

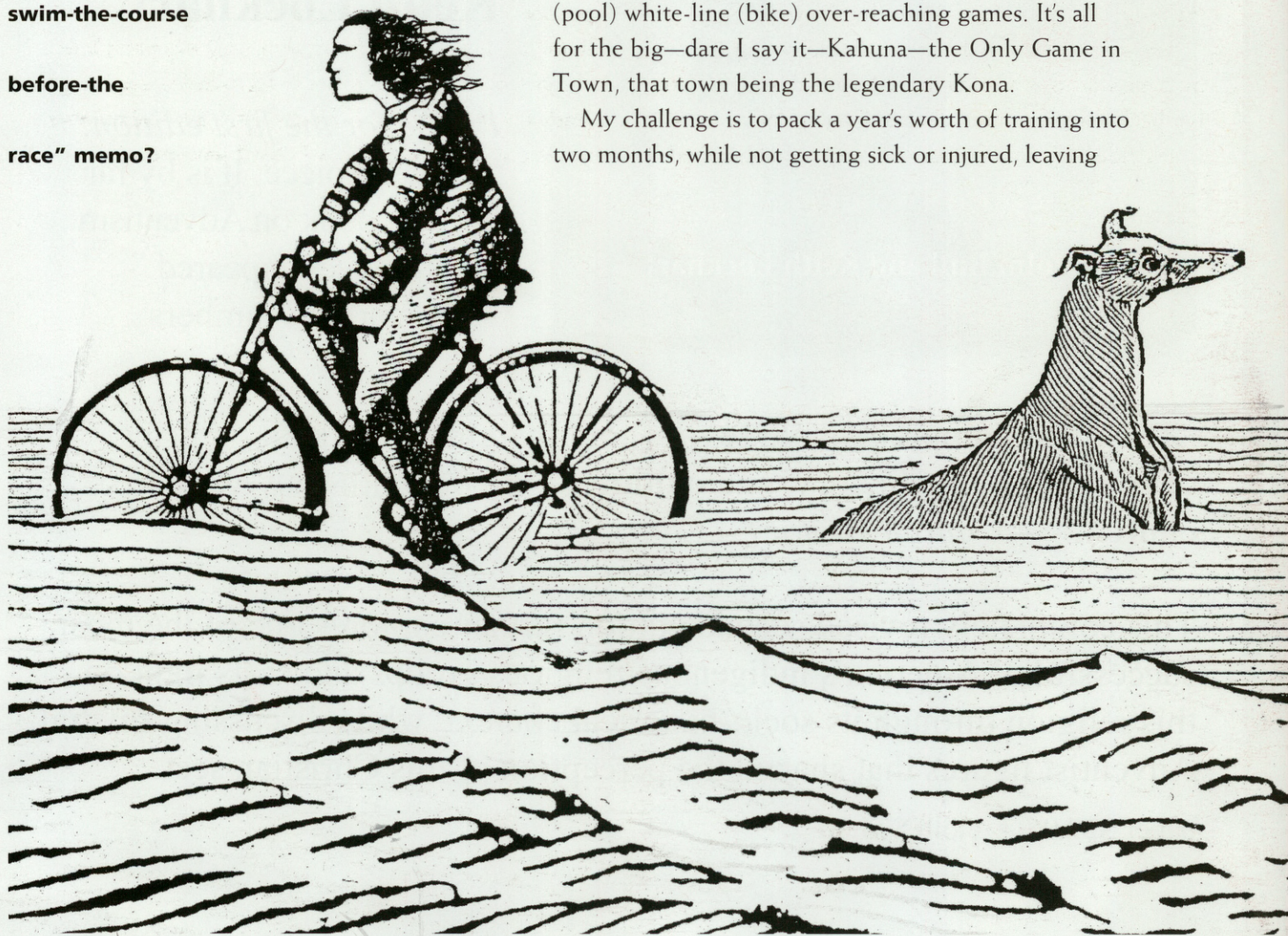
Dreams Come True in (Black and) Blue Hawaii

A Sophomore Stab at 140.6 | BY CAROL DAVENPORT

**Am I the only
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get the "all-
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swim-the-course
before-the
race" memo?**

In the "be-careful-what-you-wish-for" department, I snagged a Hawaii slot at Vineman this past summer. It's the culmination of every triathlete's dream—not the race, but the two-word boast: "I qualified." Once the delirium wears off, reality, like a bad hangover, sets in. It's a very short trip from "I qualified, yippee!" to "I qualified—I don't feel so good." Let the games begin: the mind games, the bike upgrade games, the black-line (pool) white-line (bike) over-reaching games. It's all for the big—dare I say it—Kahuna—the Only Game in Town, that town being the legendary Kona.

