

TRI

THE SWIMMING,
BIKING, RUNNING
INTENSITY THAT
IS A TRIATHLETE'S
WAY OF LIFE.



STRONG

ERIK KELLAR

GETTY

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IT'S 6:30 A.M. ON A THURSDAY, and the road to Naples' Vanderbilt Beach is dark but not deserted. As the first cars nose into parking spots, Karen Tamson is already headed to the beach. She's dressed in athletic shorts and a warmup jacket, her one-piece competitive swimsuit underneath. Tamson, 56, is well-known in triathlete circles—she competed at Kona, the Ironman World Championships, last year, and she qualified again this year—and she's part of the growing community of triathletes across Southwest Florida who are near-obsessive about the sport.

Speak to any local athlete, and triathlons are bound to come up. They're either training for one or they just came back from one or they're dreaming about the big one. It's rare to meet a runner, cyclist or swimmer in Southwest Florida who hasn't given triathlons a try. Though an exact number of triathletes in the area is hard to specify, Tamson guesses that the total reaches into the thousands. Lee and Collier counties have a number of triathlete clubs—Naples Area Triathletes, Segafredo Trek Tri Team, GearedUp and Active Grit, just to name a few—plus coaches who have their own teams. And that doesn't take into account the triathletes who train on their own

or the ones who have competed in triathlons but don't train year-round.

The races come in different distances, such as the sprint with a .5-mile swim, 12.4-mile bike ride, and 3.1-mile run; the Olympic with a .93-mile swim, 24.8-mile bike ride and 6.2-mile run; and the ironman with a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a full 26.2-mile marathon. In the run-up to this year's Kona competition, Tamson will put in 25 hours a week. Most days, she trains on two sports—on Mondays it's a swim and a bike ride, on Tuesdays a run and a swim, on Wednesdays a bike ride and a run, on Thursdays a run and a swim, on Fridays a long bike ride (100 miles) followed by a short run (six miles), then Saturdays are for recovery and on Sundays she goes for a long run (up to 20 miles). For many of us, this level of commitment looks like insanity. For triathletes in general and especially those who do long-distance ironman races, this level of training is just part of the sport.

At Vanderbilt Beach the sky is gray-white, like the color of a pearl, and the gulf is flat. There are a few clouds in the south, remnants of last night's storm, and flashes of far-off lightning that soon fade. A soft breath of breeze runs over the still water. With the increasing light, it's possible to get



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a better look at Tamson. She's blond and tan with a pair of sunglasses perched on her head. She has bright blue eyes and a ready smile. Tamson, who's a professional triathlon coach, has been competing in triathlons since 2007. A competitive swimmer in college, she took a 25-year break from the sport after getting burned out. She picked up running instead, at first just to keep in shape, starting with 5Ks then moving up to 10Ks. Soon she was running half-marathons and then training for a full marathon. After completing in eight marathons, she realized that running was breaking down her body.

"I started to feel a lot of aches and pains," Tamson tells me. "I had just turned 40, and I thought, well, I've got to figure out a way to stay in shape without wearing down my body."

That's when she discovered triathlons. Drawing from her background in running and swimming and adding in cycling, she competed in her first triathlon at 44.

"I JUST FELL IN LOVE WITH IT," she says, "and it grew from there."

In 2009, Tamson qualified for the ITU Triathlon World Championships in Perth, Australia, an elite long-distance event. From there, she took up ironman racing, and in 2018 she competed at Ironman Texas and finished second for her age, which qualified her for the Ironman World Championships in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. This year she took first place in her age group at Ironman Texas and qualified for Kona a second time.

"If you asked any triathlete," she says, "their dream come true would be to qualify for Kona. It's fulfilled my lifelong dream to be able to do Kona not once but twice, two years in a row."

