

# THE *Allure* of Ironman

Five everyday Arizonans questioned on why they have turned to Ironman for their race of choice. **By David Allison**

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COURTESY STEVE ELWELL

The Ironman: a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile run. Just writing the numbers could exhaust someone. These numbers, of course, represent the distances for an Ironman. The first Ironman was in 1978. The race was the brainchild of Navy Commander John Collins and his wife, Judy. After Commander Collins competed in a Hawaii running race, many of the competitors debated about who was more fit—swimmers, runners or other athletes. After deciding on the distances, 15 men participated in the initial event held on Feb. 18. Gordon Haller was the first winner of the event. He finished the demanding course in 11 hours, 46 minutes and 58 seconds, and was dubbed the first “Ironman”.

Today, there are more than 22 Ironman events and 28 races of 70.3 miles—otherwise known as a half-Ironman—around the world. An outsider looking in would be surprised that most of these events that take the average person anywhere from 13 to 15 hours to finish, fill up in hours and sometimes minutes. Athletes wanting to go to Kona (site of the World Championships) have been known to go on eBay and bid on a slot for the event for as much as \$50,000.

So why all the commotion for the grueling event?

Being an avid runner myself, and having competed in nine marathons and over a dozen half marathons, I know the amount of training and effort it takes to get ready for this single event. I was curious to know why so many Arizona endurance athletes are drawn to Ironman distances. I spoke with five individuals from around the state to gain more insight into their reasons for wanting to swim, bike, and run most of their waking hours.



“The captain of the swim team my senior year in high school was training for one and got me to train for one as well,” he says. “It was rough. I did an Olympic distance. Even though it was difficult I wanted to go faster for my next one. The mental aspect of the sport is very tough. I did like the fact that it was all me, and that there was no one else relying on my performance. Since then, I’ve just wanted to get better and faster.”

With all the hours of training that goes into an Ironman event, Keith had a tough time balancing school, work and his social life.

“I have become more focused in all aspects of my life because of the training and competing in these Ironman events. I have realized more than ever that one needs to work hard to see results. In regards to my social life, my social life is my training and the people I know through training. I do work at a bar part time, so I do interact with people not involved in the sport. But because of the high demands of this sport, I do stay away from the college parties.”

## Keith Rosin

- **Age:** 20
- **Lives in:** Flagstaff, AZ
- **Occupation:** Full-time student at NAU
- **Number of Ironmans / 70.3 competed in:** two
- **Best 70.3 time:** 4 hours, 45 minutes

Keith thought Ironman was crazy when he first heard of the sport.



## Michelle Patuto

- **Age:** 34
- **Lives:** Glendale
- **Occupation:** Account Manager for Silver Sneakers Fitness Program
- **Number of Ironmans / 70.3, competed in:** Six
- **Best Ironman time:** 11 hours, 12 minutes

Michelle was not doing much before she entered the Ironman world.

"I actually was overweight until about the age of 15," Michelle says. "After a serious change in my life I began weight training, doing aerobics, and running for myself.

My boss at the time had competed in Kona a few times and was always speaking about it. He seemed to enjoy it, so I started with the sprint triathlons (my first event ever was a duathlon in 1998). From there I moved to the longer races and did my first marathon in October of 1999. I was so motivated by the marathon that a year later I competed in my first Ironman (The Great Floridian) in October 2000."

Michelle adds that in Arizona there are so many great venues for triathlons and Ironmans, a good reason for the meteoric rise in both events. Plus, there is a vibrant triathlete community in the state.

"Triathletes here in Arizona seem very welcoming and helpful to anyone, no matter what his/her level may be," she says. "I didn't find that same sentiment when I was living in Massachusetts. Plus, we all are completely crazy! But nothing beats the feeling when you cross the finish line in an Ironman.

"I am a very competitive person, which I didn't know until I started doing marathons and then Ironmans. I never did any sports in high school, so I never tapped into this competitive side of myself. I just love competing. Plus, there are just so many great people who compete in

triathlons and Ironmans. It's a very tight-knit community; most of my good friends are triathletes, so there is a social aspect of being involved in this sport as well."

## Bill King

- **Age:** 65
- **Lives in:** Prescott
- **Occupation:** Computer Programmer
- **Number of Ironmans / 70.3, competed in:** four
- **Best Ironman time:** 12 hours, 3 minutes (when 58)

Bill got caught up in the running craze when he was in his 30s. He competed in his first half Ironman in California in 2000.

