

YES, YOU CAN — JUST TRY TRI

By Lynn Kuhns '69

Often, we define ourselves by what we're not.

Who, me? No, I'm not runner. (My brother used to run backwards in front of me, pointing and laughing at my girlish labor. I never could catch up with him. And quit trying.)

Swim, way out there? No way! (The breaststroke, smooth and slow, was my favorite. Only close to shore, in calm-lake play.)

Race a bike 15, maybe 20 miles? Nope, I don't compete. (I'll cruise my old Schwinn over to the Piggly Wiggly.)

But now, I'll say yes to all three, as the multi-sport of triathlons entices me out of my cushy no-not-me hiding place. An endurance sport consisting of swimming, cycling and running over various distances, the triathlon is said to be one of America fastest-growing sports. For good reasons, at least three.

Perhaps we aging baby-boomers and our children just need something more. We like to juggle our time to make room for what's good for us, to train in three sports so injuries and boredom are less likely to set in. We can make friends, earn trophies and inspire others. Then we try even harder next season.

For years, I had walked local trails with female friends to cover five miles five days a week within an hour of talking about The Best Brownie Recipe Ever, children and grandchildren, and gardens. I never pushed. Never knew I needed more.

Then, early in 2007, after reading an Oshkosh Northwestern article about an upcoming Senior Triathlon, I signed up for my first "seniors-only" event. For \$35, it included a schedule of more than three months of daily training; one night each week at the Oshkosh Senior Center for workouts on the treadmill, stationary bike and weight machines; and one night each week at a high school pool to swim. OSC Staff and students from UWO coached and guided us.

That led to the early-May competition of an 1/8-mile swim, 4.5-mile bike ride and 2.1-mile walk-run. Only one each day, with a day of rest in between — not quite your raging, ocean-banging, mountain-climbing, marathon-run half-a-day Ironman Triathlon, but a start. Got my picture in the newspaper. Met new friends. Felt stronger and had more wind than ever.

My first "real" triathlon, where the three events are held back-to-back and the transition times — swim-to-bike, and bike-to-run — are included, was the Mighty Wolf Sprint '07, in my hometown of Winneconne. While I finished about 43minutes behind the overall female winner, I was first in the women's 58-64 age bracket. Later that summer, I placed second in my age-division in the Oshkosh Triathlon, an event drawing more than 1,000 competitors from a larger region, also held in Winneconne.

Certainly, I'm not fast. And I suggest to the kind folks who praise my modest triathlete trophy collection hidden in the garage, "It helps to be old, and female... and a little crazy." There just aren't many competing in my age-division.

On July 20, 2008, I traveled out of my hometown comfort zone and was rewarded with a first-place finish in the Fourth Annual Door County Triathlon sprint division for women ages 60 to 65. It was a quarter-mile open-water swim, 18-mile bicycle ride and 3.1-mile (5-K) run. My time, 1:52, ranked me 419 in the overall sprint field of 581, and 193rd out of 301 women. I was most pleased then with my bike pace of 17.5 mph., though the rough-water Green Bay swim wasn't fun — except to finish and forget. Over all, though, this Horseshoe-Bay-based race gave us Door County hospitality at its finest, within a picturesque setting on a perfect summer day. I recommend it.

So, want to try? Most people worry about the swim, but with each facet of training you can just take baby steps or strokes or pedals. Maybe find a mentor, read training books, follow a training plan — and practice, practice. Plans are tailored according to experience level, focus area and time available. Strength training, yoga or other stretching is also recommended. I used a free, by-the-minute sprint-level training plan that I found at beginnertriathlete.com. Toward the end, I put in about 14 to 16 hours weekly.

Whether you're a newbie or an Ironman elite; whether you really want to race, or just get more fit, one wonderful thing about triathlons is all the work and research that's already been done and refined in laying out do-able training plans. There's also the first-hand experience you can tap into via run, bike, swim clubs, Internet sites, blogs and magazines. Research is especially helpful to train your weak or fearful areas; and to get better, where you're good.

For me, the training weeks and miles go fast. I've lost 10 pounds and a pants size. While I still keep in touch with my walking buddies, I've found new friends in through such clubs as the Fox Cities Triathlon Club. I'm happy to have introduced at least five friends to triathlons — first as fans, some as training partners and all became participants. Two are about one-third my age.

Trust me: Race days are extremely exciting, somewhat scary and yet so fun and rewarding to get through — with maybe 1,300 calories burned (sprint distance) and a good massage and/or nap earned. Then, as training continues, your body will feel tighter and stronger. Your endurance, stamina and strength will build with your confidence. And your No-I'm-not a swimmer-cyclist-runner definitions will meekly melt away with the miles you'll cover, the finish lines you'll cross.

You will feel and look better, stand taller and eat more healthfully because it's all about re-defining you, in a more positive way. It's really about saying Yes ... or at least, I'll try.

Lynn Kuhns is a 1969 psychology graduate of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. Now living in Winneconne, she is a freelance writer specializing in outdoors, environment, healthful living and human-interest stories. Her work has appeared in Aloha Magazine, the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, Wisconsin Resources, The Oshkosh Northwestern and other publications, while her novel waits to be finished.