

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE IRONMAN ITSELF

On October 11, 1986 I was sitting in the Honolulu International Airport, awaiting a flight to take me to Kona for my fifth Ironman Triathlon. I marveled that I was even there. Only seven months before I had been on my way to do an Ironman in New Zealand. When I won an age-group first place, I thought I was on top of the athletic world. That was in March, only five months after I'd done the 1985 Kona Ironman. If I were to do Kona again in 1986, that would have meant three Ironman triathlons in less than twelve months. I chose to give up doing Kona again and do New Zealand, figuring there was no way I could do both.

After the New Zealand Ironman, when someone had asked me what I was going to do next, I had wondered if I could do two Ironman triathlons in one year. (Conventional wisdom had it that the demands of an Ironman on the body are so great that a person can only do one a year.) Then in August I'd made another choice. It was either the Japan Ironman then or the Kona Ironman in October. I never even remotely considered the possibility of doing them both, of adding another Ironman triathlon in that same year although I was still doing running, cycling, and swim races every weekend.

Since I'd never been to Japan, and Continental Airlines had offered to sponsor me, I chose Japan. I fully expected to have to lower my goals as far as my performance was concerned but, to my surprise, I did very well and again placed first in my age group. That's when it occurred to me that my body might not be able to tell the difference between racing and training. At this point, however, I still wasn't sure. As long as I gave my body adequate rest time and the right fuel, maybe I could keep racing as frequently as I wanted to.

It never occurred to me I could do all three Ironman triathlons in the same year! In fact, I was sure I couldn't. People, especially my coaches, were always telling me I was racing too much. Since both the New Zealand and the Japan Ironman had gone so well, I decided to test the limits and do Kona as well. My heart started to race as I realized that, all my life, I'd set mental and physical limits for myself. And besides, if I had to drop out and not finish, what were they going to do: fire me?

Who'd have thought that a now-fifty-one-year-old "cancer patient" could do four Ironman triathlons in less than one year.

### The First Ironman

Back in 1982, still recovering from my cancer operation, I gave myself a treat and visited my parents on the Big Island of Hawaii. My visit was timed, coincidentally, with the running of the 1982 Kona Ironman Triathlon. Standing on the sidelines of this grueling event, I watched awestruck as finishers completed the 2.4-mile swim, the 112-mile bike ride, and the 26.2-mile marathon. My brain had trouble handling what it was seeing. One side of my brain went, "This is humanly impossible! No one can do this much! It can't be done!"

"Yes, it can!" replied the other side.

"No, it can't! It's impossible."

"No, it isn't. Look!"

"No, no, nope, no way!"

For hours this went on as the finishers struggled across the finish line.

I'd already run several marathons and knew how I felt upon crossing that finish line—totally spent, exhausted, with absolutely nothing left! How could these people run a full marathon after having done a bike race which took the average competitor six to eight hours in extreme heat and after a swim which took from one to over two hours? It hit me with an intensity I couldn't believe.

As I continued to watch, an idea formed in my head. This time it was, "Maybe I could do that." Again I split into two voices.

"No, I couldn't possibly."

"Maybe I can."

"Forget it, that's crazy."

“Maybe if I trained hard enough.”

“No way, impossible! Besides, you’re too old.” (Aged forty-seven seemed absolutely ancient to me at the time.)

“Well, maybe I could just try it....”

“My gawd, lady, even if you weren’t too old, you’re forgetting you’re now a cancer patient!”

And that’s where it ended...and began. An image of myself crossing that finish line was constantly in my mind. During my daily runs, I pictured that scene in Kona, Hawaii: the large finish-line clock, the tropical flowers surrounding the finish area, and the cheering crowds.

Yet I still wasn’t sure. I told myself that there had to be a limit as to what I was physically able to do, and I did not want to set myself up for probable failure by reaching out for something that was totally unreasonable. And surely, for a middle-aged “cancer patient,” this quest seemed totally ridiculous. This was “validated” by the fact that, as of that moment, no woman that old had completed the Ironman. Remember: we’re talking about a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike race, followed by a full 26.2-mile marathon. I told myself that it would be absolute lunacy to even contemplate such madness.