My challenge is to pack a year's worth of training into two months, while not getting sick or injured, leaving



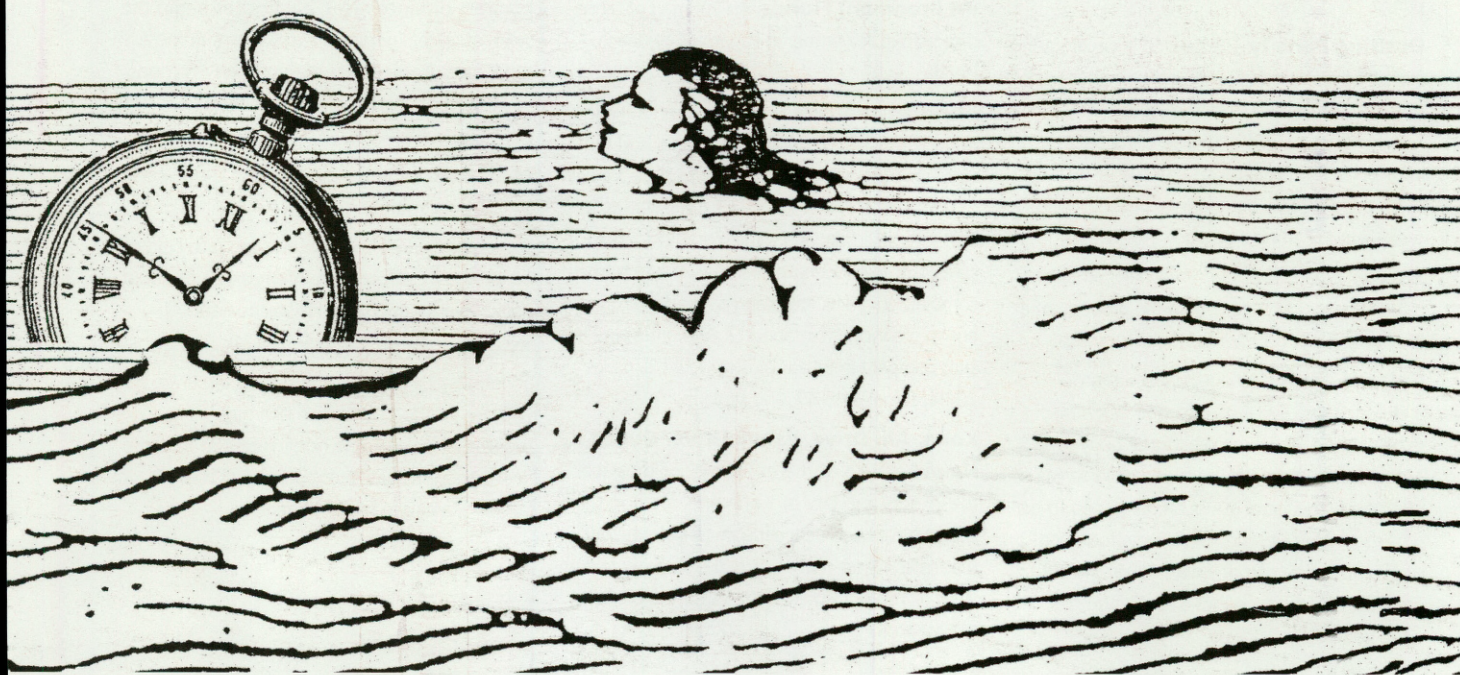
HEALTH AND FITNESS

enough time to arrive at the start line nicely tapered, muscles packed with fuel, head comfortably numb, and family still intact. I exude quiet confidence as I exit my hotel the first morning in Kona. I am an Ironman athlete.

