

Historical Origin of the Triathlon

Four years before the "Ironman", on September 25, 1974, the first triathlon was held on Mission Bay in San Diego (Usa/California). It was directed and conceived by Jack Johnstone and Don Shanahan and sponsored by the San Diego Track Club. What follows is the story of the beginnings of this new sport as remembered by one of its founders, Jack Johnstone (photo of Jack Johnstone coming out of Mission Bay below right and Don Shanahan directing an early triathlon below left).



In 1971, at age 35, I joined millions of other Americans in the jogging craze. As was the case with so many others, I'd been growing increasingly disgusted with my ever-expanding waistline and general physical deterioration. One thing led to another, and before I knew it I was competing in road races, which at that time, were relatively small (and inexpensive) affairs. My previous athletic career had been eight years as a high school and college swimmer. Despite being named to the 1957 Collegiate and AAU All-American teams in the 100 yard breast stroke, my overall performances had been rather mediocre. After a year or so of competitive running, I was still struggling to regain my athletic mediocrity. Then, in 1973, I heard about the "Dave Pain Birthday Biathlon", to be staged for the second time on July 28. A 4.5 mile run followed by what was billed as a quarter-mile swim (the actual distance was between 200 and 300 yards). My race! I thought. How many of these runners can swim? I found out. I can't remember my exact place, and the full results aren't available, but I think I came in somewhere around fourteenth. Nothing to write home about, but a lot better than I'd been doing in road races.

In much better shape the following year, I broke into the top ten. That rather modest success got me to thinking, There should be more of these races, and the swim should be longer. Someone else wasn't going to do it. If I wanted it to happen, I had to make it happen. I conceived of a run-swim biathlon with equal emphasis on the two disciplines, and several alternate legs. The initial run could be done in racing shoes, but subsequent running legs would have to be barefoot on a suitable surface (grass or sand). The Fiesta Island area of Mission Bay, where Dave Pain's race had been staged, was almost perfect. I designed a course, then called Bill Stock, the San Diego Track Club Calendar Chairman, and told him of my plans. He said he would put it on the calendar, and the rest was up to me. As an afterthought, he suggested I call Don Shanahan, who also had some strange event in mind.

Maybe we could combine our ideas so there wouldn't be too many "weird" races on the schedule. I called Don and he told me that he wanted to include a biking leg. I wasn't too thrilled with the suggestion, having never cycled competitively (I didn't even own a bike). But what the hell, I thought, let's go for it. We decided to call the event the "Mission Bay Triathlon".

Neither Don nor I had put on a race before and we had a lot to learn. We leaned on friends and relatives and signed up as many volunteers as we could. The race had to be held late in the summer to allow enough time for publicity. We chose Wednesday, September 25, 1974 as our date, there being no available weekend time slots on the calendar. Our brief notice in the September Issue of the "San Diego Track Club Newsletter" read as follows:

The First Annual Mission Bay Triathlon, a race consisting of segments of running, bicycle riding, and swimming, will start at the causeway to Fiesta Island at 5:45 P.M. September 25. The event will consist of 6 miles of running (longest continuous stretch, 2.8 miles), 5 miles of bicycle riding (all at once), and 500 yards of swimming (longest continuous stretch, 250 yards). Approximately 2 miles of running will be barefoot on grass and sand. Each participant must bring his own bicycle. Awards will be presented to the first five finishers. For further details contact Don Shanahan (488-4571) or Jack Johnstone (461-4514).

It seems strange to me now that we thought it necessary to include the sentence about bringing bikes. I think someone must have asked me if they'd be provided. I haven't been able to find any record of the entry fee, but I think it was one dollar. One minor, but memorable experience I had was when I ordered the award trophies. The trophy maker called and asked how to spell "triathlon". He hadn't found it in any dictionary. I thought, Well, if it's not in any dictionary, the word must not exist. It's up to me how to spell it. Given the spellings "pentathlon", "heptathlon", and "decathlon", I guess there wasn't really much choice, but it seemed like a lot of power at the time.

Our main concern was having enough entrants to make the event credible. I was afraid the inclusion of a bike leg might cut down on the field to the degree that no one would take the race seriously. I drew up a map of the course and took it around to several of the track club events and tried to encourage the athletes to try something new. At one of these I ran into Bill Phillips, a previous winner of the "Dave Pain Biathlon". It took very little encouragement to get a commitment from him. Donna Gookin, who directed a running group at the time, said she'd bring her entire crowd to the race and have as many as were willing enter it. I prevailed on my surfing son Bill Swanson and two of his friends, Joel Rear and Rick Terrazis, to lifeguard along with Jeannie Lenheart, whom I knew from work.

The winner was expected to finish under an hour, but some competitors could take twice that long. Darkness could conceivably be a problem, so we arranged for a few cars to have their headlights directed on the last, short swimming segment (Don remembers this as a last minute, hurry up solution).

