

# THE EXTRA MILE

Triathlon is already a challenge when you're in perfect health. But what if you faced the additional obstacle of significant—perhaps life-threatening or deeply disabling—injury or illness? Put to the test, would you carve out the courage and strength not only to recover, but to rally to the race course and surpass your wildest fitness dreams? Five individuals share their inspirational rebound stories—and the passions that have them fired up like never before.

**BY HOLLY BENNETT**



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## SHAD IRELAND

dreamed of being a professional athlete and lawyer. But at age 10, diagnosed with kidney failure, Ireland's dreams came to an abrupt halt. A decade of dialysis and two failed transplants took a brutal toll on his body—his parents were advised to make funeral arrangements. Flipping listlessly through television programs, awaiting death, Ireland stumbled upon Ironman, an experience that undoubtedly saved his life. Now, an impassioned athlete and advocate via the Shad Ireland Foundation ([Shadireland-foundation.org](http://Shadireland-foundation.org)) and the United Athletes Foundation ([Uaffsmg-sports.com](http://Uaffsmg-sports.com)), Ireland strives to “Take on the Tour” ([Takeonthetour.com](http://Takeonthetour.com)), an awareness-raising initiative to ride the mountain stages of every major cycling tour.

**I WAS 75 POUNDS OF FRAILTY**, on the edge of the couch screaming at the TV. These athletes were crazy, giving everything they had, collapsing and crawling across the line. I told my mom I was going to do Ironman someday. Back then, having a renal diagnosis was horrific. I spent six hours a day, three days a week connected to a machine, followed by 24 hours on the bathroom floor, hugging the toilet. At age 11, I attempted suicide. I was angry and defiant and without hope. But that night, I fell asleep dreaming of crossing that finish line.

It took two years to regain any strength. I went on to college, but I fell back into self-destructive patterns. I had a philosophy professor who challenged me: “What inspires you, Mr. Ireland?” “Nothing,” I said. “That’s unacceptable,” he countered. Then he smiled and winked—and proceeded to teach. In 15 weeks, Professor Bell taught me reflection, realization and perception. He taught me to believe in possibility.

Against all medical convention and advice, one doctor—an ultrarunner—agreed to monitor my Ironman training. The race had never been done before by a dialysis patient. Someone told me an ostrich is a hell of a bird, but it will never fly. The first day in the gym was the most humiliating experience of my

life. I couldn’t walk 30 seconds on the treadmill. I couldn’t breathe. I had a cardiovascular disease and blood-pressure issues. I sat with my head in my arms, realizing the gravity of my situation. But by the end of the week I walked 2 minutes, and then 2 turned into 4, 4 into 8.

A woman from the Czech Republic emailed me when I was racing Ironman Lake Placid. She wrote a beautiful letter about how she liked to walk through the woods and watch birds, something she hadn’t done in years. “In my country, when we’re given this diagnosis, we’re told to rest. Today is the day I get my life back, because of you.”

I’ve gotten people to change their perception. This is not a medically fragile community anymore. Kidney disease is most often caused by obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure. I advocate to prevent people from becoming patients. It’s basic stuff: exercise and nutrition. We have the ability to live life any way we choose. I’m always a dialysis patient at the end of the day, but I have this great regimen—Fresenius Medical Care home hemo-dialysis—that allows me to forget what it’s like to be sick. I can travel, I can control my schedule. I feel free. And when I’m on my bicycle, I’m not a dialysis patient anymore. I’m an athlete.

BEN IRELAND





## LAUREL WASSNER

had every intention of becoming a professional triathlete following a successful college swimming career. Then she discovered three lumps in her neck that proved to be stage II Hodgkin's lymphoma. At 23 years old, the promising athlete endured six months of chemotherapy and several years of lingering side-effects before regaining the physical strength necessary to train. Now, 10 years cancer-free, Wassner is the first cancer survivor to compete in the professional triathlon ranks. Even more exciting for Wassner is her ability to impact other young adults through her work with the Ulman Cancer Fund ([Ulmanfund.org](http://Ulmanfund.org)) and Livestrong ([Livestrong.org](http://Livestrong.org)).