"I love the challenge of it all," he says. "I wanted to know if I could do it. When you train for a marathon you have a certain understanding of how the race will be because you run close to that distance in some of your training workouts. In Ironman training, there's never a day where you come close to doing all three events like you will on race day. So in a sense, there's no true understanding of the trials you are going to go through in this event. You have no expectations because you're so uncertain of what you can do. You don't worry about the negatives in your training, but focus on just finishing. My first Ironman is still my favorite because I had no expectations for the race but to finish."

So, why not just swim, bike, or run individually?

"First, there is an organized structure in place for a person looking to get involved in triathlons. There are many groups, clubs, and races in the area. Also, I think competing in an Ironman is a good event for an athlete who may be good to average in one or all of these events, but maybe not great in any particular one. It evens the playing field. You always have an opportunity to improve yourself, which makes the sport very satisfying. For those who are strong in a particular event, they can leverage this strength in the race, but still can have the challenge of working hard and improving their base level ability in the events they are not as strong in."

## Steve Elwell

- **Age:** 46
- **Lives in:** Phoenix
- **Occupation:** Engineer, Freescale Semiconductor

- **Number of Ironmans / 70.3 competed in:** One
- **Best Ironman time:** 14 hours, 8 minutes

"Without a doubt there is a lot of give and take when training for an Ironman," Steve says. "You are in a constant state of fatigue, which in turn limits the amount you do around the house, time you spend with your kids, it's tough. I do think one has to keep their training in perspective: it's okay NOT to go to Kona. For someone who is single or is talented in one or more of the events, then there may not be as much of a sacrifice in other aspects of his/her life. It makes sense to try to qualify for Kona. For me, there needs to be a yin and a yang to all of this stuff. It would have been nice to have qualified to go to Kona, but at what cost? I was two hours off being able to get a slot in this year's Ironman Arizona. The way I figure it the two I missed from making it to Kona is two hours my family and/or work got out of me.

"The way I try to take some of the focus off the Ironman being all about me, is by raising money for charities. So although I get the physical benefits from the training and the event itself, I am able to help others and involve my family in the fundraising aspect of what I am doing."

It seems even if you want to compete in one you may not be able to due to the limited number of slots in races, he says. "But there are numerous triathlons of shorter distances all around the state nearly all year long. The overall sense I got from everyone I interviewed was a great sense of community and that the social benefits of swimming, riding, and running with people on a regular basis is a big part of why they continue competing in the sport. The triathlon community in Arizona seems to be one that welcomes newcomers into the fold without hesitation. If you want to be super competitive you can find like-minded people. If you want to find a more laid-back crowd who are simply competing for personal goals and experience, you can find that, too.

Although most of the athletes I interviewed said they would suggest doing an Ironman to a person who was interested in competing in one, they all cautioned that there is a certain level of fitness one needs to have in order to be able to finish an Ironman safely.

I must admit I may have been swayed to finally get into one of these Ironman events sooner than I thought.

I do like a challenge. I may just have to make some room for some Speedos in my drawer and a Cannondale in my garage, so I can join these other athletes in their insanity.



## Lisa Zeschke

- **Age:** 37
- **Lives in:** Phoenix
- **Occupation:** Global Procurement Manager, Honeywell
- **Number of Ironmans / 70.3 competed in:** Two
- **Best Ironman time:** 12 hours, 45 minutes

"The weather here in Arizona is good year round," Lisa says. "I know some people will say it's hard to train in the summer, but I don't really buy into that. You just wake up a little earlier to get your workouts in, that's all. Also, it's just a great reason to be outside. There are several triathlon clubs in the Phoenix area, which makes this daunting task much more accessible to the novice."

One of Lisa's challenges is her busy travel schedule, which makes it difficult to fit in training.

"First, I have to be able to forgive myself when I cannot get a workout in due to my job," she says. "I was in Hong Kong not too long ago and ran three and a half hours on the hotel treadmill to get my workout in. Definitely a bit insane, but you do what you can.

"I was a focused person before doing Ironman, but I do find that I really focus more on doing things I want to do more than before. Because I'm so busy with the training, work, and other commitments, I whittle my life down to what is truly important to me. I also think that it's not so much the physical aspect of the race that's tough, but the emotional or mental part of the race that is so inspirational to others. I think going through an event like this motivates the individual and the confidence gained from completing an Ironman will most definitely pervade into all aspects of one's life." ■