I saunter across Alii Drive for my morning coffee and run into Faris Al-Sultan. Quiet confidence sputters, stalls, nosedives. "I'm doomed. Who am I kidding? I don't belong here." As I retreat to my hotel, I spy Lori Bowden pushing a baby carriage down the sidewalk. Sure, she's fifteen years younger than I am, but knowing she could beat me with that stroller, baby included, strapped to her back intensifies my (advanced) age-group insecurities.

I wander down to the pier and see several hundred

whippet-thin athletes swimming along the buoys in the cove. Am I the only one who didn't get the "all-athletes must-swim-the-course-before-the-race" memo? Well, no. The ones who aren't in the water are whizzing through town atop their carbon monocoques in full wind-tunnel regalia, like college sophomores pulling all-nighters, cramming for that last final exam. The right side of my brain assures me that these guys are nuts, just wasting precious energy and inviting a last-minute crash or injury. But the left side, already unnerved by the complete absence of body fat in Kona, is ascendant, suggesting that readiness for this race is directly related to the number of tattoos one has on one's body. I have none.



Nevertheless, I'm in Kona—a ramshackle, beachy village where everything is body temperature—the air, the wind, the sea, the Gatorade sponsors are handing out. What's not to like? This being my second Ironman, I navigate the registration process more smoothly than the first. I know I'm going to be weighed, I know I'm going to get more bags for clothing and transitions than I know what to do with, I know to leave an extra space in my ID wristband so that gangrene doesn't set in until after the race. Registration behind me, I enter the temple of the god M-dot, and leave him many alms in exchange for most anything with his

logo embroidered on it.

The only race-prep I'm eager to do is to drive the bike course, the famed Queen Kaahumanu (or Queen K) Highway. So my husband and I set out across the lava fields, and up to Hawi, the turnaround, where the terrain turns from moonscape to jungle, palm trees hunching in ominously fierce winds. Driving back, I have Al Trautwig's purpley narration about Madame Pele looping through my head, so we stop and leave my initials in white coral in the lava, hoping to create good jujū with the wind gods. Having tied off all the supernatural loose ends, we head to the brewery for a burger and a tall drink.

Friday afternoon, the day before the race, I check in my bike and transition bags. I've seen this setup on television dozens of times, the hanging bags, the pros running up the ramp from the swim, grabbing their bags, and heading off for their four-hour bike ride. It looks coolly choreographed, made for TV. I'm dizzy with fear that I'll flub my moment—I'll grab the wrong bag, I'll wander lost in the ocean of bikes, I'll knock over Ricky Hoyt's wheelchair—all the nightmare slo-mo scenarios that have kept me awake for the past few weeks. Nevertheless, I drop off my bike, remove the computer in case it

Glossary

140.6 The total distance in miles of an Ironman race.

Body Marking A convention of triathlons; all athletes are marked on their arms and their calves with their race number and age.

Carbon Monocoques Super-duper high-end time-trial bikes. Most triathletes are gearheads and spend more money on a bike than some people do on cars.

Drafting Penalty The rules of Ironman racing state that drafting (riding close to another rider) is illegal, and there are marshals on the course who look for drafting and issue time penalties for infractions. It is well-known that the faster men often draft in races despite the rules, believing that it's not drafting if you don't get caught.

Energy Lab Part of the run course, around miles fifteen to eighteen, is on the property of a local power plant known as the Energy Lab.

Gels Nutrition is a serious concern in an endurance race, because of the huge caloric expenditure and the inability of the body to accept much in the way of food. A whole line of nutritional stopgaps have been developed to get calories in without much digestive effort. One such product is a carbohydrate gel, a one hundred-calorie substance that is easily ingested while competing.

Hand Cycles Challenged athletes of all types compete in the Hawaiian Ironman. Those who are paralyzed from the waist down can do the "run" in a hand cycle, a hand-powered wheelchair.

Hawaiian Ironman This particular race is the World Championship, and virtually all competitors must have won their division or age group in any of a series of races designated as qualifiers; all are of full- or half-ironman distances during the current triathlon season.

IM (Ironman) Florida An Ironman distance race held in November in Panama City Beach, Florida.

