

The History of Triathlon - Part III: Off and Running



Triathletes ride past the Sydney Opera House at the 2000 Olympic Games.

AP Photo/David Guttenfelder

By [Gale Bernhardt](#)

At meetings following that historic 1989 meeting in Avignon, it became clear to everyone involved in the newly created International Triathlon Union (ITU) that association with the Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne et Biathlon (UIPMB) was not going to work.

Despite all of the problems surrounding the organizational structure of the sport of triathlon, International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Juan Antonio Samaranch continued to support triathlon becoming part of the Olympic family. IOC member Gunnar Ericksson invited ITU President Les McDonald to travel to the IOC Congress meeting in 1991, one year prior to the Barcelona Olympic Games.

Ericksson wanted McDonald to begin the lobbying process with the IOC members to lay the groundwork for triathlon to become a new sport on the Olympic program with a unique international federation. This was a more difficult process than "riding on the coat-tail" of another sport.

Les accepted the task again. How could he turn down Ericksson and the IOC president?

IOC members spoke to Les and told him that spectator-friendliness and television viewership is what gets a sport into the Olympic Games. Certainly, public popularity of the sport plays a big role as well. While many within the sport were enamored with the Ironman, IOC members made it clear that for inclusion into the Olympic Games, the sport must be no longer than two hours.

At the time of the 1991 IOC Session there were 110 countries represented in the IOC and McDonald needed a minimum of 75 countries with support from a National Olympic Committee to be affiliated with the ITU. He was also told that he needed the approval of the international federations of track and field (IAAF), cycling (UCI) and swimming (FINA).

During the IOC session Les did the groundwork and obtained permission from IAAF, UCI and FINA so that triathlon could become an independent federation.

After three years of lobbying, on April 22 of 1991, the IOC announced that the ITU would be officially recognized as an International Federation. This did not mean, however, that triathlon would automatically be included in the Olympic program.

At the time triathlon received recognition, there were 15 International Federations worldwide that were recognized and yet had still not achieved inclusion as a sport on the Olympic program.

It wouldn't be until the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games that triathlon would actually debut on the Olympic program. In fact, the women's race was the opening event for the 2000 Games. Triathlon would become a media favorite.



Barb Lindquist, Susan Williams and Sheila-Taormina (l-r) have fun during practice before the 2004 Olympic triathlon in Athens. - Photo: Gale Bernhardt

The Story of One Man's Dedication

There are so many more stories to be told and many names that were a part of ITU history that were not included in this column due to space limitations. From that first phone call from Juan Antonio Samaranch to the 21st ITU Congress held in Madrid, Spain, in 2008, Les McDonald certainly symbolized the legacy of many that worked to get triathlon into the Olympic Games.

He is the first to admit he was not alone in bringing the sport to the current Olympic status. It was the ideas and hard work of many that went to battle for the sport's ideals and nurtured triathlon to where it is today.

During my interview with Les, there was one story that made him teary-eyed. He told me the story of bringing his mother from Great Britain to Vancouver in 1980. He was traveling with her on a flight from Montreal to Vancouver when she became very ill. She was so ill that the pilot landed the plane in Edmonton and Les's mother was immediately taken to the hospital. She passed away within a few days.

He returned home to Vancouver with the two suitcases his mother had with her. He had her complete belongings. For months, he couldn't bear to look in the suitcases. One day he opened the first one and found her clothing, which he decided

to donate to charity. In the second suitcase he found her entire life savings, a substantial amount of money that would fund his quest of establishing the ITU.

After a discussion with his wife, Monique, it was agreed that Les would not continue to work as an electrician. Instead, he would work full-time to move triathlon into the Olympic limelight. At a time when many people made personal sacrifices for the sport, Les would use his mother's money to help support his current family and, primarily, fund the travel necessary to help triathlon become an Olympic sport.

His mother's influence would continue to play a key role in the development of the sport. Les remembered that both his mother and grandmother battled for women's rights in Great Britain. This influence would have him stand firm on the topics of equal race distance and the critical issue of equal pay for men's and women's racing in ITU-sanctioned events.

Certainly the formation of a women's commission and some key elite male racer support helped the cause, but Les was confronted several times by groups of elite male racers that thought they were deserving of a bigger piece of the prize money than the women. He remained steadfast on the ideal of equality.

Entering the Draft-Legal Age

A column on the formation of the ITU and inclusion of the sport into the Olympics would not be complete without a discussion of the issue of draft-legal triathlon racing. As the sport of triathlon grew more popular and more elite racers grew closer in competitive ability, the romantic concept of mass-start triathlons on courses that did not encourage drafting, along with ensuring that officials could enforce the non-drafting policies were just that—a romantic concept.

In reality, elite racers knew that drafting or some kind of a format change was necessary to make the sport an Olympic reality. On the start line at the Games would be 50 competitors in each race, men's and women's.

Retired elite racer Craig Redman said, "We all knew something had to change because the bike part of the elite non-drafting races was a joke. Everyone was drafting. There were race-format change options thrown around, such as announcing the order of the sport format at the start line of the race (like run, swim, bike); but that and other options were just not practical from an organizational standpoint."

On the recommendations from many people (including triathlon representatives from various countries, elite athletes, IOC members and cycling's governing body, the UCI) the ITU pushed forward with the concept of draft-legal racing for Olympic inclusion. It was a complicated decision that was not made lightly. However, it appears to have paid off.

At the November 2008 ITU Congress meeting, a new president was elected. Marisol Casada, from Spain, is only the second president that the ITU has known. With excitement and anticipation about sport growth, both in participation and media viewership, the ITU and the sport of triathlon can look ahead to a bright future.

While it was Ironman that first captured national media attention; the fast-paced, draft-legal series of ITU World Cup racing secured a media sponsorship deal in 2008 that broke all past records and elevated the sport on a global scale. Prize money totaling over \$3 million USD was at stake in the battle to become triathlon's 2009 ITU World Champion. [The Dextro Energy Triathlon - ITU World Championship Series](#) offered a \$150,000 prize purse at each world championship event—including 2009 series stops in [Washington D.C. and Des Moines, Iowa](#)—and the Grand Final winnings totaled \$250,000.

Athletes made history in Des Moines at the first mixed Team Triathlon World Championships. Participating countries fielded teams consisting of two women and two men for a relay-format competition where each contestant completed a leg-searing,

short-course triathlon before tagging a teammate and sending them on their way. This race has led some to hope that perhaps the sport of triathlon will secure another event in the Olympic Games.

So here's an enthusiastic "Happy Birthday!" to the sport of triathlon and to the formation of the International Triathlon Union.

If you have already completed a triathlon, then congratulations are in order. To say, "I'm a triathlete" or "I've done a triathlon" means you are ultra-tough and ultra-cool. If you haven't tried the sport yet, perhaps [entering a triathlon](#) is the best way to celebrate your next birthday.

Gale Bernhardt was the 2003 USA Triathlon Pan American Games and 2004 USA Triathlon Olympic coach for both the men's and women's teams.

Her first Olympic experience was as a personal cycling coach at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Thousands of athletes have had successful training and racing experiences using Gale's pre-built, easy-to-follow training plans.

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