

# The History of Triathlon - Part I: Learning to Swim

By [Gale Bernhardt](#)

On September 25, 2009, the sport of triathlon celebrates its 35th birthday. In April of this year, the international organizing body for the sport, the International Triathlon Union (ITU), celebrated 20 years.

A sport that was born as an alternative activity for San Diego Track Club members has grown to a family that includes the iconic Ironman World Championship in Hawaii, three inclusions in the [Olympic Games](#) and countless events of varying distances around the world. Currently, the ITU is looking for more inclusion world-wide as it offers Sport Development programs to help countries get involved and get more flags represented on the start line of the Olympic Games.

So just how does a quirky club sport turn into the fastest growing sport in the world? Mix equal parts of challenge, fun, colorful characters, passion, power struggles, television, backroom deals and a push for Olympic inclusion. But it all began with a couple of guys looking to organize a new event.

In 1974, Jack Johnstone and Don Shanahan, decided to put on this new type of race as an activity for the San Diego Track Club. Their newsletter that year read:

## ***Run, Cycle, Swim: Triathlon set for 25th***

*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 pm 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.*

In modern terms, this is the first time the word "triathlon" was used in print. Organizers took the name from the fact there were three sports and in a similar vein of the established sports of pentathlon, heptathlon and decathlon.

It was common in the early triathlons to have swimming as the last event. It seemed logical to swim at the end of the race in order to cool off. However, as more competitors enjoyed the experience of a triathlon, it became obvious it was unsafe to finish with the swim leg. People experienced cramps and accumulated fatigue during the swim, making for dangerous conditions. Today, most triathlons are staged in a swim, bike, run sequence; although a few exceptions do remain.

As the 1970s progressed, triathlons were becoming more popular on the west coast of the United States, and their popularity was extending north to Canada, as well as other select locations.

## **The Early Years of Ironman**

It was at the awards ceremony for the 1977 Oahu Perimeter running relay race that U.S. Naval officer John Collins laid down a challenge for others to compete in an event that combined three of Oahu's toughest endurance events into a single event. He combined the [Waikiki Rough Water Swim](#), the Around-Oahu Bike Ride and the [Honolulu Marathon](#) into one race that was 2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of cycling and capped off with 26.2 miles of running.

On February 18, 1978 his challenge was accepted by 15 men and Ironman triathlon was born. Only 12 of the 15 starters finished that first event, with Gordon Haller crossing the finish line first with a time of 11:46.58.

In 1980, it was ABC's Wide World of Sports broadcast that brought Ironman and triathlon into mainstream media. Anxious spectators watched [Julie Moss crawl towards the finish line](#), while Kathleen McCartney ran past her for first place. It was real life drama made for television, viewers and athletes alike became hooked on the sport.

### **Triathlon Gets Organized**

The sport of triathlon was gaining positive press and momentum worldwide. As it often happens, along with the explosive growth came problems. There were poorly organized races, dangerous courses, a lack of uniform rules and events in multiple countries claiming to be the "World Championship" of various distances.

This spurred several countries to organize national federations. Triathlon Federation USA, or Tri-Fed, was born in the U.S.A. in 1982 (it would later become what is now USA Triathlon). Just north, a fellow named Les McDonald was the driving force behind establishing the first provincial federation in British Columbia in 1983, and then the Canadian Federation in 1985.

Similar to any interesting lead character in a good movie or novel, Les has been described by different people in multiple ways. He's been characterized as a hero, a bully, a peace-maker, a rabble-rouser, tenacious, athletic, a rule-breaker, benevolent and a politician, to name just a few. How you might describe Les depends on the point in time when you met him and under what circumstances.

Of Scottish-Irish heritage, Les McDonald was born in Felling, England, in 1933. His family lived modestly and many of them worked in the coal mines. His first exposure to athletic endurance was through a school teacher. This particular teacher took small groups of students mountain climbing and, Les says, that this is where he first fell in love with the outdoors and exercise.

While serving military duty for England in the Korean War, Les met French Canadians that encouraged him to immigrate to Canada after the war to find good work. They told him he could make a better wage than in England, one that was more suitable for a man looking to support a family. He was also enticed by the stories of the Rocky Mountains and outdoor adventure.

It wasn't long before Les's athletic interests had him doing triathlons. He traveled to multiple Ironman races, going on to be a five-time Ironman World Champion in his age group.

A list of connections including the Alta Lake Sports Club, participation in the sport of triathlon, his ability to organize a federation organization and his knack for negotiating as an experienced labor union leader led to a call that would change Les's life and the sport of triathlon forever.

