Your transition at T1 was faster than mine; how did you do it?" Or, "Hey, fantastic time you had at Lake Placid. Good luck tomorrow."

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e-mail addresses and training tips, and become quick friends. Of course, they all want to beat everyone else in their age group. But in Kona, it's more about having a race that you can say you did your best.

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The first Ironman, held nearly 30 years ago, drew a mere 15 athletes. Though the field was

small in number, the competitors had something to prove. Story goes that during an awards ceremony for a Hawaii running race, a friendly debate began as to who was more fit—swimmers, bikers or runners. Navy Commander John Collins and his wife, Judy, dreamed up an event to find out. It would combine three existing races.

The first leg would be the 2.4-mile Waikiki Roughwater Swim, an Oahu tradition since

1970. The second leg would be the 112-mile Around-Oahu Bike Ride, originally a two-day event. And the final leg would be the 26.2-mile Honolulu Marathon, which started in 1973.

And so it was that the start gun sounded for that first Hawaii Ironman on Feb. 18, 1978, held on the island of Oahu. There were 12 finishers, including Collins. Gordon Haller was the first Ironman, with a time of 11:46:58.

The course records now stand at 8:04:08 for men (Luc Van Lierde, 1996) and 8:55:28 for women (Paula Newby-Fraser, 1992).

In 1981, seeking a less congested venue, the Ironman moved to the town of Kailua-Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii, and today's infamous mass start for the swim has grown to a fiercely competitive 1,650. (The other 150 or so pros

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get a 15-minute head start.)

Placement in the fray of world-class arms and legs is everything.

Steve Borowski, head coach for Kona Aquatics Masters and former Ironman race director, recommends starting as far to the left as possible. “You don’t lose that much time,” he explains. “Being in the middle is not worth the anxiety and getting kicked. When it thins out, find a draft. Then build on the second half.”

The swim course—an elongated rectangle, 1.2 miles long and 100 yards wide—starts 40 yards from shore on the east side of the Kona pier. Triathletes swim in a clockwise direction, keeping all buoys on their right, rounding the two turnaround boats and then heading back. Stairs are set up to lead competitors out of the water and onto the pier.

## Ironman Stats

### Average training week for an Ironman triathlete:

- Swimming miles: 7
- Biking miles: 225
- Running miles: 48

### Average October water temperature in Kona:

- 79 degrees

### Depth of water in Kailua Bay:

- Approximately 20 feet for more than half of the course
- Some depths up to 90 feet.

### Swim records:

- (M) 1998 Lars Jorgensen USA 46:41
- (F) 1999 Jodi Jackson USA 48:43

Running through an optional shower (hoses dangling from a rack), along a chute to pick up racked transition bags and into men’s and women’s changing tents, the swimmers-turned-cyclers emerge from the other side of the tents to get their bikes. A swim cutoff time of 2:20 is strictly enforced.

Mariana Phipps, overall course record holder for the women’s 60-64 age group, completed the 2005 swim portion in 1:25:24. “People here are good and know where to place them-

selves. I ask the people around me what they think they’ll do the swim in and start near those around my speed.”

Navy SEAL Mitch Hall, competing in Kona for his second time in 2006, favors seeding. “I finish in the top third so that is where I start.”

Race officials go to great lengths to make sure swimmers are safe. According to 18-year swim course director Jan War, 80 to 90 surfers, many of them pros, and 15 kayakers are on the course at all times. Still,



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eyes get blackened, lips get split, and watches get torn from wrists.

Carol Hassell, 53, of West Palm Beach, Fla., emerged from the water with a gash on her arm that required a trip to the medical tent. "I think it was a safety pin on someone's ankle band for their [timing] chip," she says.

Unlike other Ironman events in the U.S., wetsuits are not allowed in the Hawaii championship. The official U.S. governing body for the sport, USA Triathlon, only allows wetsuits when water temperatures are 78 degrees or lower. Average October temps in Kona are 79 degrees.

Technical suits, considered legal since they aren't buoyant, are popular with the pros and are catching on with age-groupers. Last year, 16 top swimmers debuted a new swim skin by Blueseventy called the pointzero3. Among them were Normann Stadler (Ironman world champion 2006), Linda Gallo (fastest woman swimmer) and Tom Thorum (fastest male swimmer). With a drag coefficient of 0.032, Blueseventy claims its suit has 50 times lower drag than human skin.

Thorum was impressed, noting that despite tough conditions, the suit helped him achieve a swim time as fast as he accomplished two years earlier in more favorable conditions. Gallo also gave the new technology a two-fins up. "It is hard to estimate time savings, especially due to the tough conditions of the Ironman swim [in 2006]. I think it was

most beneficial because it saved on my efficiency. It took me less energy and I was still the first woman out of the water. The slippery material of the suit allowed me to glide through the water that extra little bit with each arm stroke. Over a 2.4-mile swim, or even a 1-mile open water swim, this gain is huge."