One of the reasons you'll hear triathlons come up so frequently in this area is because it's possible to train here year-round. Southwest Florida may not have the hills that cyclists crave, but it does have good weather 12 months a year. That's crucial, especially when it comes to training for open-water swims. Another reason: triathlons are expensive. They require a lot of gear—special bikes with special wheels, wetsuits, athletic wear that can transition from swimming to biking to running. It all adds up. Southwest Florida in general, and Naples in particular, has a population that can often afford the sport's requirements.

Cailin Weidenmiller, 42, came to triathlons two years ago as a way to carve out a niche in her busy life that gave her an outlet outside of her home. Like Tamson, Weidenmiller was a collegiate swimmer who burned out on the sport. Also like Tamson, she took up running when she

couldn't bear the thought of getting back in the pool. Weidenmiller moved to Naples in 2005, married her now-husband, had two children, and while holding down a full-time teaching job she started training for marathons. "Because I needed a physical outlet," she says.

After her third child was born, Weidenmiller left her teaching job to stay home full time with her three girls. It didn't take long before, as she puts it, she started getting antsy again. "I'm used to having a goal," she says.

Weidenmiller joined the cycling gym Orange Theory Fitness to stay active, and when her Orange Theory coach, Marissa Abrams, came in one morning and asked if anyone wanted to train with her for a triathlon, Weidenmiller signed up before she even owned a bike. In that initial race, she took first place in her age group—even though

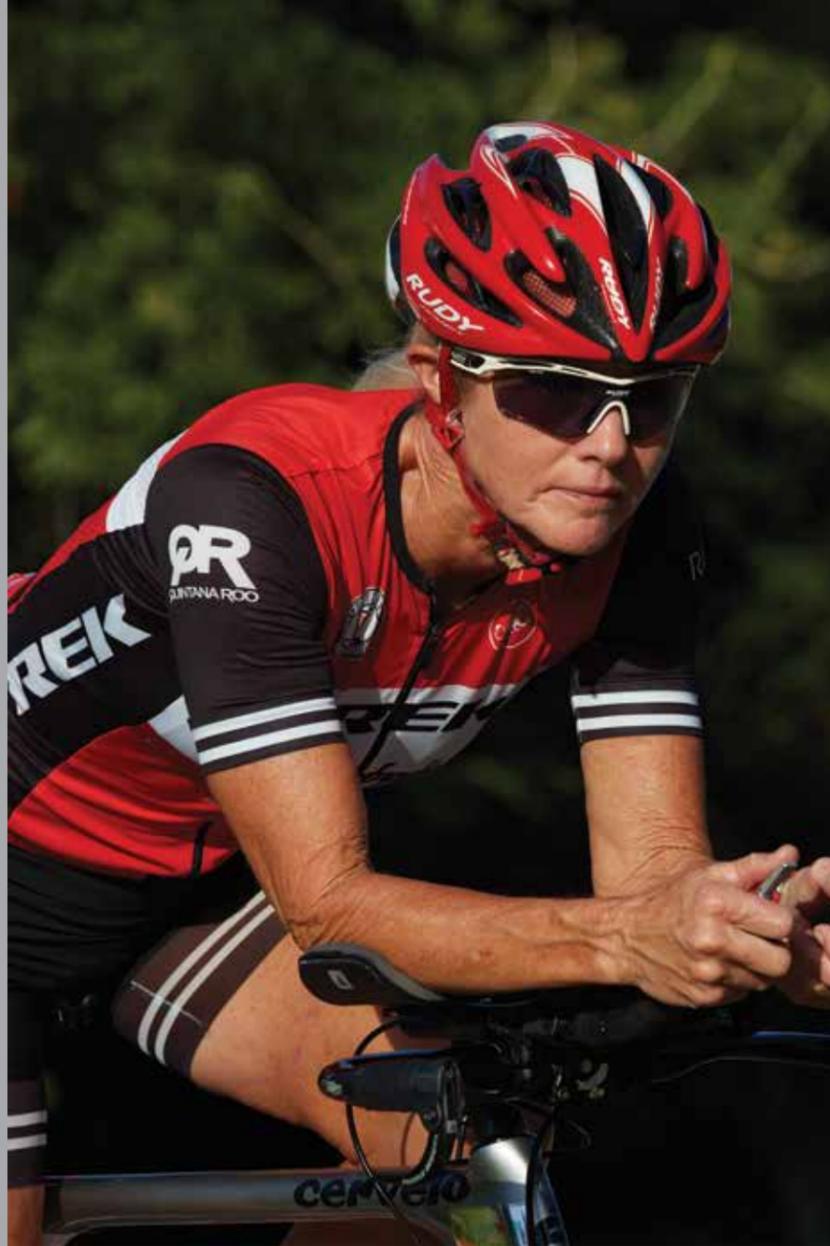
she didn't know how to change the gears on her bike. Right away, she was hooked. "It brought back a piece of my old self," she says. Since 2017, Weidenmiller has competed in four half-ironman triathlons and two full ironmans. Her husband teases her about her long hours on the bike, in the pool and running. He says it's like a full-time job. In many ways, it is. Like Tamson, Weidenmiller trains six days a week. If she's gearing up for a full ironman, she puts in 20 hours over those six days. For a half ironman, it's 14. "For me it fuels my living," Weidenmiller says. "But I don't consider it working out. I consider it training for something I'm passionate about." That passion is key, because training for a triathlon—especially a long-distance race—takes intense amounts of focus.

