

WHAT IS A 'REAL' TRIATHLETE?

In the October issue of Inside Triathlon, Ms. Katherine Wurzer published a letter (p. 10) that said, in part: "Some time ago, I participated in a sprint-distance triathlon. The race took me a few months to prepare for, was a lot of fun and got me excited about multisport... Here's my problem: (Some say) that I didn't really do a triathlon and that I'm lying whenever I tell people I did, even though I always use the "sprint-distance" qualifier. (Some say) that only the Ironman distance counts as a triathlon. Am I misleading people, including myself, when I say I did a triathlon if the race was only a sprint?"

"Only a sprint," you say. Gee, I wonder what that makes those of us who competed in Sprint Nationals last summer? Or those folks who will be competing in the USA Triathlon Sprint National Championships this July? Or those folks who, back in June of last year competed in the International Triathlon Union Age Group Sprint World Championships? Or those of us who will be competing in the ITU Age Group Sprint World Championships this September? Not "real" triathletes?

Well, it depends how you define "real." A writer for a leading triathlon magazine used to write about triathlon as if doing an Ironman was the gold standard, and getting to Kona was the diamond. Fortunately, that writer has stopped doing that. For what does that kind of message, the message delivered to the writer of the letter above, say to those triathletes, and those duathletes for that matter, who will never get to do an Ironman, or a half-Ironman? "Forget it. You don't count. Don't think that you have done anything. Don't imagine for an instant that the training you put in, the discipline you exerted during that training, the focus you had on the day of the race, the pride you felt on getting to the starting line and even more so when you crossed the finish line, mean anything."

As you read this, I will be embarking on my 27th season in the sport. By the end of my 26th season last October, I had done 195 multisport races – 119 triathlons and 76 duathlons. Between 1985 and 1994 I was lucky enough to have started Iron-distance races five



times and finished three times. (The other two times I got halfway on the marathon, was not going to make the time and had to drop out.) They were "real" experiences, I can tell you, and I am very happy that I had the chance to do them. But just as real for me was my very first race, Ray Charron's 1983 Mighty Hamptons Triathlon at Sag Harbor, N.Y. Previously a non-athlete except for downhill skiing, I swam 1.5 miles, biked 25 miles on some hills and ran 10 miles. What a thrill that was, and it started me down the long road I have followed in our sport, a journey that has changed my life, profoundly.

Just as real too was my next-to-the-last race at the end of last season, the New York Triathlon Club's New York City Biathlon (yes, my good friend and iconoclast Dan Honig still uses that term for his two-sport races). I ran the first 2.1 miles, biked 12.4, and ran 2.1 again. Short, yes. But real, surely.

Why "real?" There is no absolute standard for "real." If for the person who told the letter-writer that the only "real" triathlon is an Ironman, all that means is that the only "real" triathlon for him is an Ironman. For what does the word "real" really mean? Something that you experience objectively, something that you can see or taste or hear or feel, that has an actual existence for you, not necessarily to anybody else.

So whatever the race was – long, short or in between. On a hot, cold, windy, calm, or in-between day. Hills, flat or in-between. Was it fun, or even if it wasn't on a given Sunday, was gutting it out and crossing the finish line real for you? Then for you, it was a real race, a real experience.

And actually, if you did your best on that particular day and didn't happen to finish, as Dave Scott said a long time ago (this favorite and much-used quote of mine is on the frontispiece of the original edition of *Triathloning for Ordinary Mortals*, and the 2nd ed. too): "I encourage all ... triathletes to reach for their goals, whether they be to win or just to try. The trying is everything." ■