**I NOTICED THE LUMPS** after sleeping on the floor of a friend's beach house. I thought maybe I just had a sore neck, but they kept getting bigger. The cancer was in my lymph nodes and abdomen. At first chemo isn't that bad, but it has a cumulative effect. I lost all my hair and my energy level plummeted. The worst was the constant nausea. I didn't feel well at all. I could run and walk maybe 20 minutes on the treadmill. My baldness definitely drew attention, but going to the gym made me feel a little more normal. Toward the end, though, there were days I couldn't even get up.

Ironically, a friend called the day after I received my diagnosis, asking if I would run the London Marathon with Team in Training. She didn't know. So she ran in my honor and also recruited my twin, Rebeccah. The whole time I was going through chemo, Bec was training. That really helped—it gave her something to focus on. My last chemo date was the day before the marathon. I left my treatment, got in a limo with our older sister and went straight to the airport to catch a flight to London. My doctor wasn't too happy!

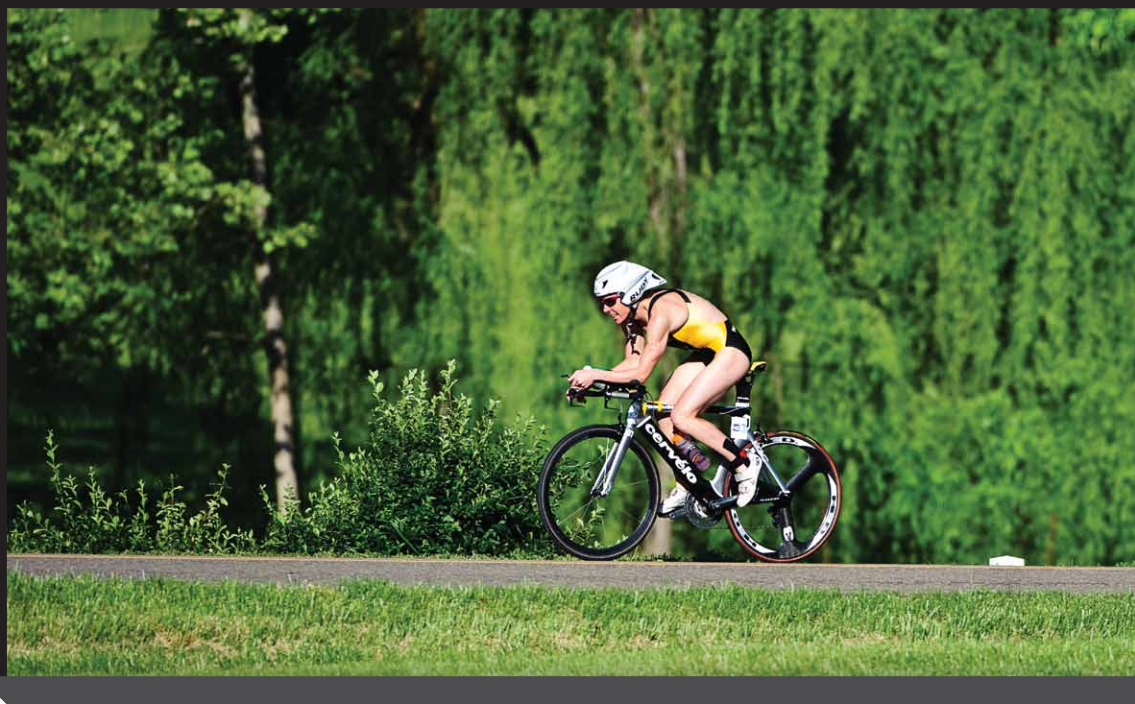
I've always been a competitive person, but after going through cancer I have a better

perspective. I feel more inspiration, more of an edge because I'm doing something that no one else has done. That helps me get through a lot of painful things. When I run on the treadmill and I'm running really fast—like a 5:20 pace—I know anyone watching sees how huge I'm smiling.