On race day 46 eager contenders toed the line. This significantly exceeded our expectations for a never before staged race being held on a weekday evening. An injury kept Don from competing, but I just had to do it. We shared the pre-race responsibilities, but he was the director once the event began. My recollections of the race are fuzzy after so many years. I don't recall the first run at all, but remember a little about the second leg. Most of the bikes I saw were beach cruisers and three speeds. Riding a primitive 10 speed Volkscycle, I had one of the quality machines in the field. On the second biking loop, I passed a young lady on a beach cruiser, still on her first time around. I later learned her name was Barbara Stalder. As I went by I remember thinking, Darkness is going to be a problem. I don't know if Barbara ever competed in another triathlon, but that evening she earned the distinction of coming in last in the first.

As I dismounted my bike and tried to run, my legs felt like they didn't belong to my body. I let out a moan of anguish and remember someone yelling to me, "Well, it was your idea!". Now, a quarter of a century later, I think, Inspired by Dave and along with Don, it was my idea. In this small way, I changed the world; the course of athletic history. Somehow I did manage to get my legs working again and picked up several places on the swim, though I remember Bill Phillips finishing his second crossing of Leisure Lagoon as I was starting my first. After finishing in sixth place, I started helping Don with the finish line. Sure enough, it was well after dark when the last of the first triathletes made their way across the inlet to the finish.

Most of the competitors went for pizza after the race, and I could tell that everyone, even Barbara, had had a great time. There was no doubt we were on to something. Reflecting now on that first event years ago, I marvel that we were able to draw such an impressive field under the circumstances. These were not triathletes. There was no such thing at the time. None were into cross-training, a term not yet coined. Most didn't own racing bikes and some were marginal swimmers at best. Yet they had the adventuresome spirit to come out after a hard day's work and with only two weeks notice to participate in a new athletic event. Few of the names listed in the results will be familiar to today's triathletes, but if it weren't for them, the new sport may have died on the cloudy evening on Mission Bay. One name which almost any triathlete will recognize, however, is listed in thirtyfifth place. John Collins, who four years later would found the event which brought international attention to the new sport, had just completed his first triathlon.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to the volunteers, who are necessary for the successful staging of any race. My wife Betty worked in many capacities, but remembers most being chief shoe collector. She headed the team that picked up the shoes from the start of the first swim, stuffed them in plastic bags, and delivered them to the staging area. They were wet, sandy, and smelly. It wasn't a pleasant job.

Don and I planned three more races for the following summer. Tim Cohalen volunteered to direct the popular two person triathlon relay. During the next few years the events became more popular and saw the emergence of a few athletes who considered the triathlon their specialty. Among these were Tom Warren, winner of the second "Ironman", Wally and Wayne Buckingham, and two time "Ironman" champion Scott Tinley. The Coronado

Optimist Club began to sponsor triathlons a short time later. Their races started with biking, followed by an ocean swim and a short run. To my knowledge, these were the only other triathlons to precede the "Ironman".

We stopped sponsoring the event in the early eighties, but by that time the "Ironman" had caught the attention of the media and the sport of triathlon was well on its way. On October 23, 1998, the "Founders Day Triathlon" was held on Mission Bay to commemorate the first triathlon almost a quarter century before. The next day Dave, Don, Bill, and I, along with Tom Warren, became the original inductees into Triathlon Hall of Fame.



The historical photo of the induction into the "Triathlete Magazine's" Triathlon Hall of Fame (October 24, 1998 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in San Diego). From left to right: Bill Phillips, Don Shanahan, Tom Warren, Jack Johnstone, and Dave Pain.

Mission Bay Triathlon, September 25, 1974 - 1st Bill Phillips 55:44, 2nd Greg Gillaspie 56:49, 3rd Dave Mitchell 56:57, 4th Jim Young 57:05, 5th Gordon Lutes 59:40, 6th Jack Johnstone 62:18, 7th Richard Fleming 64:01, 8th Bob Letson 64:14, 9th Tom Rothhaar 64:26, 10th John Garty 65:31, 11th Dale Larabee 65:44, 12th Bill Lee 66:04, 13th Pain and Gervais 66:04, 14th Ed Gookin 66:04, 15th Joe Bruce 66:41, 16th Pete Negaard 67:29, 17th Mike Welch 67:38, 18th Armen Johnson 67:40, 19th Rubin Collins 68:18, 20th Rick Sacory 68:25, 21st Ed Stalder 68:49, 22nd Ron Sandvick 71:23, 23rd Eileen Water 71:43, 24th Steve Parson 72:44, 25th Dan Abbott 74:05, 26th Greg Holmes 74:39, 27th Bob Holmes 74:40, 28th Flo Squires 74:45, 29th Herman Platzke 75:29, 30th Judy Collins 77:21, 31st Richard Fromen 78:02, 32nd Gail Hanna 78:12, 33rd Kristin Collins 78:56, 34th Michael Collins 79:10, 35th John Collins 79:19, 36th George Moore 79:27, 37th Bob Potthof 81:16, 38th Arne Dixner 81:47, 39th Jim Waters 84:03, 40th Jerry Mailhot 86:15, 41st Donna Gookin 86:52, 42nd Mayanne Garty 89:14, 43rd Joanne Bartlet 89:25, 44th Karen Gookin 90:20, 45th Sharon Buntrock 90:30, 46th Barbara Stalder 94:51.