An aerial photograph showing a massive crowd of triathletes in the ocean during the Ironman World Championships. The swimmers are densely packed in several lanes, creating a chaotic scene that resembles a washing machine. The water is a deep blue, and the swimmers are visible as small white and colorful specks. Several support boats are visible in the upper right corner.

The start of the
Ironman World
Championships is
compared to
swimming in a
washing machine.

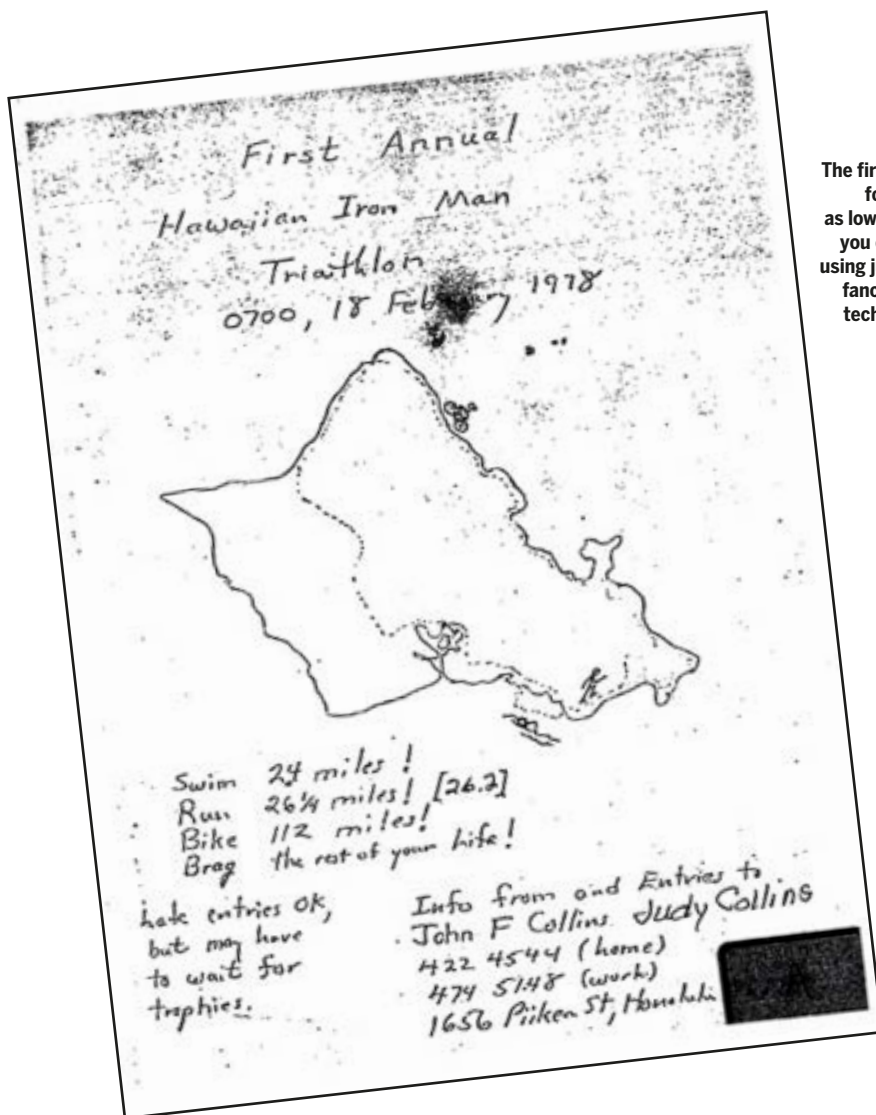
**"PEOPLE SAY THEY
TRY TO FRACTION THEIR
MIND FROM THE
DISCOMFORT. BUT I THINK
THAT'S A LOAD OF CRAP."**

Dave Scott, Ironman

An aerial photograph of a triathlon race in the ocean. The water is a deep blue, and the race path is marked by a series of white buoys. A large number of athletes are visible, swimming in the water. The title text is overlaid on the top right of the image.

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE KONA IRONMAN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

It's the ultimate test of pushing past one's physical limits, a triathlon of epic proportions set amongst the lava fields of Hawaii. Here's the tale of how this sufferfest came to define endurance sports—and human achievement. Words: Megan Michelson



The first entry form was as low tech as you can get, using just that fancy Xerox technology.

The Inception

Judy Collins: On the entry form, John added by hand at the last minute: "Swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles, and run 26.2 miles. Brag the rest of your life."

John Collins: When I was 17, my father put me to work in construction. It was over 100 degrees on the pavement and he said, 'Whatever you do in life will be easier than this.' He was wrong about that. But you can say that about Ironman and be right.

Dave Scott, six-time Ironman World Champion in the 1980s, first inductee into Ironman Hall of Fame:

I'd won the Waikiki Rough Water Swim, the original 2.4-mile ocean swim. After that first year of Ironman in 1978, John Collins handed me a flyer and said, 'You should do this event.' I saw the sheet and I remember turning to him and saying, 'That's a long three days.'