Ironman Triathlon A triathlon is an athletic event comprised of swimming, biking, and running. An Ironman distance triathlon is the longest of triathlons and consists of a 2.4 mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a full marathon, 26.2 miles. Competitors have 17 hours in which to complete the race. Pro men can do it in around 8 hours; pro women in about 9. Age group triathletes compete in 5-year divisions, that is, males 30-34, females 45-49, and so forth.

Kona, Alii Drive, Palani Drive, Queen K, Hawi Because of the exclusivity of the race, the streets and city of Kona and the Ironman course have become legendary to all long-course triathletes. These names carry the same mystique as Hopkinton or Boylston Street for the Boston Marathon.

Last-Minute Training Conventional wisdom is that trying to squeeze in last minute training is a bad idea for such a long race. However, most triathletes are Type-As who have too much nervous energy and end up doing workouts that will probably only tire them before the race.

Madame Pele Hawaiian goddess of fire, said to be the spirit in the lava and volcanoes that abound on the island.

Mass Starts, Wave Starts The swim is the first event in triathlon. In some races, mostly Ironman distance races, all athletes begin the swim at once, known as a mass start. In most other races, competitors are launched in groups, or "waves," generally as age groups, and at several-minute intervals.

M-Dot This is the famous Ironman Logo, a giant letter M with a dot on top.

Vineman A half-Ironman distance race held in Santa Rosa, California, in July. It is one of about twenty-eight designated Hawaii qualifiers.

"You are an Ironman" Every finisher is announced by name as she crosses the finish line with the words "You are an Ironman." I have found that only people not involved in triathlon find this sexist. Triathletes consider all finishers Ironmen, and gender is not an issue.

rains overnight, and treat myself to my third Thai meal in as many days, my hometown Santa Fe, New Mexico, being a town that boasts many fine restaurants, none of them Thai.

The eerie dark of race morning is a scene from *Night of the Living Dead*. Seventeen hundred zombies march silently toward the body-marking area to be tagged and sorted before they hurl themselves, lemming-like, into the sea. I have always thought the big-stamp numbers of this race were terminally cool. My own race number is an anagram of my home address, and I immediately stand in the wrong line—my street address number—for stamping. The ladies of perpetual body marking expect a certain amount of brain fade from us, and they show me to the correct line, where I am proudly emblazoned with my six-inch numbers that reach from my shoulder to my elbow.

Race legend Irongent Bill Bell shows me to my bike, and I am in the midst of it—Natascha Badmann conferencing with her coach, Michellie Jones, a tower of fuchsia, hunching over her bike. I hear German, Japanese, Aussie, French. But no matter the language or ranking, we are all the same—captives in porta-john hell. Our final ablutions done, we head out to a line of surfboards and inflatable sponsor logos—where we will tread water while various national anthems, conch shell blasts, and Hawaiian folk songs are sung. Then we'll tread water for another fifteen minutes after the pros are launched.

I've always preferred mass starts to wave starts because I take a drubbing only for the first ten minutes, as opposed to every ten minutes in wave

starts. I actually escape unscathed during the start, but am inexplicably clobbered about a half-hour into the swim, almost losing my goggles in the process. How someone can come upon a lone swimmer in crystal water and just slam into her, I'll never know. But despite that setback, the first half of the swim goes quickly. I circle around the committee boat and head for home.

The second half, I soon discover, resembles an Endless Pool treadmill—take ten strokes, look up, take another ten, look up—no apparent forward motion. I learn afterward that a current going out to sea has dragged down everyone's times, although I am perfectly happy with mine, being several minutes faster than my IM Florida swim. I also learn that several swimmers have been stung by jellyfish—all of them, I assume, ahead of me—the jellyfish are all stung out by the time I get to shore.

On land again, I head to transition, where a sister of merciful bag handlers has already procured my bike bag—I pull on my socks, hit the porta-john, head out on an AstroTurf labyrinth, grab my bike, and begin the longest part of my day. As I hop on my bike, I notice a gray piece of plastic where my bike computer should be. I removed the computer last night, threw it in my swim bag, and promptly forgot about it this morning.

