

Unimaginable distance

Less than a year after back surgery, local man competes in triathlon

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Curtis Campbell
*Wilmington Family YMCA
Triathlon participant who
could barely walk in February*

By Rachel George
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WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH

In April, this goal seemed ludicrous. Finish a triathlon? Less than a year after having major back surgery? Compete again seven months after being bedridden?

Saturday, that goal seemed less than ludicrous – remarkable, perhaps – for Curtis Campbell. The 55-year-old was one of more than 1,200 people competing in the 29th annual Wilmington Family YMCA Triathlon, finishing the race 10 months after disc surgery gave him an infection that left him bedridden for three months.

“I decided to set a ridiculous goal, which was to do a triathlon at the end of September,” he said. “I said if I could do that, I would just feel like I had come back. So it became a physical and spiritual quest in a way.

“I set a goal,” he added, “and I said if I reach

that goal it would just be a wonderful accomplishment. I just feel great.”

Campbell should, after what it took him to get there. After he had surgery in December to remove part of a disc in his lower back, a disc got infected, and he was ordered to lie still in bed for three months.

For someone who has done about six triathlons and another half dozen road races during the past six years, that was difficult.

“It was kind of a humbling experience to be flat on your back and not be able to do things you think you should be able to do,” Campbell said. “It made me appreciate every little improvement every day.”

It was tough on his family as well. His wife, Lori, and his stepdaughter, Genna Brooks, had to give him an IV of antibiotics twice a day. Helping him from one room to another became a 20-minute chore.

“It was about four months that he was completely out of it,” Lori said.



SEE TRIATHLON | 3C

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TRIATHLON

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Once Campbell could get out of bed again, he started setting other goals. He got back to preaching at his church, Wesleyan Chapel UMC. He started using a walker, then a cane. Each week and month he set a training benchmark for himself. He started working out at the YMCA five times a week, walking on the treadmill at first and taking a spinning class, doing a little more each time.

To Lori, a personal trainer, it didn't seem possible that he could recover so quickly. But she credits his motivation and determination for that.

"I thought he was rushing it a bit," she said. "It's amazing to see the miracle that God has done for him to be able to be back at this point. In February of this year, I would have said no way. He couldn't even get up off the bed. I wouldn't have estimated that he would have been anywhere near this far along in September."

Campbell finished the race in about 1 hour, 41 minutes, about eight minutes slower than his normal pace. For him, that was anything but disappointing.

"I really didn't have a time goal," he said. "I just wanted to finish and not be last. ... I took it pretty easy. I didn't push myself really hard, and it sort of paid off in the end."

And so did setting that goal, one that Campbell showed Saturday was anything but ridiculous.

WISTHOFF WINS

Wilmington's Matt Wisthoff won the triathlon, finishing in 1:03:23. A former UNCW swimmer, the 22-year-old competed in his fifth triathlon of the year Saturday and has top-three finishes in four of those events.

"Going in, I knew I could win it," Wisthoff said. "I felt real strong all season. I knew it was going to be tough. There's a lot of strong guys that come to town for this race. I had a great swim, had a pretty good bike and then I just felt great on the run."

'GO HARD, BUT SMILE'

A group of twenty-somethings provided entertainment with their choice of race apparel. Seven participants competed in Pirate costumes, with wigs, hooks and swords. Crisp McDonald has been dressing



STAFF PHOTO | MATT BORN

Lots of different contestants showed up at the starting line of the 29th Annual Wilmington Family YMCA Triathlon in Wrightsville Beach on Saturday. Some participants dressed up as Pirates, but others were all business.

Above, swimmers get out of the water and head for their bikes. Below, contestants head back to the transition area to ditch the bikes and start the run.

in costume the past six years of the triathlon, and last year convinced his friends to do it as WCW wrestlers.

McDonald's past costumes include a three-piece suit, a Twinkie costume and Hooters outfit.

"It said Twinkie Race Team, and on the back it said, 'Dude, you're getting beat by a Twinkie,'" the 26-year-old McDonald said. "So as I ran past people, they would laugh at my costume as I was beside them and after I passed them, they were like, 'Grrr.'"

The group still isn't sure what costumes will be chosen for next year, but so far the candidates are Superheroes, Elvises or furniture.

"People forget that you come out here and do it for fun," McDonald said. "Go hard, but smile."

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Race organizer Gray Fore said no one was seriously injured during the race. Of the 1,200 who signed up for it, 965 finished the race: a 1,500-meter swim, 12.4-mile bike and 3.1-mile run.

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