

Exploring the Motives, Experiences, and Transformations  
of Non-Professional IRONMAN Athletes

by

T. Michael Liddell

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Charles Claiborn, Chair  
Eric Margolis  
Richard Kinnier

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the motivation and persistence factors for non-professional athletes who decided after the age of 40 to begin training for an IRONMAN distance triathlon. The qualitative methodology of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used in conceptualizing and implementing the research. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 individuals in the Southwest region of the United States. Data was coded in accordance with grounded theory methods. Motivation themes that emerged from the data centered around either initiating training for triathlon as an approach toward a specific goal or outcome, or beginning triathlon as a way to cope with personal difficulties. Obstacles to motivation also emerged, such as finances and time, injury, fear and doubt, and interpersonal difficulties. Persistence themes emerged that centered around either taking active steps to help continue training and relying on internal traits or characteristics to promote persistence. Data are discussed in terms of how these individuals adopt triathlon as a part of their lifestyle and identity, and how they come to persist in training beyond IRONMAN.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my wife Amber—You have been with me every step of the way. I could never have done this without your love and support. I also dedicate this to Chuck—I feel deeply honored and privileged to be your final advisee. Thank you for helping me see that I can research things I enjoy.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The sport of triathlon, while relatively new, has grown in popularity at an exponential rate over the last decade (Tribe Group, 2009). It draws from both the male and female populations, of all body types and sizes. Events take place regularly worldwide, and participants pay their own expenses in order to participate (Lamont, Kennelly, & Wilson, 2012). However, triathlon is difficult, and much of that difficulty comes not just from the event itself, but from the long-term training commitment it requires (Lamont & Kennelly, 2011). Further, the vast majority of the participants are non-professionals, who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Most are above the age of 30, having started in their late twenties (Tribe Group, 2009). Yet many of these same individuals continue on to competition in longer and more extreme distances—even to that of the IRONMAN. The current study investigates the motivation and persistence factors of these individuals, utilizing qualitative research methodology, specifically that of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory borrows from ethnographic research—it is a “bottom-up” approach, one that requires the researcher to observe and collect data without having consulted the relevant literature beforehand, in order to get to the raw experiences of the subjects themselves without undue influence of external sources (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In grounded theory, it is important to consider the role of the researcher, and his or her impact on the study. Therefore, in order to better understand the individuals involved in the study, as well as the role and experience of the researcher, the following section will include a personal narrative from the researcher, describing his own

experience with triathlon and triathlon training. It will include important definitions as well as an explanation of triathlon events and related training. It will conclude with an explication of the rationale and research questions for the current study.

### **My Own Experience**

A couple of years ago, my wife and I were visiting family over the holiday break. My older sister, who had been into long-distance running for some time previously, informed me that my oldest brother had decided to train for and participate in a sprint triathlon, and that in solidarity, she had decided to enter the same event. Like most Americans, I had been contemplating adopting some cliché, unattainable physical fitness goals for my New Year's resolutions, fully intending to give it my best, half-hearted effort. I was not overweight; I just didn't care much for exercise. Like everyone else, I made my resolutions because it was "a good thing to do," and physical fitness has ever been growing in the public awareness. My sister, hearing this, suggested that I enter the triathlon as well. The required training wouldn't be insurmountable, and it would add some structure and purpose to my workouts, as well as some motivation to follow through. I had seen a triathlon before—earlier in the year my wife's sister had completed *Escape from Alcatraz*, a well-known event San Francisco, and we had gone to cheer her on. It was quite inspiring to watch, and I began to imagine myself performing a similar undertaking. This appealed to me somewhat, and on a whim, my wife and I decided to give it a try.

A triathlon consists of three consecutive parts, or "legs"—swimming, biking, and running, typically completed in that order. Each leg takes place immediately after the previous one, with only a short transition time between them for drying off, donning

running shoes, etc. Leg distances vary depending on the classification of the race (See Table 1). A sprint distance triathlon typically is the shortest, consisting of a 750-meter swim leg, a 12.1-mile bike ride, and a 3.1-mile run. The Olympic distance features a 1.5-kilometer swim, a 25-mile bike, and a 6.2-mile run. The half IRONMAN, a long-distance event, is a 2-kilometer swim, a 56-mile bike, and a 13.2-mile run. Lastly, the pinnacle of ultra-distance triathlon events—the IRONMAN – is made up of a 4-kilometer swim, a 112-125 mile bike, and a 26.4-mile run. It should be noted that the only difference between IRONMAN and other distance events is length, IRONMAN is a trademarked event and brand, and is therefore referred to in all capital letters.

