

# Interview with an **IRONMAN**



**Who: Simon Butterworth**

*Masters Swim Team Coach at the Bob L. Burger Recreation Center,  
Triathlon Coach at D3 Multisport & IRONMAN Athlete*

**What is your fitness background?**

I grew up in Ireland and played Rugby, Field Hockey, Cricket, Baseball and competed in intermural track & field. I started Fencing my Senior year, discovered a talent, and was fortunate enough to compete in the Junior World Championship on the Irish team in 1965. I did swim in high school, my school was one of two schools in the country with a pool. However, I did most of my swimming in the ocean in 60 degree water.

**How long have you been swimming?**

My father taught me to swim using probably one of the earliest coaching books on swimming written by Jonney Weissmuller *aka "Tarzan"*. Swimming was my fathers passion. He was a below the knee amputee and, in those days, swimming was one of the few sports he could do with ease (there were no carbon fiber blades or other modern prosthetics available). He use to crawl into that 60 degree water too. When I race, he is almost always on my mind and will always be an inspiration to me.

After high school, I took a 20+ year break from competitive sports. My wife Ingrid and I took a year sabbatical from work when we were in our 40's and went sailing on our 30 foot Morgan from the East Coast to the Bahamas. On that adventure, I watched a Triathlon for the first time and an idea was planted. A few years later, in 1991, I competed in my first Triathlon and found I could still swim, run and was an even better cyclist. I finished 4th in my Age Group and was hooked.

**When & how did you get started in Ironman Competitions?**

I trained and raced for Sprint and Olympic distance races for the first 10 years in the sport. In 2000, I found myself working from home and had the time to train. My first was in Lake Placid in 2001 and I qualified for the Ironman World Championship in Kona. Then I was really hooked.

**Any interesting stories associated with your first Ironman Competition?**

My first trip to Kona turned out to be the toughest on record. Winds were gusting to 55 mph. The race director considered canceling the race when she heard the forecast at 3:00 a.m. In an Ironman, most races are won in the run. As one Pro put it to me later, you need to get off the bike nicely warmed up. When I got off the bike in 2001, my legs buckled and two volunteers saved me from falling down. Two miles into the run, Ingrid was waiting for me and her comment was, "You look like #\$\$\*! ". Ingrid was always one to speak her mind. When she saw me later at mile ten, I was feeling much better and of course she said so. There was never any thought of just giving up in that race but I sure did not know if my body would get to the finish line. But it did.



### ***How long does it take to finish an Ironman race?***

Professionals now finish the race in Kona in a bit over 8 hours. In Ironman races in other parts of the world, where the weather and winds are a bit more gentle, they have gone under 8 hours. At the other end of the spectrum the record for the 80+ Age Group was shattered this year in a time of 15:30. There were a total of 5 people over 80 in this years race including one woman. That's 2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles on the bike and a 26.2 marathon for an 80 year old. That inspires me and every other Ironman athlete.

### ***What is your best time?***

My best race was almost 10 years ago in Florida, on a dead flat course. I completed in just under 11 hours. My best time in Kona was 11:37, which was just under the winning time of the first Ironman in 1978.

### ***What is the hardest part for you?***

It's always nice to get the swim behind you, but the hard part is always the run. Running well is all about convincing your brain that you can do it. The best athletes play the mental game with themselves to get to the finish line faster than anyone else. The top professionals spend a great deal of time mentally preparing for their event. Running a 2½ -3 hour marathon in temperatures approaching 90 degrees is not for the faint of heart. Fortunately for us older athletes, we get out on the run course just as the temperatures start to drop.

### ***And the best part?***

The lifestyle, especially that I know I am staying healthy as I age. I should point out that training and racing for the Ironman distance is over the top as far as staying healthy is concerned. I do think Triathlon is a great sport because it uses the entire body, not just the legs. Swimming especially complements the other sports, giving your joints time to recover from the pounding they take running, while maintaining cardio fitness. Running also gives your bones the stress they need to maintain strength that swimming and biking do not. Cycling spares the joints, assuming you are properly fit on the bike. Of course you also need to do sport specific strength training. All that makes for a big time comitment to the sport.

