



Surgical lifestyles:

*Going the distance
in the OR
and in athletics*

by Karen Sandrick, Chicago, IL

Almost every weekday morning before day-break in and around Memphis, TN, trauma surgeon and triathlete Gayle Minard, MD, FACS, undergoes some sort of vigorous workout. Three times a week, before she teaches surgical residents how to perform endoscopy, Dr. Minard intersperses low-intensity aerobic runs with high-intensity track workouts. Another two or three days a week, before she acquaints third-year medical students with the fine points of trauma and critical care, Dr. Minard tests her speed and endurance in freestyle sprints and 500-yard repeats in master swim practice, then does 10 to 12 sets of strength-building exercises. Before sunset two evenings a week—after supervising the surgical ICU at the Memphis Veterans Affairs hospital, consulting on nutritional support at the regional medical center and the VA, and scrubbing in on trauma cases—she bumps up her overall fitness on her bike. When she leaves work late, she sets her bike up on a stationary trainer in her living room and rides for an hour or two. Then on weekends, she tries to get in an extra long run and bike ride.

How long and how far Dr. Minard goes depends on the specific event for which she's training. If she's preparing for an Olympic triathlon, which entails a swim of about 1.5-k, a 40-k bike ride, and 10-k run, her longest workout is three hours or less. If she's readying for an Ironman competition, which is a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride, and a 26.2-mile marathon, her longest training runs are about three hours, and her bike rides lengthen to six or seven hours.

Athletic competition

Dr. Minard, associate professor of surgery and assistant professor of emergency medicine at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, has always been athletic. She was a competitive swimmer in high school and competed with the University of Cincinnati swim team. She kicked into high gear as a dedicated triathlete just seven years ago when she was the swimming member of a triathlon relay team competing in the annual Memphis in May Triathlon. The head of

the trauma center, Timothy Fabian, MD, FACS, who is now the chair of surgery at the University of Tennessee, Memphis, decided to enter that competition. The associate director of the trauma center challenged Dr. Fabian, saying he'd run the race the next year and beat him. Their wives then decided to run the race as a relay team and asked Dr. Minard to handle the swimming. Over time, the wives dropped out, and Dr. Minard replaced them with other people. Finally, she decided, as long as her knees could take it, she'd run the race herself.

She now competes on her own every year in all three arms of the triathlon, which is part of the month-long Memphis in May International Festival. The competition consists of a 1.5-k swim along a triangular course in 45-acre Casper Lake, a 40-k bike ride around northern Shelby County, and a 10-k run back and forth from Edmund Orgill Park. In the last few years Dr. Minard also has competed in a Powerman Duathlon and the twelfth annual Great Floridian Half Ironman. Last October she participated in her first Ironman competition—Ironman Wisconsin in Madison.

Sure, training for and competing in a triathlon are grueling and time-consuming, but the rewards extend to both the body and the mind. Dr. Minard works out early each morning not only because it fits into her schedule, but because it prepares her for the day. "Training gives me more energy. I may start out tired and achy and feeling miserable, but usually within 20 minutes I start to feel good and after a two-hour run, I feel good for the rest of the day," she said. Repetitive, endurance exercise, such as long-distance running, also reduces tension and stress and clarifies thought processes.

But it's the tremendous sense of accomplishment that gets her to the starting line of the toughest all-around tests of stamina—Ironman races. Ironman competitions are held all over the world, from Langkawi Island, Malaysia, to Lake Taupo in New Zealand. Dr. Minard picked Ironman Wisconsin for her first outing because she's familiar with the city. She has a friend who lives in the area and has been attending football games in Madison for years. Another positive attribute of Ironman Wisconsin is the freshwater swim. "At some Ironman competitions,

Left: Dr. Minard cycling in competition.

you swim with sharks and jellyfish. There are no sharks in the lake in Madison,” she joked.

She didn’t even mind the “nasty” hills she had to cover during the race, because the countryside was so picturesque and the people were so supportive. About 75,000 spectators lined the Ironman route to cheer on the triathletes and attend the accompanying festivals, such as the Ironman Pig Roast, she said.

And it didn’t take her long to move up to an Ironman distance. “When people first get into triathlons, they can’t imagine doing an Olympic distance. But then you work on it, and your endurance improves, and you find you can finish the race. So then you think you’ll do a Half Ironman, and after you get a few of those under your belt, you ask, ‘What’s next?’”

Competing in an Ironman turns out to be less daunting than one might expect. Dr. Minard explained that all Ironman contests except the world championship in Hawaii accept all comers. All a racer has to do is sign up, pay the fee, train heartily for four to five months, and compete. Active triathletes include a 72-year-old nun named Madonna Buder, who was the only competitor in the women’s 70-74 age group, and 75-year-old Bill Albrecht, who was the oldest athlete to finish the 2002 Ironman Triathlon World Championship last year.

For amateurs like Buder, Albrecht, and Dr. Minard, an Ironman is not “a killer,” she said. “You’re not trying to race until you fall over; you go at a pretty moderate pace and essentially turn the race into a long training day.”

Discipline

Balancing the demands of triathlon training and competition with the rigors of critical care and academic surgery as well as a home life with her husband and four dogs takes careful plan-



ning. “I don’t have an extra minute during the day; every single minute is planned,” Dr. Minard said.

Day-by-day, week-by-week planning extends to her triathletic workouts. While Dr. Minard learned how to train for an Olympic-distance triathlon from other triathletes in the Memphis triathlon community, as well as books and magazines, she felt she needed a highly structured training program for Ironman Wisconsin. So she turned to a programmed online training plan developed by six-time World Ironman champ Mark Allen. Mr. Allen recommends: 12 weeks of gradually building a racing base by increasing mileage and speed; four weeks of honing racing skills through speed work, short-distance triathlons (Half Ironmen or less), and fitness development; and four weeks of tapering down from peak volume and intensity workouts to none two days before a race.

The time and effort have paid off in top finishes. In the sprint and Olympic distance triathlons, Dr. Minard frequently places first in her age group, and she’s occasionally won the



masters' division, which includes all competitors age 40 and up. In Ironman Wisconsin, Dr. Minard ranked tenth out of 30 in her age group, "which isn't bad," she said, "but it won't get me to Hawaii."

The Ironman Triathlon World Championship in Hawaii, which has been called a lesson in humility, was established in 1978 to settle an argument about which athletes—runners, swimmers, or cyclists—were the fittest in the world. To settle the debate, then-Navy Captain John Collins proposed combining the three toughest endurance races on the island into one and calling the winner "Ironman."

The original field of 15 Ironman competitors has grown over the years to 1,500 triathletes, who cover 140.6 miles while bucking crosswinds of 45 miles an hour and sweltering in temperatures in excess of 90 degrees.

Despite the wind, the heat, and the unforgiving black lava rock along the Kona Coast of Hawaii, the Ironman Triathlon World Championship is Dr. Minard's athletic goal. "I don't know how realistic that is, but I've done Ironman Wisconsin once, and I know I can improve on that," she said.

Regardless of what sort of athletic event she chooses to compete in next, odds are it won't be the last. Dr. Minard said she keeps up with the triathlons and Ironman competitions because she has a lot of fun and gets a tremendous sense of accomplishment. She also said that training in general gives her more energy for her "day job," and she gets a lot of "good thinking done" when she's running. □

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