



AGING TRIATHLETES

BY THOMAS LEGGETT

Covington resident Bob Sigerson, 70, is not your run-of-the-mill senior citizen. At an age when most settle into retirement, Sigerson works full-time in the insurance business, yet there's an even more extraordinary aspect of his persona. Sigerson regularly competes in—and wins—Olympic distance triathlon competitions.

"I'm a competitive person," Sigerson said. "I don't like to come in anywhere but first place." His steely blue eyes, broad smile and upright posture reflect the vivacity of a man half his age. After finishing fourth in the 2007 BG Triathlon World Championships, Sigerson qualified for the 2008 championships

in Vancouver, where he hopes to take the top prize.

Triathlons come in standard distances. For the "sprint" distance, athletes complete a .5 mile swim, 12.4 mile bike ride, and a 3.1 mile run. For the Olympic race, distances increase to .93 miles, 24.8 miles, and 6.2 miles. Sigerson, who once trained for the Boston Marathon, completed his first triathlon in 1983. He still competes up to the Olympic distance—sometimes completing more than one in a year—and swears his swimming and biking times are as fast as they were in his forties.

Often, aging triathletes are faced with slower running times. "Running creates the most wear and tear on joints and tendons from overuse injuries," Sigerson said. "I've had calf problems and inflammation of the patella tendons, mostly from the running." For his weekly training, Sigerson bikes and runs for an hour on Mondays and Wednesdays and swims for an hour with a coach on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On the weekends he trains all three, then takes Fridays off.

"It's important for older triathletes to take time for recovery," said Dr. Christine Keating, a sports medicine and rehabilitation physician

at Ochsner. "With age, athletes lose elasticity in their tendons and need to recuperate after strenuous exercise." And recuperation doesn't have to mean a full rest. Keating said cross training has long been a useful strategy for reducing the effects of repetitive strain on muscles, bones and tendons. Because triathlons inherently call for variety in training exercises, triathletes have to worry less about overuse injuries than single sport athletes as long as they give their bodies ample time to recover.

Ben Elder, USAT certified triathlon coach and trainer at Elmwood Fitness Center, says more frequent recovery time is essential for older triathletes to allow tissues to regenerate. While some eighteen-year-old athletes endure as many as 14 consecutive days of moderate to intense training for a triathlon, aging athletes should allow more days to rest. According to Elder, exactly how much time off depends on the individual's physical condition, but for most it means training for no more than 7 days in a row without a rest. "If older athletes don't take enough time off to rest, they risk overuse injuries from repetitive motion," Elder said. "Tendonitis and stress fractures are the most common injuries they encounter."

Because of risks associated with training and competing in triathlons, even in his 25th year of competition, Sigerson speaks with deep reverence about the longest standard race of them all—the Ironman. "I did one Ironman in 1985, but I just didn't want to go through that again," Sigerson said.

The first Ironman, organized by U. S. Navy Commander John Collins, was held in Hawaii in January 1978. Out of 15 men, only 12 crossed the finish line. In 2000, triathlons were made part of the Olympic program, garnering worldwide popularity. Legend says Collins handed his first 15 athletes a list of rules before the race. At the bottom of the last page he wrote, "Swim 2.4 miles! Bike 112 miles! Run 26.2 miles! Brag for the rest of your life!"

Even Sigerson wonders with admiration, then, at Sue Boudreaux, 53, of Mandeville, who successfully completed 12 Ironman races in her 11 years of competition. "I volunteered to work at a Crawfishman competition on the North Shore, and it looked like something I wanted to try," Boudreaux said. "Once you

do one, you get hooked." In 2004 and 2006, Boudreaux qualified for the oldest and most prestigious Ironman event, the Kona, Hawaii Ironman Championships. To be eligible, an athlete must finish in first place in an Ironman qualifying race. "Making the Hawaii Ironman race was my proudest moment," Boudreaux said.

These days, Boudreaux competes in half-Ironman races, partly because of the reduced training time. While she used to train 4 hours a day to prepare for the Ironman, now her time is cut to 2 hours a day. She swims 3 days a week with a masters group, runs 3 days a week, and bikes 2 to 3 days a week. Stressing proper diet and training, Boudreaux has recently added strength training to her regimen.

"I've added weightlifting to keep muscles healthy and prevent damage," Boudreaux said. Otherwise, age has little effect on her performance. In fact, with children in college, Boudreaux has entered a stage of life that offers more free time for events. "I used to compete in places like Orlando so the kids could go to Disney World," she said. "Now I go to places like California's Sonoma Valley for the Vineman triathlon that goes through wine vineyards."



Sigerson and Boudreaux train for the swimming component of triathlons with help from coaches and masters groups. Both say swimming demands the most technique, giving skilled swimmers a natural edge, at least in the beginning. Enter Jeff Warwick, 44, an attorney from Beau Chene, who spent a year on the LSU swim team as an undergraduate. "As a swimmer, I don't have to train in that area as much as other triathletes," he said. "I focus mostly on running and do a long bike ride on the weekends." Warwick agrees that running puts the most wear and tear on the body, especially the 26.2 miles of the full Ironman.

Given the grueling training regimen and wear on the body, some may have trouble understanding the popularity of these contests. For these triathletes, the answer is simple. "Like golf or other hobbies, it just becomes what you do," Warwick said. "It's where your friends are."



Boudreaux said the rewards include feeling good about her body, but the real benefit is the camaraderie with other athletes. "The people you train with become your good friends," she said.

For the competitive Sigerson, the social aspect remains the most important component, which ties in with his affinity for beer. "I do it for the health reasons, but I also like beer," Sigerson said. "I don't compete unless there's beer at the end."

All three triathletes stressed the importance of finding a team or other community, getting involved, and remaining consistent in workouts. Trainers and coaches agree that assistance, especially in the beginning, is crucial. In addition to helping clients plan a training schedule, he sends them to a registered sports dietician. "Some older triathletes try to do it on their own, but for their own safety they should get someone to help them and guide them through proper training and nutrition," Elder said.

Keating said as long as an athlete learns to minimize the risks of triathlon training and competition, it offers great overall health benefits.

"I just hope I'm healthy enough to compete in triathlons when I'm 70," she said.