### ***What type of training is required?***

The training is really the hard part of an Ironman. When I am asked by someone with a busy life, family, job, commute, etc., if they could do an IronMan my answer is always sure, but... It is a second job and then some. Perhaps a good way to put it is you have a solid 8+ hour day job and then you have a part time construction job in the morning and evening. If you skimp on sleep, you won't make it to the start line. At least not in good shape. And, more importantly, your family life is strained at best. There is a reason why Ironman athletes have an above average income. They have more resources available to help. Not that it can't be done by anyone, you just have to be more resourceful. Numerically, to have a decent race, you need to train 15+ hours a week for about three months. To win or place in an age group, you need to train over 20 hours a week and get at least 8-9 hours of sleep a night. Recovery is important.

### ***Where do you train?***

I do most of my training in and around Lafayette. Of course, long rides see me up on the Peak to Peak or in Fort Collins. Swimming is at the Bob Burger Recreation Center, often after the Masters Class that I run on Mondays/Wednesdays/Fridays at 5:45am. As I have said, swimming is not the hard part for me but it is critical to be able to swim 2.4 miles and really get out of the water feeling warmed up, nothing more. That's why I spend so much time doing drills and make them part of almost all my workouts in the Masters Class. To me, the fun part of swimming is maximizing my efficiency. It is also the one sport that I will be able to do when I am 90.



***What is it about these competitions that drive you? You clearly are hooked and Ironman's are the ultimate athletic competition – so why keep doing them?***

In every Ironman I have done, I question my sanity at some point on the run. As I finish, I often think this is enough. Then over the next day or two I start thinking about how I could do better and I start planning for next year. Truth is I love Hawaii especially the Big Island. It reminds me of Ireland and the people remind me of the Irish, very friendly. But there is one thing that is better than Ireland, the weather. I also greatly value the friends I have made in the sport. What's especially great is I have friends ranging in age from their 20's to 80+ . I don't know any other sport were you can have such a wide range of interesting friends.

***How did you start coaching the Masters Swim Program at the Bob L. Burger Recreation Center?***

In anticipation of retiring, I became certified as a Triathlon Coach when we lived near New York City. When we moved here I had to restart my coaching and my sister-in-law saw an advertisement for a Masters Swim Program coach in Lafayette. The rest is history and I am fortunate enough to spend mornings with some great athletes.

***What is your motivation to coach the program?***

Swimming, as anyone who has tried it knows, is not natural and to swim well you need help. Swim clinics are great but the best way to make steady progress is to swim with a Masters Program with a coach who likes to give feedback to the athletes. That's the part of the Masters program that keeps me coming back at 5:40 in the morning. One of my most successful students is now one of the top 50-something Triathletes in Boulder. When he started with me he could hardly swim the length of the pool even though he could already bike and run well.

***Any interesting or inspirational stories that have come out of coaching the program?***

One of the athletes, John Kelly, who has been coming to the morning sessions since before I started coaching, completed in his first Ironman in 2011 with me in Utah. Before I knew John, I understand he was a wee bit heavier than he is today and started swimming as part of his weight loss program. Just getting exercise though is not in John's make up. He started competitive swimming first and has/is doing very well at local swim meets. Next up was Triathlons, Sprints, then Olympic and Half Ironmans. I don't remember when he decided to tackle a full Ironman but he chose a race course that was considered one of the most challenging in the world, Ironman St George. The bike course itself would earn the event a difficult rating but the run course is as bad or worse. Not to mention frequent winds and an average race day temperature of 86 degrees . I'm not sure John is rushing to do another Ironman but he finished when many did not. John is a great roll model for anyone looking to shed some pounds and develop a healthier life style. Two more of the Masters Team will be competing in an Ironman next year and I am sure others will be doing some local, shorter races. The winter Swim Meet season is also getting under way and I have a few rookie swimmers in the pool with me. It should be an interesting year.

**Simon just competed at Ironman Cozumel over Thanksgiving weekend. His age-division winning time of 12 hours, 10 minutes qualified him for his 10th Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii. Look for him coaching the Masters Swim Team and preparing for the Kona competition that takes place October 12, 2013.**

**Congratulations Simon!**