The Swim

Meredith Kessler, currently a top American Ironman competitor and a perennial favorite at Kona:

It's a deep-water start and it is so nerve-wracking. You're waiting there for a good five minutes, just treading water until the cannon goes off. Your heart is pulsing. You just want the gun to go off.

Scott: At the start, the energy is neurotic and frenetic and crazed. I was like the honeybee. I was always surrounded by this hive. It was like people had grappling irons on their hands, that's how aggressive it felt. People are pushing down your feet and I remember getting an elbow in my goggles that felt like George Foreman delivering a knockout blow.

Dick Hoyt, who pushed his son, Rick, who has cerebral palsy, through over 1,100

When U.S. Navy Commander John Collins and his wife, Judy, got the idea to merge three long-distance events into one grueling day, the Iron Man was born.

It started in 1978, on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, with 15 intrepid athletes who paid an entry fee to subject themselves to a 2.4-mile ocean swim, followed by a 112-mile bike ride, and capped off with a 26.2-mile marathon run. It took the winner nearly 12 hours to finish that first year; the current men's course record is just over 8 hours. Now held each October in Kona, the Ironman World Championships now features 2,000 professional and amateur competitors, chosen by a lottery of over 80,000 entrants. *The Red Bulletin* talks to the founders of Ironman and the athletes, both past and present, who've endured the toughest race in the world in one of the planet's most idyllic locales.



Founders Judy and John Collins, in 1983.

**"IT IS NERVE-WRACKING.YOUR
HEART IS PULSING. YOU JUST
WANT THE GUN TO GO OFF."**

Meredith Kessler, Ironman



Top: The 50 highest ranked professional men gain an entry into Kona. The rest are amateurs; Above: The open water start requires fortitude. Right: Meredith Kessler



racers, including four appearances at Kona:

At the start, you're waiting for so long. I'm like, 'We're ready to go.' But you have to sit there. All the people around us were nice, so we got to chatting and that helped me relax. I towed Rick in a small, inflatable boat. I wore a vest around my chest with a rope that attached to Rick's boat. We were the first in the world to do something like that. When we decided to do triathlons, I didn't even know how to swim. I had to buy a house on a lake to learn how to swim.

The Bike

Scott: On the bike, you've got strong headwinds, a climb that's an 8 percent grade, and it's blazingly hot. The wind is in your face and you feel like you're barely moving. That's when it gets difficult. You have to recognize those moments of extreme

"IT HIT ME ON THE BIKE AND THE RUN—THAT PHYSIOLOGICAL HUNGER."

Dave Scott, Ironman

discomfort. People say they try to fraction their mind from the discomfort. But I think that's a load of crap. You have to try to manage the discomfort in the short term. You have to relax your back and look at your legs and try to make your strokes rhythmic and fluid.

Hoyt: We have a special bike where Rick sits in front of the handlebars, on the front tire. I like having him there because I can see him, I can talk to him, I can give him water. Rick and I have been together for so long, we have a special bond. I don't get tired when

Dick Hoyt and his son, Rick, who has cerebral palsy, compete at Kona.



Dave Scott amid Kona's barren lava fields in 1994.



I'm with him. I feel very strong. Sometimes I get stronger. He's the one who motivates and inspires me. He's the athlete. I'm just loaning him my arms and legs so he can compete.

The Run

Chris McCormack, Australian pro triathlete and Kona Ironman World Champion in 2007 and 2010:

I had a 13-minute lead after the bike [in 2012] only to fall apart on the marathon and fail to finish. This was my first loss in a triathlon in two years. I vowed to return, which I did the following year. Ironman is more than the physical. You can't suffer here and leave a piece of yourself on those lava fields and just walk away.

Julie Moss, made famous by her 1982 finish, when she crawled across the finish line, earning second

place: My legs started going first. I had to go deeper and deeper within myself. I was getting very narrow field of vision and all I could do was focus on moving forward. When my legs stopped working, I had to figure out how to use my arms. I spent a lot of time on the ground. I kept thinking, 'I'm a winner, I've got to figure out how to walk.' I had bought into this idea that not only was I winner but I deserved to win.

Hitting the Wall

Scott: I'm obviously very connected to my body and I like ratcheting up that discomfort. It would hit me on the last stages of the bike and on the run—that physiological hunger. I can't replicate that anywhere else besides Ironman in Kona. I get into this rhythm and I keep pushing myself. I think, 'Don't give up, do what you can do.' We're all fatigued, but you



**"THE PHYSICALITY IS
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Chris McCormack, Ironman

Australia's Chris McCormack celebrates after winning Kona in 2007. His splits were 51:48 for the 2.4 mile swim, 4:37:32 for the 112-mile bike leg and 2:42:02 for the final marathon.

McCormack on the bike during his championship-winning effort in 2007.



Below An amateur triathlete starts the swim, and he's one of the lucky ones. The odds of winning the Kona entry lottery is 1 400. Right Mark Allen in Kona in 1992.



have to keep going. Kona gave me this bright ember to say, 'OK, you're going to do it again and again.' It's like a slow drip from a drug. That morphine-like effect that we get from the endorphins, it's off the charts.