Still, the Hawaii Ironman isn't just about the latest technology or setting new records. Half of the competitors—who typically win everything at home—finish in the bottom half of the field. And they're OK with that.

"This is a great race," says Jim Dyke, 61, of Hudsonville, Mich. "I don't think it's much of an ego thing. You compete with athletes at the highest level of your age group and that's something really special, whether you have a good race or you don't. And it's a beautiful island, so you have a bonus."

Navy SEAL Hall competed in the event, but also spent time during race week raising awareness for the SEALs. "The Navy is going to need 300 to 400 new SEALs in the next few years," he says. "Anyone with a competitive swimming background has a great chance of making it through the training. Statistically, competitive swimmers are going to make it through the training more than [athletes from] any other sport."

After an age-group win in the 2005 Wisconsin Ironman that secured her slot in Kona, Elizabeth Weaver, an attorney, wanted to give it her best shot. So she hired a coach and ramped up her training. After



another year of 120-mile Saturday morning rides, 20-mile Sunday morning runs, weekday Masters swimming workouts, tempo runs, spinning and weight training, Weaver finally boarded the plane at Washington Dulles for her trip to Hawaii last fall.

When she and her husband landed in Los Angeles and prepared to switch planes for the final leg of their journey to Kona, they learned that a 6.7 magnitude earthquake had struck only 10 miles from the start of the Ironman, shutting down airports on the Big Island and causing hotels to evacuate. Weaver's airline informed her that no flights to Hawaii would be available until later in the week—just days before the event started, leaving no time to acclimate.

"I started to have a meltdown," Weaver says. "I was shaking. My eyes welled up. I hadn't totally lost it yet but John, my husband of 27 years, knew what was coming. Mentally I couldn't handle what was happening. John got on the phone and called every airline until he found us tickets the next morning—first class and one way. He said I had spent too much time and money training to miss this."

Meanwhile, across the Pacific, cars bounced around parking lots, dishes flew off

countertops and roofs collapsed. John Duke, publisher of *Triathlete Magazine*, was swimming the actual Ironman course in Kailua Bay when the earthquake struck.

"I didn't feel anything," he recalls. "My friends were all swimming in different places in the bay and nobody noticed a thing. We were surprised to get out of the water and hear that there had been an earthquake."

Normally swimmers in Kailua Bay enjoy brightly colored tropical fish, coral and turtles. Last year's tectonic activity left the bay murky. "Where are the fish?" Judy Luce of Reno, Nev. asked. "I'm here as a volunteer and heard the swim was beautiful. I can only see as far as my hand."

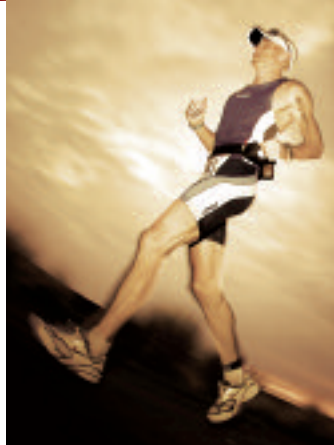
But the race proceeded without further incident. Weaver,



Dyke and Hall pushed through the swim, and endured the ensuing 112-mile bike ride, mostly into a headwind, across barren black lava fields. None of them quit running, long after dark, on the lonely out-and-back marathon along the Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway. Their race ended as it started—wet. A tropical downpour flooded parts of the road.

“Near the end of the race, when I turned right onto Ali'i Drive, there was an absolute lake,” Weaver says. “It was at least 3 inches deep. My light-weight shoes weren't feeling so light.” Her Ironman finishing time was 13:06:23. Dyke and Hall crossed the finish line in 13:20:30 and 13:26:14.

“The water in the finish area was halfway up to my knees,” says Luce, who was undeterred



from handing out finishers' medals and shirts. “People were heading to the medical tent with hypothermia—in the tropics.”

Such stories can reaffirm the decision of many athletes to never do an Ironman, or any triathlon for that matter. Still, many are drawn to the

mythology of the Kona Championship. Some want to swim part of the course because they've seen it on television or are looking for a place to work out while on vacation.

“I have swum that course more than anyone else and it's fantastic,” says Kona Aquatics coach Borowski. “It's like an aquarium. A few weeks before the Ironman, I saw about 50 dolphins out by the pier,” he says. “And the number of visitors we have at our local Masters workouts at the pool is amazing. For most practices we have one or two visitors, and they come from all over the world. Anybody coming to Kona should contact us,” Borowski invites. “I have put out buoys at the 1.2-mile mark and the halfway mark, which stay there year-round. We'll show you where to go and we

may even take you out.”

It never hurts to check out the Ironman course—even if you don't qualify as a top contender. That's because there's another way to get into the race. When Capt. Collins transferred with the Navy out of Hawaii in 1980, he turned the growing event over to a local health club. No money changed hands, but he was assured of a free entry any time he wanted, and race coordinators promised they would always save a few spots for the common man.

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After all, it's everyday athletes who gave the Ironman its start. <<<

