

History of the Double Iron Triathlon

From Ray and Nancy Shephard – Originators of the race

Multi sports events have been around as long there has been competition. Examples are the pentathlon and decathlon in the summer Olympic Games. The winter games has the duathlon (cross country skiing and rifle shooting). The modern day triathlon is an event usually combining swimming, bicycling and running.

The sport originated in California in the early 1970's with "exercise freaks" dreaming up different methods of competing and training. In these early days there were no set standards and the events were a haphazard array of swimming, biking and running. Largely because of safety considerations, the sport gradually evolved into the traditional sequence of swim, bike, then run. The distances of each leg were set by the race director and were dictated by the course and environment. Today, the standard distances are 1 k (.9 miles) swim, 40 k bike (25 miles), and 10 k (6.2 miles) run. The sport of triathlon has a governing body, and international following, and expects to be an Olympic sport in 1996.

After the early triathlons in Southern California, a group of extremists laid plans for the "Grand-Daddy of all triathlons" to be held in Hawaii. They devised the Ironman Triathlon in 1978 - 2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles on the bike, and ending with a marathon (26.2 miles). In 1979 there were 15 competitors, and 100 in 1980. This triathlon has continued to grow, and now attracts thousands of athletes from around the world.

In 1981 a friend of mine went to Hawaii for the event, but was unable to finish the grueling race. He saw the finishers that year and began to think that to them it almost appeared too easy. So, he planned to double the distances and have the event here in Huntsville, Alabama. In 1984 he advertised the race and got a response from 10-12 racers. A few months before the race he called a meeting of his "race committee." I was one of 5 people that showed up. He announced that he would be unable to direct the race for personal reasons. A friend and I volunteered to become the race directors. What a hectic two months!! We had athletes from all over the country coming to Huntsville for our "little" race. And thus began the Double Iron Triathlon -- 4.8 miles of swimming, 224 miles of bicycling, and 52.4 miles of running -- Labor Day, 1984.

The race grew, not so much in numbers, as in stature. We became known all over the world, and have attracted athletes from all comers of the globe. The race evolved into not just a challenge to finish the event, but into a full-blown-death-to-the-end competition. Each year provides a different challenge to those of us providing a world-class event.

The first several years we ferried the competitors up river and they swam back to Ditto Landing to begin the bike course. At first they bicycled to Vincent, Alabama, up Brindley Mountain. That first year was

extremely dangerous on that two-lane road. We changed it the next year so they biked to Scottsboro Hwy and did 34 mile loops before biking back to town. The Huntsville Marathon course was used for the run. Those of you who know the course, realize that it has many winds and turns. After finding athletes running all over south Huntsville and getting lost, we changed it to loops on Bailey Cove Road.

For the past few years, we have had the privilege of using Redstone Arsenal for the bike course. The athletes now swim from Ditto Landing to the Civilian Rec Center on the Arsenal. They bike on the Arsenal and return to Grissom High School. They then run loops on Bailey Cove Road.

About a week before Labor Day, athletes from all over the world now come to Huntsville. Some are given housing by local volunteers, some stay in hotels. They train on the course, and acclimate to the heat. Many bring support crews and family to help them. Some have even brought journalist and camera crews. They usually stay a few days after the event and see the local attractions and countryside. Many of the foreigners have never been to the U.S.A.

For the race we use many of the local resources. The Boy Scouts canoe next to the swimmers; the Coast Guard Auxiliary help patrol the river; and local boatists help with the swim. The Marines and Ham Radio operators help with the bike course; the RSA provides its facilities and roads. The Spring City Cycling Club patrols the bike course. The high school running and booster clubs assist in the run, along with the Huntsville Track Club. Friends and volunteers plan social events that include an ice cream party, pre race pasta meal, and post race pizza party. We estimate that over 450 volunteers support the race.

The race attracts only those athletes who have competed in an ultra distance event such as the Ironman. (Now there are about a dozen Ironman distance events around the world.) Therefore, we get about 20 - 30 competitors each year. One year we had eight athletes just from Japan.

The Double Iron Triathlon has sparked the imagination for other ultra-distance races. There are now two other Double Irons in Europe. There is a Triple Iron in France. Occasionally there have been quadruple- and quintuple- events. And this last year there was a Deca-triathlon in Mexico. That event took eight days to complete.

Unfortunately, there is an end to every story. We have had very little in the way of monetary support; tremendous local manpower backing, but almost no cash to purchase the things we need to put on such a race. Nancy and I have decided to step down after next year's race unless we can appeal to local and international sponsors to help us with the event.

For now, we will continue to assemble the volunteers and athletes on Labor Day weekend to test their abilities and give them the times of their lives.