Mark Allen, six-time Ironman World Champion in the 1980s and '90s, Ironman Hall of Fame inductee:

In '89, I saw Dave [Scott] at the swim start. And I thought, 'Just stay with him, see how it unfolds.' I stayed on his feet the entire swim course. On the bike, I shadowed him. We started the run, and we were running sub 6-minute pace. I thought, 'This is suicide.' It blew my mind. I thought, 'I can't win this thing. I just want to quit.' All that stuff that doesn't help you out. It got so hard to match his pace. I started giving up, and my mind went quiet. Then I recalled this image I'd seen in a magazine. It was a photo of an old Indian wise man who looked very peaceful and powerful. That's the place you're trying to find when you're racing. You need to find peace, but you need to find a reserve of strength, too.

McCormack: The physicality



Above: Transitioning from swim to bike
Below: Hydration is key. The average high is 84



"IN THE REAL WORLD, YOU CAN PRETEND. AT THE END OF IRONMAN, YOU MEET THE REAL YOU."

Chris McCormack, Ironman

is something I never fear but the emotional and mental anguish that this race delivers is extremely tough. Ironman is about being real with yourself. In the real world, you can lie and pretend. But at the end of an Ironman you meet the real you. You have an open conversation with yourself, and this can be tough. At the professional level when you are racing to win, this

conversation involves a commitment to further suffering and pushing to take the title. You ask the question, "Why is victory so important?" and you have the switch to stop the pain but you'll have to sacrifice the win.

Kessler: Your body and your mind have to be in sync. If you're mentally like, 'I'm done with this,' you're not going to make it. Sometimes your legs may be over it, but if you have that mental fortitude to keep going, you'll make it. It's all about a positive attitude. My internal resources for me are emotional strength, courage, mental fortitude, and most of all, gumption. I write the word gumption on my hand. You have to have gumption to prevail. It's problem solving at its finest. It's an unwavering ability to endure discomfort and distress.

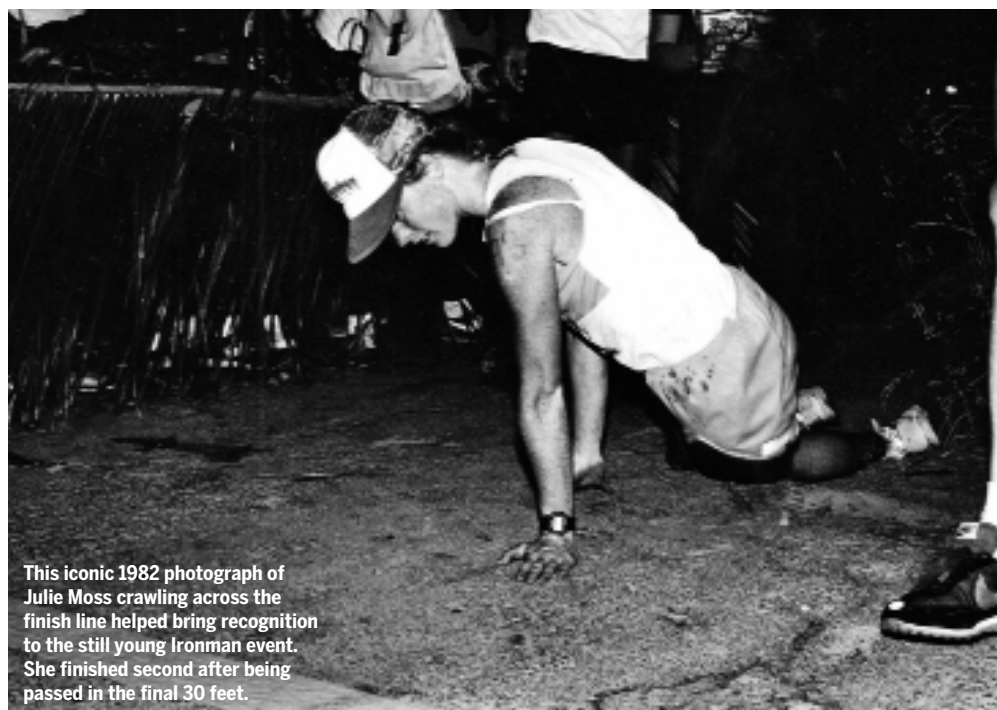
Hoyt: Our message is yes, you can. There isn't anything you can't do. People see Rick and me out there and they say, 'You're so focused on what you're doing. A train could cross in front of you and you'd climb up and over it.'

The Finish and the Aftermath

Moss: The final moments were really life defining. I'd accessed this inner fire and I felt like there was no limit to what I could do. When I finally did get passed by Kathleen McCartney 10 yards from the finish line, I understood even then that I didn't lose. I lost that race, but what I found changed my life.

McCormack: Every single race you ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?" But that all melts away when you see that finish line. If you could bottle that emotion and feeling you would be the world's richest person. There is nothing else like it in the world. The sport has given me my life. I love this event.

www.ironman.com



This iconic 1982 photograph of Julie Moss crawling across the finish line helped bring recognition to the still young Ironman event. She finished second after being passed in the final 30 feet.