



Three Times The Fun

A GROWING INTEREST IN TRIATHLONS IS FILLING THE ROSTERS FOR EVEN THE MOST GRUELING EVENTS IN THE OLD NORTH STATE.

Until a twist of fate — or actually of his ankle — John Gioffre seemed an unlikely triathlon addict. As the chief finance officer at a publicly traded company in Charlotte, Gioffre had a successful life that included zero interest in sports. Then a freak foot injury led him to the stationary bikes at a local gym where he met a guy with wet hair. The man was a triathlete who was hitting the pool before the pedals.

The new acquaintance encouraged Gioffre to try a race, waving off the then-57-year-old's concern that he hadn't swum more than 25 yards or ridden a bike more than a block in 40-plus years.

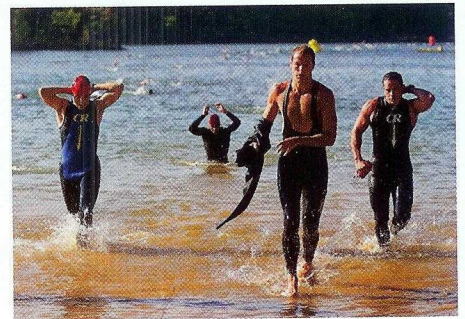
By Sam Scott

Seven years later, and now retired, Gioffre has more than 50 races under his belt, including numerous finishes at the top of his age group, thanks to an urge to win that surprised even him. "I didn't realize how competitive I was," says Gioffre, who turns 65 this summer and still competes. "I just got really hooked on it."

Gioffre's journey is a variation on an increasingly common story. Across the country, people are turning to triathlons for competition, camaraderie, or just variety, often with little history in one or all of the sport's three disciplines — swimming, biking, and running. In the past 10 years, USA Triathlon (USAT), the sport's national sanctioning body, has seen membership explode from 16,000 to more than 100,000, a surge that captures just a fraction of the numbers who participate on a more casual basis.



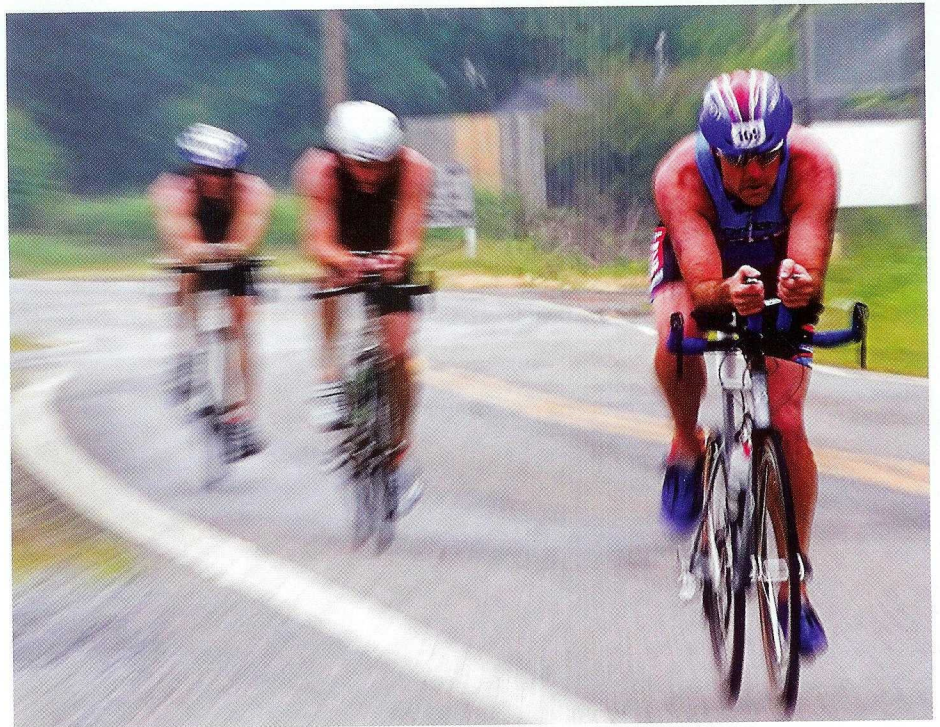
Swimming in open water is often the most grueling leg of a multi-sport race.



