

The History of Triathlon - Part II: Putting the Wheels in Motion



American Mark Allen won the first ITU World Championship in 1989 in Avignon, France.

By [Gale Bernhardt](#)

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In April of 1988, on a routine trip to Sweden, International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch discussed the possibility of the sport of triathlon joining the Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne et Biathlon (UIPMB) with Brigadier General Sven Thofelt (Sweden), the current president of the organization. Thofelt was excited about the opportunity.

In July, Samaranch approved the use of the word "Olympic" to describe triathlons of distances that included a 1.5-kilometer swim, a 40K bike and a 10K run.

Samaranch called an international conference for nations representing triathlon for the weekend of August 20 to 21, 1988. The primary purpose of the meeting was for the 23 represented countries to consider associating with the UIPMB. The fastest way to gain a spot on the Olympic program is to associate with another sporting entity that is already on the Olympic program. Those 23 countries made a unanimous decision to preliminarily affiliate with the UIPMB.

At that meeting it was decided that France would be the host country for the first "Olympic Distance" World Championships in 1989. A working committee, including Les McDonald, was elected and assigned the tasks of preparing statutes, and dealing with financial issues and elections to the first triathlon congress in 1989. A technical committee was selected to prepare rules for future world championship events.

Though too much to cover here, it is worth noting that not only were there troubles internationally, but here in the States Tri-Fed was in complete upheaval. There were power struggles, conflicts of interest, and disagreements on finance and governance. These issues brought the resignation of key players at Tri-Fed, including Verne Scott (Executive Director and father of legendary Ironman [Dave Scott](#)) and Sally Edwards (legendary racer and board member).

At a January meeting in 1989, it was Les McDonald who served as the peacemaker between parties. His work was successful and now the United States could be a solid player on the international scene.

In November of 1988, McDonald and Phil Briars (New Zealand) traveled as spokespeople from the April working committee to Montecatini, Italy, for the UIPMB congress. McDonald gave a few introductory remarks and after that the de facto leader of the UIPMB, Vice President Igor Novikov (Soviet Union) told him he would be restricted to only answering questions from that point onward.

McDonald recapped the meeting to me, saying it was very heated and intimidating. He felt he was going to the UIPMB to negotiate in good faith and they wanted, very simply, complete control. In fact, Novikov took the constitution prepared by the TFI and tore it in half.

Novikov caught McDonald off-guard and asked him if the triathlon group was willing to join the UIPMB under the un-amended UIPMB Green Book rules. Knowing that an answer of "no" would turn the entire UIPMB congress against triathlon, McDonald agreed and triathlon's acceptance became "provisional".

His head still spinning from Novikov's tactics, McDonald received another surprise. Within an hour, a surprise election was held and Novikov was installed as the new president of the UIPMB. By the Green Book rules, Novikov told McDonald he would look forward to traveling to Avignon in April so he could chair the new triathlon congress.

McDonald returned to discuss the UIPMB problems with the working committee. Though the previous UIPMB leader, Thorfelt, promised triathlon would have autonomy, it was obvious that Novikov would not allow it. His mind was made up, he would rule triathlon.

Confused and somewhat bitter, the working committee decided that the only way to maintain some reasonable control over the sport was to negotiate from a position of power. This meant proceeding with an election (against the UIPMB Green Book) and attempting to continue talks with the organization.

The ITU Is Born

March 31 to April 2 of 1989, in Avignon, France, there was a meeting of 30 national governing bodies representing triathlon from all five continents, five members of the UIPMB and members of the press. The goals included creating a unified world governing body for the sport and to decide whether to affiliate or not with the UIPMB for a path into the Olympic Games.

An explosive meeting room broke into arguments over delegation credentials, proxies and certain delegates. There was plenty of political lobbying, stratagem, confrontations, allies formed, and finally some agreements. The new International Triathlon Union (ITU) was formed with 26 national governing bodies paying membership fees to the new organization. Four additional nations agreed to pay dues by a July 1 deadline.

As for joining the UIPMB, the group voted against immediate affiliation because UIPMB leadership wanted control over the sport. Triathlon wanted autonomy within their organizational structure. However, a motion passed to attempt to negotiate with UIPMB executive committee for future membership.

Before the congress adjourned, an election for key offices was held. Top office results included:

President: Les McDonald (Canada)
Vice President: Jean Cote (France)
Secretary: Sture Jonasson (Sweden)
Treasurer: Carl Thomas (USA)

The work had only just begun and the ITU needed a headquarters. Loreen Barnett, whose home was already the headquarters of Triathlon Canada, would become an integral part of the ITU. The world governing body of triathlon soon began operating out of her patio-turned-spare-room for the office.



*From left: Marisol Casado (now president of ITU),
Les McDonald (Honorary President) and
Loreen Barnett (current Secretary General).*

It wasn't until January of 2004 that the ITU would move out of Barnett's home and into a normal office space. There was a period of time in the early ITU days that she could no longer obtain a credit card because she had overspent her limit purchasing equipment on her personal cards.

She was involved in the organization from the beginning, and her skills would eventually take her to the Executive Director position of the ITU and then the Secretary General in 2008.

But long before 2008, a lot of work needed to be done.

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