In 2010, I had my first big win as a pro at the Columbia Triathlon. When I crossed the line all of my sisters had tears of joy running down their faces. It was the first time I made them cry tears of happiness rather than worry, stress and sadness. To be able to give them that gift of happiness was the best way to thank them for all of the support they've given me.

I didn't feel comfortable talking about my cancer at first, but working with the foundations really helped. Before the 2009 Chicago Triathlon, Brock Yetso (the executive director of the Ulman Cancer Fund) texted me saying, "Good luck. You have 70,000 fans behind you." Seventy-thousand young adults are diagnosed with cancer each year. That really motivated and touched me. It made me realize how important it is to share my story, to potentially help people who might not be so fortunate. I had one of my best races ever.

NILS NILSEN





In 1991, 24-year-old **TAMIRRA STEWART** was perched on a ladder fixing a concert stage spotlight. Her next memory was awakening from a coma, having fallen and cracked her head open on a concrete floor. The road to recovery from traumatic brain injury continues to this day for Stewart, who started from scratch to relearn the simplest of functions: walking, talking and eating. Always the overachiever, Stewart also tacked on a few additional skills, earning two black belts in martial arts, a journalism degree and four Ironman finisher medals.

**I REMEMBER SITTING UP** on my elbow in my hospital bed and seeing a smoke stack out the window. It was an absolute wonder to me that there was stuff out there. I didn't know what it was—I didn't even know what my elbow was—but it was a wonder. Every minute was something new. For the longest time I had to label everything. I could spend hours looking for a fork. Of course then I'd forget why I needed a fork, or that I was even looking for one at all.

Six weeks after the accident I went back to school. I only understood 1,500 words of English, but I recorded every lecture and studied them at night. I constantly asked my teachers what words meant. That's how I got language back. Writing is easy for me now, but speaking can be tough. That's an area of my brain that is atrophied. When I'm tired, it's painful to even try having interactions with people.

I had physical therapy, occupational rehab, cognitive rehab—pretty much a doctor a day—but nothing was working. Then I tried martial arts, which helped immensely with my balance. In six months I noticed a real

difference. I could stand on one foot; I could let go of the side wall. I eventually started running. I ran a 5K. Then I started biking and learned to swim. There are tons of people who aren't motivated to get going again and end up living as a head injury. I wanted to get away from that.

The most frustrating thing during a triathlon is staying in a straight line in the water. Then there's a point on the bike when I can't talk to anybody, I can't understand what they're saying. It's all I can do to focus enough to talk to myself and make the bike go forward. My neurologist tested me to make sure I'm not having seizures while racing. (I have epilepsy from the accident.) On the run, everyone is wobbly. I'm just extra wobbly.

After a head injury you're suddenly a different person. You just want to curl into a ball and not come out again. Triathlon pushes you to socialize. It gives you self-confidence. I go to a race and I know people are there to encourage me and support me. Whatever happens after race day doesn't matter, but on that day we're all there for each other.

DAVE MCCLAUGHLIN / DCM PHOTOGRAPHY





Professional triathlete  
**SAMANTHA  
WARRINER**

recently graced the start line at her first iron-distance race in her native New Zealand a mere three months after undergoing heart surgery. The 39-year-old, who became hooked on triathlon a decade earlier, feels healthier than ever following a corrective ablation procedure to address supraventricular tachycardia (SVT), a condition in which faulty electrical connections caused her heart rate to rocket to dangerous levels.

**I'VE ALWAYS BEEN ACTIVE** in sport, and I would often get this racing heart. As a kid, the doctors said my heart was too big. They taught me techniques to deal with it: close my eyes, hold my breath sharply and wait for it to calm down. Also the triggers to avoid: too much stress, too much caffeine, too little sleep. When I started training harder, it happened more often—maybe once a month. I was still able to manage it, though.