Few places better

With the eighth most USAT members, North Carolina has shared in that growth. In fact, if triathlons are your game, few places are better for participating in the sport. North Carolina hosts dozens of races, from the heights of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the glassiness of White Lake and the sands of Kure Beach. It also has the oldest triathlon on the East Coast, the Wilmington YMCA Triathlon in September.

This year, about 1,300 racers are expected to participate in the 30-year-old port city event that started with about 150, says Karl Sutter, the first race director and second-place overall finisher (first place in his age group) that year. Race distances vary from sprints — the sport's shortest, most popular category — up to the newest addition to the North Carolina circuit,



Iron-distance competitors will complete 2.4 miles of swimming and 112 miles of bike riding before beginning a 26.2-mile marathon.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KASEY HINE

the grueling iron-distance race, which is inspired by the Ironman series.

In November, 500 racers from across the country will gather in Wrightsville Beach for the inaugural Beach2Battleship iron-distance triathlon, one of only about a dozen races of such distance in the country.

Racers will face a 2.4-mile swim in the Intracoastal Waterway, a 112-mile bike ride through four counties, and finally a full marathon of 26.2 miles. Even the best racers will take more than eight hours to reach the finish line. The slowest have a cutoff of 17 hours to join them.

It's an elite event that organizers expected would take months to fill. Instead, all slots were gone in little more than two weeks, says Bill Scott, the head of Set Up Events, which organizes most Tar Heel races.

"I would have been tickled to death if we'd gotten 400 people by the time the race came around," says Scott, who runs his company from an office in Kure Beach in New Hanover County. "We had absolutely no idea what was going to happen."

In recent years, Scott has grown accustomed to his most popular races filling up in the blink of an eye. A few years back, he changed the opening of registration from midnight on New Year's Eve to later in January in response to complaints. People had to choose between ringing in the New Year or sitting by their computers to assure themselves spots in the White Lake, Azalea, and Lake Norman races.

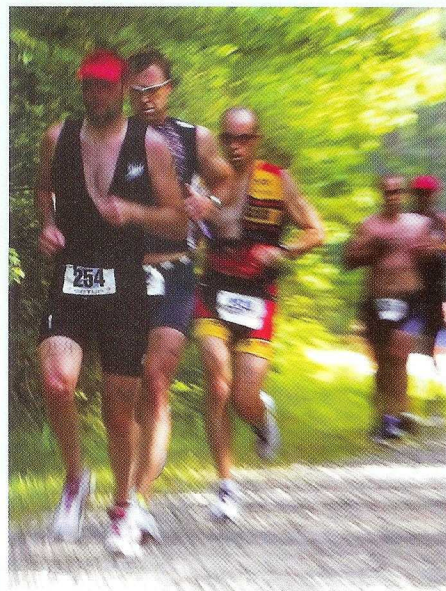
Health and competition

The average age of 39 reflects that, even at its upper levels, triathlons attract a varied crowd. Ken Schettig, for one, is perhaps an even less likely triathlete than Gioffre.

A Wilmington broadcast engineer, Schettig started his athletic career the way many others' end — with a heart attack, in his case at age 51. The doctors told him he would've died if he hadn't

gone to the hospital with heartburn — that turned out to be 98-percent blockage of an artery. Schettig's doctor promised to wean him off his cocktail of medicines if he did a triathlon.

In the three years since, Schettig has competed in a dozen triathlons, leading up to November's Beach2Battleship. He doesn't set any records, but the



racing and daily training has improved everything from his temper to his focus. "It really doesn't bother me if I finish last as long as I get it done," he says. "I intend to do it 'til I fall over."