Table 1

*Typical Event Distances in Triathlon* (adapted from USA Triathlon, 2013a)

Distance	Swim	Bike	Run
Sprint (short)	750 m	12.5 mi	3.1 mi
Olympic (Intermediate)	1500 m	25 mi	6.2 mi
Half IRONMAN (long)	1900 m	56 mi	13.1 mi
IRONMAN (ultra)	3900 m	112 mi	26.2 mi

While triathlon race distances usually follow these standard lengths other variables such as location can affect the layout and even difficulty of a course. For instance, a triathlon with a swim leg in the ocean (versus a lake, or a pool swim) is likely to have waves or salt water, adding to the difficulty. Similarly, a bike or run course may go through a mountain pass or a hilly trail, which introduces elevation gain or steep climbs, making the leg much more difficult. Weather can also be an issue. Courses in

areas of intense heat can affect participants via early fatigue or dehydration, while courses in cold climates can also affect race performance. A flat may become slow and difficult if it is located in an area prone to windy weather.

Completing a sprint distance triathlon can take anywhere from around 45 minutes (for an elite athlete) to around three hours. Olympic distances can take from just under two hours to up to five. Half and full IRONMAN distances typically take most of a day to complete. For the bike distance alone on a half-IRONMAN race, an average athlete riding in relatively flat and neutral-weather conditions can take up to five hours. For such races, event officials usually employ pre-determined time cut-offs for each leg. If a participant does not make the cut-off, he or she is collected by race “sweepers”—event officials who follow behind the racing group to account for registered athletes that fall behind the required times.

Being relatively new to triathlon (or long-term, consistent exercise, for that matter), it became requisite for me to assess my capability for participation. My wife and I were contemplating only a Sprint—the shortest of the triathlon distances—and I was comfortable enough with the idea of running three miles. However, I was somewhat concerned by the fact that I had not set foot in a pool in probably a decade, and I had not been on a bike since my failed paper route experiment as a young boy. Furthermore, I had not even considered the costs of training—neither my wife nor I owned a bike, we needed running shoes and swimming gear, proper athletic clothing, and adequate gym time (not to mention race registration fees)—and we were living on meager graduate student stipends. Nonetheless, we pressed on, undaunted. We figured that in order to make ourselves actually go through with it, we’d have to approach it “old school”—burn

our boats to prevent return. We immediately registered (and paid for) the race. We went to the local discount sporting goods store for basic supplies, and we spent our free time over the next few days scouring Craigslist for the best used road bikes that grad student money could buy. With those obstacles out of the way, there was no turning back.

Having both registered for our event and procured the requisite necessities, we were ready to begin training. The goal for endurance training is to make sure that one can keep up sustained exercise for the amount of time it takes to complete an event. For example, if an individual feels that it will take around an hour to complete a sprint triathlon, then that same person should make sure that they can either run, bike, or swim continually for one hour. If they find that difficult, then that individual can increase their endurance by following a regimen that systematically builds their aerobic “base” (their base level of stamina/capacity, or fitness) by adding “volume” (more distance per workout) week by week. Similarly, if a person wants to increase speed and improve average times, that person can follow a regimen that includes specific workouts such as high intensity/low intensity intervals, or other such “speed work.”

Training for longer distances typically requires much more time, effort, and planning. Individuals training for long distances often have to complete two (or more) different workouts per day, such as a swim in the morning, followed by a bike ride in the afternoon/evening, both of which possibly requiring more than an hour to complete. A typical schedule for an olympic distance triathlete working on his or her speed might be as follows: A 2500-meter swim workout that focuses on drills and technique in the morning, followed by a light, 4-mile recovery run in the evening on Monday; an hour-long, high-intensity speed interval bike ride on Tuesday; Another 2500-meter morning

drill swim and an 7-10 mile “tempo” (sustained-pace over distance) run in the evening;  
 Another high-intensity bike session on Thursday; A long, sustained, endurance swim