During the 2010 season, my heart started racing much sooner and more frequently. In the thick of a triathlon I thought maybe I didn't have the proper fitness and couldn't push, so I'd back off. (You get used to pain in racing, so it can be hard to know exactly what's going on.) I took four weeks off training—the longest break I've had in years! I came back excited, fresh and completely rested, but every time I'd ride or run my heart would go off about 20 minutes into my session. That's when I started to get scared.

It hit home that I was having heart surgery when I was in the hospital getting prepped—when everyone comes to see

you and you have to sign off on all the risks. And then you're knocked out and have no control. My surgeons guided catheters up through my groin into my venous system, pumped me full of adrenaline to trigger the problem area and zapped it until my SVT was fixed. Luckily, there's no long-term damage to my heart—if I'd waited, there would have been irreparable damage. I feel so much calmer now. My heart feels more relaxed. I download my heart-monitor data, and where it used to be a zigzagging line, now it's almost a straight line. I never knew the zigzag was not normal!

I coach a team of women called Sweat7. It's a confidence thing, inspiring women to get out there. It's important to give back, to show others that everyone faces obstacles and finds ways through them. When you return at 11 p.m. and listen to all the stories at an Ironman finish line, my story is only minor compared to what other people have achieved and endured. I feel really lucky. I have very competitive goals and I'll always try to achieve them, but at the end of the day I feel lucky just to be here.

NILS NILSEN





## STEVEN PEACE

was a 32-year-old U.S. Naval officer and recreational cyclist when a massive stroke tore through his otherwise fit and healthy body. Unable to stand, walk or talk—yet unaware that this bizarre incident was in fact a stroke—Peace assumed he would soon be back to normal. Home alone, he crawled to the front door, locked himself in for the night, and remained lying there for nearly 16 hours. Peace eventually learned to walk again following extensive treatment, albeit with a cane. Then, he was introduced to the NESS L300, a revolutionary wireless device worn as a cuff below the knee and a sensor in the shoe, which electrically stimulates the peroneal nerve and in turn, signals the leg muscles to engage, allowing him to walk independently. With his newfound physical freedom, Peace launched a career in triathlon and cycling, winning the 2010 Paralympic Road Nationals and setting his sights on the 2012 Paralympic Games.

**WHEN I DIDN'T REPORT** to work, a friend came looking for me. The fire department had to break down the door. I couldn't walk for two months and couldn't talk for nearly six months. I had to relearn everything. The doctor said he didn't really see me making much of a recovery, because I had been on the floor for so long. It's unheard of actually—usually stroke victims need to get help within four hours.

Before my stroke, I never thought of marathons, triathlons or anything like that. It just seemed too hard. Now? Give me anything! Just put it in front of me, and I'll do it. If I can't do it the regular way, I'll find a special way to do it. Where I live there are a lot of triathletes. It's great because I can now relate to these people, whether it's a first-timer or a full-blown elite on his way to Kona.

The run is definitely the hardest part for me. With or without the L300, I can't actually run, so I have to walk. The first time I

raced the Mission Bay Triathlon, I was very slow. The second time, I'd used the L300 longer and I was definitely faster. It was a fast walk.

Sometimes people wonder whether I should really be doing these things. Usually someone reaches them before they can question me directly and says, "Just watch." If I fall down, I fall down. If I have to try 10 times before I can actually get up and do something, well, then that's the 10th time. And everything's fine after that.

If you had asked me about this before the stroke, I would have said, "Oh no, not me." But now I feel better about myself. I'm lighter. I eat better. I feel more alive. That's partially because of the stroke and partially because, well, last year I won a national championship. The Challenged Athletes Foundation has a box on its application that says "elite athlete." I can check that now. I'm going to make sure I always can. **1**