During my regular, daily runs, my mind would wander. Images of my getting stronger kept coming up, and from time to time the thought of doing the Ironman would reappear. I started biking daily and right away began to push the limits of the rides, both in distance and intensity. I signed up for a master’s (adult) swim class. I never really knew if I could do it and wished I possessed that “positive attitude” that everybody kept referring to. Then came the inspiration.

What if I, as a “cancer patient,” could be the first to complete the Ironman Triathlon? The contrasting concepts—“cancer” and “Ironman”—intrigued me. Wouldn’t that prove to myself that I really was a survivor and had beaten the disease? What if I took that damning diagnosis of cancer and turned it into the challenge of a lifetime and became an “Ironman” in the process? What if extreme super fitness could help fight cancer? What if getting my body the fittest it had ever been in my whole life was the best offense against the cancer cells that surely remained in my body? It was an exciting goal,

something to wrap my life around, something worthy of a major commitment, for it would take a large part of my life.

I knew I was “falling in love” with a life with the Ironman. I started getting very serious about all three sports and even added weight training. I subscribed to magazines on all four, poring over them cover to cover. I looked for anything written on the triathlon I could find, not that there was much in those early days of the event. I started examining training schedules of every athlete I ran into. My obsession was total.

Then I noticed the physical and mental changes. My muscles became more defined, and it seemed new ones popped up all over. A friend, Bonnie K., one day looked down at me in mock disgust and shook her head, “You and your ‘thirty-year-old’ legs!” I slept like a rock and awakened after only five or six hours of sleep, raring to go for my morning run, quitting only because I’d run out of time. I ate like a horse and never gained a pound. I felt strong, confident, and, as if for the first time, I was really enjoying life. I’d found a challenge that was totally engrossing and could even forget about the cancer for short periods of time. More importantly, I also felt that I was on to something in dealing with the cancer.

What if there really never would be a “cure”? What if strengthening the body’s immune system was the only way to deal with the cancer? I’d asked my oncologist how to build up my immune system to help fight the cancer. Shaking his head, he replied, “We don’t know.”

I developed a theory, and it revolved around both diet and exercise—to an extreme, although I now know that it’s not as extreme as I’d originally thought. I also found it ironic that diet-oriented physicians disagreed with my exercise approach, and exercise-oriented physicians disagreed with the diet approach. Nobody, as far as I knew, had ever put the two together. It was scary, wading into these uncharted waters. But, after all, I felt I had little to lose.

Our bodies crave movement and when given time to adapt, can accomplish prodigious feats. This was true for even a by-now fifty-year-old body that I’d thought a few years earlier was already old! I was feeling younger—and certainly did not fit the stereotype of how a fifty-year-old woman would look and act. I also discovered that there are no limits—only those we set in our own minds.

That philosophy worked as I graduated from the Tinman triathlon (which is approximately a quarter Ironman) to a half-Ironman, and from a half-Ironman to a full one. In training for my first Tinman, I knew so little about training for cycling that I thought if I could just go the distance once, that was all there was to it. It was only after my first opportunity to go “all out” on the bicycle that I realized one had to go through the exact same sequence.

This entailed a start, with its accompanying chest and leg pains; the middle, with its backing off enough so I could stand the pain; and the end where the finish line was in sight. That was a major discovery for me, as I suspect it was for most others who were just venturing into triathlons in the early days where there were no “experts” to turn to and no texts to consult.

Then there was the matter of increasing the distances. In Hawaii, where I live, the shortest triathlon bike leg at that time was twenty-five miles. In 1983, the first half-Ironman distance triathlon in Hawaii took place and was known as the Windward Triathlon. I looked at that fifty-mile bike leg and wondered how I could possibly go that far. I did it, and then, of course, looked at a 100-mile bike leg and was again totally awed by that distance. Then the fifty-miler became “a piece of cake.” I have not yet done a Double Century, a 200-miler, but I know that once I set that as a goal, the 100-miler should be easier by comparison, the secret to making “hard” seem “easy.”

In later chapters, I will show you how to train for the three legs of the Ironman—running, swimming, and biking—although you don’t have to run out and do an Ironman to get the benefit from exercise. Just know that I believe that you can do it if you really want to. Even if you don’t want to run, bike, or swim, there are other exercises that provide benefits. Try jumping rope, climbing stairs, and even dancing! It all helps.