"IT'S 100 PERCENT," Weidenmiller says. "When I'm in full ironman training, some things get pushed to the side. I show up to my kids' PTA meetings in my tri kit. All of my girls' trips revolve around races and training now instead of going to the hotel pool and having cocktails."

Weidenmiller works for her husband's commercial printing business part-time, and when she's not training, she's caring for their three children. Triathlons gives her something that's all her own, even if it's not always easy to balance the sport with other things.

"It gives me a sense of self," she says. "At the same time, it's important that my daughters see that it takes hard work to achieve big goals. I want them to dream big." All three of Weidenmiller's daughters—ages 6, 8 and 11—have competed in junior triathlons.





THOUGH TRIATHLONS are an individual sport, camaraderie plays a big part in their appeal. It's one thing that convinces people to try the sport, and one of the factors that fuels their desire to keep going. Often, one friend pulls in another friend, and then it goes down the line.

"Triathlons have brought me some of the greatest friendships of my life," Weidenmiller says. "I have been incredibly inspired by the

triathlon community, and I look up to so many of the female competitors. That camaraderie is one of the best parts of the sport."

Abrams, the Orange Theory coach who recruited Weidenmiller—the two are now best friends—says this is part of what drives her.

"I like training with my friends," she says. "We push each other, we motivate each other. We love that."

Abrams, 30, has been into fitness and working out her whole life. "It's who I am," she says. She started competing in triathlons at 19 and completed her first full ironman this past April. Triathlons, for her, are about pushing physical limits with like-minded athletes.

"It's a lot of fun," she says. "You can go out, show your fitness level, do it with your best friends and cheer each other on and push the limits, do things you didn't think you could do."

For Abrams, the appeal of the sport is not just its physical demands—though she loves that, too—it's also the challenge of mastering not one, but three sports.

"You're not just running every single day and trying to improve on running," she says. "You have to improve on three different sports. It's a mental challenge to stay motivated."

Like Tamson and Weidenmiller, Abrams works out six to seven days a week. She also holds down a full-time job.

"It's amazing, the triathletes in Southwest Florida," she says. "They train for triathlons but they still have a life. Cailin is a mom of three. Karen is a coach. I'm head of two fitness facilities with a lot of employees."

How are these superwomen able to do it? A lot of it has to do with the support they receive from friends, family and coworkers. And it helps that they surround themselves with a group of similarly motivated, good-spirited fellow triathletes. More than anything, it comes down to a relentless commitment to their goals.

"This is our passion," Abrams says, "and everyone sees that."



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