I spend a few seconds berating myself for such a stupid mistake, but then quickly remind myself that positivity is what is going to make or break my day. No amount of self-flagellation will conjure my computer, so I might as well get on with it. I still have my watch, and the five-



Biking in the Lava Fields of the Queen K Highway; running down Alii Drive; finish!

mile markers on the course will help me approximate my speed—If I pass through a five-mile mark in fifteen minutes, I'm going twenty miles per hour. If it takes me twenty minutes, fifteen miles per hour. Sadly, it appears I'll be going at the latter rate.

Around twenty miles into the ride, it begins to rain, at times heavily. My Pollyana-for-the-day self assures me the rain will keep me cool. I remove my sunglasses—all this coolness is approaching torrential. Eventually the rain stops, and the heat begins. Well, Pollyana says, at least it's not windy. About thirty miles into my ride I see Stormin' Normann Stadler, heading back to town. The second man back appears to be in a different zip code. After them, the familiar packs of men appear. As a back-of-the-packer who lives in abject fear of incurring a drafting penalty on the lone septuagenarian ahead of me, I am awestruck by the peletons of riders who routinely flout the rules of their sport with such impunity.

The Queen K ends, I turn left and then up a long fifteen miles or so to Hawi. Here's where the wind kicks up along with the road. It's a tough grind, but soon (well, more like an hour) I'm turned around and headed back to Kona. As with my first Ironman, I have lost my appetite halfway through the bike. I learned that gels will get me through, and I manage to suck one down every half-hour. I'm considerably slower than I was in Panama City, but other than that I'm in pretty good shape as I head out to run. I know I'm slower

because in Florida I got to listen to the announcer calling in the male finishers as I began my run; this time it's the female finishers. Ah well, at least it's still daylight.

I'm so happy to have my feet on the ground, my first couple miles down Alii are at a pretty good clip. But soon enough, I'm making the devil's deal with the run-to-the-aid-station bargain, which soon turns into run-to-the-next-traffic-cone, walk, run-to-the-cone, walk. Darkness falls around mile ten on the run-up on the Queen K, where the complete absence of light makes running both easier and more precarious. Easier because without any land markers, I forget how much I have left to run and am able to amble for several minutes at a time without stopping. More difficult because without any visual cues, I just hope the road is even and I don't step into a pothole or uneven surface. Even with the glow sticks we now wear, I almost crash head-on into a hand cycle heading the other way.

Down in the Energy Lab, Peter Reid offers me water. In my advanced state of Ironman delirium, I don't recognize him until someone shouts "Hey, Peter Reid just handed you water; the least you could do is run!" I glance back and instantly make out the lanky body of the three-time world champion, and pause to berate myself for (a) not appreciating the remarkable volunteer work he's doing, and (b) being so dreadful at this race. To add insult to injury, the giant inflatable Ford Logo tunnel is being knocked down for the night. The crew is going home. Ugh.

But once I'm out of the Energy

Lab and back onto Queen K, I can smell the barn. I make out a faint glow of street lights in the distance. My running picks up. As with the Boston Marathon, where one can begin to hear the din of the cheering Wellesley girls a half-mile before the coed gauntlet appears, the energy of the crowds two miles away pulls me like a magnet. Once onto Palani, an ear-to-ear smile takes over my face. The finish I've dreamed about is happening—onto Alii and headed for my "You are an Ironman" moment. I elbow past a guy who's stopped to pick up his two kids as he finishes, I pump my fists as if I'd just done the race in nine hours, and savor the indescribable joy of accomplishing a dream I once never thought possible.

My first Ironman, I assured my husband, would be my last. Ironman Hawaii, of course, is always an exception—it's the world championship, after all. But I caught him saying to me during race week, "if you do this again, we can... (fill in the blank—try a different restaurant, go snorkeling, skip the car rental)... whatever. All I heard was that he could tolerate another year in which I figure out how to do this again. I'm on board. Yippee! I don't feel so good. ■

Carol Davenport has been a competitive triathlete for ten years and a competitive runner for thirty. She's a veteran of forty marathons, including thirteen Boston Marathons. She was a medical librarian at Loma Linda University for several years and currently lives with her husband, Donald Davenport, in Santa Fe, New Mexico.