What would you say if the president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a man you only knew by name and title, called you on the telephone and after casual conversation asked, "Will you help me get the sport of triathlon into the Olympic Games?"

Les McDonald said, "Yes" without knowing how to begin. He had no idea that by accepting the request made by Juan Antonio Samaranch he would completely change his life's course and the lives of many others.

### **Chasing the Olympic Dream**

Within the year or so prior to the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch was visiting the host city. He switched on the television and saw this unusual sport, something he hadn't seen before. He was watching the

broadcast of one of the United States Triathlon Series (USTS) events. He said to Gunnar Ericksson, an IOC member in Sweden, "That sport should be in the Olympic Games."

Samaranch began investigating the sport, including its various connections and leaders. That research led to a phone call to Les McDonald. Les recalled that the phone rang one morning at 8:00 a.m. The voice on the other end said, "Hello, this is Juan Antonio Samaranch. How are you?"

Completely bewildered as to why the president of the IOC would be calling him, Les continued to answer questions about the weather and whether or not he had dinner yet or not. After explaining that he hadn't had breakfast yet, Les asked bluntly, "Why are you calling me?"

The voice on the other end of the phone said, "Will you help me get the sport of triathlon into the Olympic Games?"

Les said yes and set about learning what needed to be done to get a new sport on the Olympic program. To help him navigate the IOC processes, Samaranch asked Erikson to assist Les. One of the items that needed to be done was the establishment of an international governing body. Coincidentally, it turns out that several others were also interested in the creation of a global federation.

### **The Road to Global Governance**

In the U.S.A. in 1982, Carl Thomas (then-chairman of the Tri-Fed international committee and co-creator of the USTS event series) began promoting the idea of a world governing body. He named the organization Federation International Triathlon (FIT). Joining him on the international committee was Ironman race director Valerie Silk and San Diego attorney David Curnow. Thomas, with the help of Bob Helmick from the U.S. Olympic Committee, drafted a constitution for the FIT organization in 1983.

In 1984, representatives from the U.S.A., Canada, Australia and New Zealand traveled to Almere, Holland, for a meeting with the European Triathlon Union (ETU), a confederation of Europe's triathlon associations. ETU President Joop Van Zanten (Holland) and Secretary Con O'Callagan (Ireland) were also interested in forming a unified international body, but were not keen on joining the American-initiated FIT.

Les McDonald, who attended the meeting as the President of the Canadian Federation, recalled that ETU members were interested in organizing a world governing body and they wanted the Ironman to be named the official long-distance World Championship race. Like the North Americans, Europeans had become big fans of Ironman.

Les said the implications from the meeting were that Silk should turn the event over to a world organizing body. Initially, she was willing to participate in some kind of arrangement.

### **The Battle to Make Ironman "Official"**

As time went on, tensions grew, and at a special meeting in Dallas in February of 1987, several key players sat down together to debate and revise the constitution of FIT. It was agreed that FIT would change its name to Triathlon Federation International (TFI) and that the first general assembly meeting of the organization would be in Amsterdam that November.

On November 15, TFI was "officially" constituted with over 40 delegates from 26 countries representing four continents. (Africa had no representation.) Voting rights and organizational financial dues were hotly debated before finally being

agreed upon. Joop van Zanten became president, Con O'Callagen was named Secretary and David Curnow, who had left early to fly home, was in his absence elected Treasurer.

Things got very contentious and convoluted after the November meeting, with issues of control and money at the top of the list. It was McDonald who tried to be the negotiator/peace-maker between the U.S.A. and the Europeans at a subsequent meeting in early February, 1988, in San Diego. He soon found that the situation had become unreasonable, mostly due to the European representatives' resistance to participate in finding a solution that was agreeable to everyone. The USA became unwilling to join TFI.

The straw that broke the camel's back was the issue of world championships. The Europeans wanted Ironman as the first official world championship race. Two excerpts from a 1988 [Triathlete magazine](#) column:

*The final issue was the world championships. Because the Europeans so love the Ironman, they suggested that it be the site of the first long-distance championship of the new organization because of its historic importance to the sport. Ironman race chairman Valerie Silk, who had flown to Amsterdam and had given her tentative agreement to the idea, was also in San Diego. But now she had changed her mind. She declined the TFI world championship designation for 1988, saying, "If the U.S. doesn't participate in the world body, there is no world body. And if there is no world body, then the Ironman can't recognize its authority." Silk then suggested holding off one or two years to get the houses of the governing bodies in order. The Europeans were devastated. They were counting not only on the prestige of officially associating with the most important race in the world, but also the cash that it would have brought to the TFI bank account. The strings attached to being an "official" world championship were not insignificant. And this is where Les McDonald parted company with the Europeans.*

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