Still, such an appetite for endurance is the exception. Most participants focus on the shorter sprints, which even most newcomers can handle with several months of training. Typically, they consist of a half-mile swim, a 12.4-mile bike ride, and a 3.1-mile run.

The top finishers are awe-inspiring athletes, but the sprints fill out with all shapes and sizes. "You don't have to be



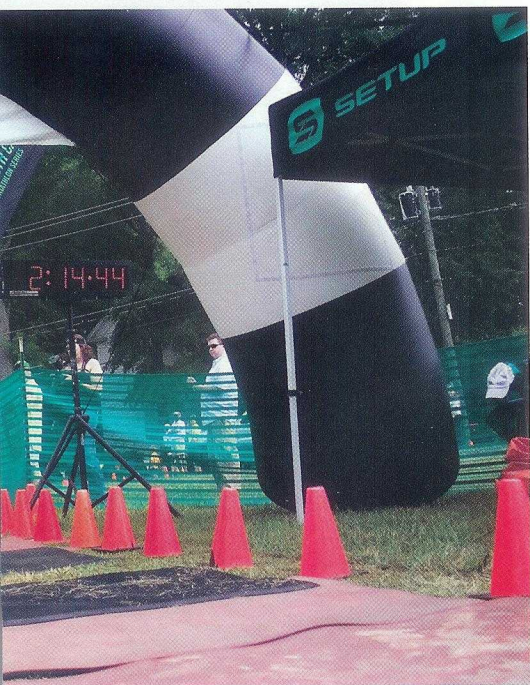
From mountain climbs along the Blue Ridge to swims in the Atlantic, North Carolina hosts dozens of triathlons each year.

an Olympic athlete," Gus Gustafson said after both he and girlfriend, Colleen Strickland, finished the White Lake Sprint in Bladen County on May 4. "I'm a basketball player; I can't swim."

Strickland, a computer programmer in Raleigh in her late 40s, averages two triathlons a year, which gives her the incentive to work out the remainder of the calendar. About 34 percent of triathletes are women, according to Set Up's numbers. Strickland turned to the sport three years ago after watching her sister participate.

Swimming is the biggest mental hurdle to entry. A few laps in a pool can be exhausting if you're rusty. Open water, like lakes and the ocean, only makes it tougher.

Maggi Atkins, for example, was a fairly accomplished runner, having started in college and worked her way up to marathons. But the 36-year-old marketing professional wanted something kinder on her body. "You just can't keep running marathons over and over," she says. "Biking and swimming are just as challenging yet not as jarring."



She started biking by herself, then more recently turned to swimming. She took one lesson and began practicing with a friend for the five months prior to the White Lake race.

The lake's clear, calm water made for a great first race, although swimming was still the hardest of the three legs. A bundle of nerves, she found it hard to find a rhythm but got comfortable as the race progressed. She finished in 1 hour, 45 minutes.

"You feel like you really accomplished something," she says. "Having had no background in it, especially in swimming, I felt really strong."

Room to grow


How long newcomers will continue to flock to the sport is a guess. Scott looks for signs of flagging demand, but each year it's growing, even in a sluggish economy. People value triathlons enough to keep them in the budget, he says.

The sport has seen boom times before, says Cid Cardoso Jr., who founded Inside-Out Sports in Raleigh in 1993 as one of the first businesses in the state to focus on triathlons. He's a committed triathlete who

will do his 20th Ironman this year and considers biking 145 miles from Cary to Wilmington as part of his favorite workout.

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Cardoso says, the sport surged in popularity, attracting corporate sponsors and racers before deflating. But this time, the sport's growth has been more steady and seems to have deeper roots with better organization.

If his own family is any measure, the future is bright: His parents followed him into the sport, learning to swim in their 50s. They've now completed four Ironman races. And last year, three generations of his family participated in the Wilmington YMCA Triathlon as a relay: Cardoso swam, his mother biked, and his 9-year-old daughter ran.

"That was a big thing for my girl," he says. And in a way, so it was for triathlons. 

Award-winning writer Sam Scott lives in Wilmington.