Table 2

*Sample of a weekly workout schedule for an individual training for an IRONMAN distance triathlon.*

Monday	Long swim (approx. 1 hour duration/3000 meters), focus on drills/technique, med. intensity  Interval/Power training bike ride (~1 hour/20 miles), high intensity
Tuesday	Tempo bike ride with intervals (~2 hours/38-40 miles), moderate intensity  Recovery run (5-6 miles), low intensity  30-60 min weight/core training (optional)
Wednesday	Long swim (~1 hour duration/3000 meters), focus on speed, high intensity  Short run (7+ miles), low-med. intensity
Thursday	Short ride with intervals (~1.5 hours/30 miles), med-high intensity  30-60 min weight/core training (optional)
Friday	Long swim (~1 hour duration/3000 meters), practice race conditions, med. Intensity
Saturday	Long ride (~5.5-6.5 hours/115 miles), practice race conditions, low intensity
Sunday	Brick workout (workouts follow each other without break):  Short bike ride (~30 minutes/9 miles), low intensity  Long run (~2 hours/16+ miles), low intensity

(2500 meters or more) on Friday; A “brick” (combination of two or more workouts that follow immediately after each other) workout consisting of a long recovery bike ride (50

or more miles) and a 3-mile run on Saturday; And a 10-mile recovery ride followed by a 7-10 mile tempo run on Sunday. Long distance triathletes (half and full IRONMAN) require even more training time (see Table 2), comparable to that of a part-time job (or more). Such athletes train up to three or more hours per day, with weekly recovery bike rides that can exceed 100 miles per session, or 15 miles when running.

Individuals that train for triathlon or endurance sports also have to be wary of injury. Because of the sheer volume of running required by long-distance training, joint injury in the legs and feet are a significant risk. When cycling, wrecks or other accidents may occur that can cause injury. Because of the amount of time and knowledge required to build a plan that both addresses base and improvement over time, and to help adjust plans should injury occur, it is not uncommon for long-distance triathletes to hire a professional coach to come up with a customized speed and base-building workout regimen, tailored to the individual's goals, current health/injuries, and performance capabilities.

My wife found a free training schedule for virgin triathletes (like ourselves) online, and we decided to follow it to the letter. Our workout program focused on developing the base necessary for a complete newcomer to complete a sprint triathlon. It involved 30-90 minutes of exercise per day, alternating between swimming, biking, and running, with a bike/run brick every Saturday, for the 10 weeks leading up to the race. Each week we increased our volume by 10 percent, so that by about half way through, our individual workouts were exceeding the distances required by each leg of the actual race.

As our training progressed, we found that we were enjoying the process—we looked forward to our daily workouts, and were motivated by our gains and improvements. Each time we improved our mile run time, our mileage on the bike, or our efficiency in the pool, we were excited and took pride in our gains. We also found that while training, we also were motivated to eat differently—we started cutting out unhealthy or unnecessary foods, and eat more nutrition-rich, healthy foods.

Soon enough, race day came. We met with my siblings on the morning of the race, and began our preparations. I don't think words can adequately describe the anxiety that accompanies starting your first race. We both were incredibly nervous—I think I had to relieve myself close to 10 times in the hour before start of the event. I don't really know why I was nervous, as I was not expecting to win anything, or even to compete against anyone in particular. Further, in retrospect, the sprint distance is relatively short, anyway. Eventually my time came to enter the water. I found that once I was in the water I relaxed a bit and was able to focus on the event. Before I knew it, I was on my bike, and then running to the finish line. I was there to greet my brother, my sister, and my wife. We all embraced afterwards, enjoying the moment together.

It felt incredible. The whole way home, my wife and I talked about “which race should we do next?” Soon after, I had a new, more rigorous training regimen, and a new race on my schedule. I'm not sure when exactly it happened afterwards, but I can say that I became consumed with it—my life changed. Training and racing soon eclipsed all of my other hobbies and extra-curricular activities. I came to value things differently—I began to value my fitness in a way I never had previously. I began to notice that I paid attention to my perceptions of others' levels of fitness. I came to live differently as well.



My daily workouts became longer, more intense, and more difficult, but they also became as routine to me as sleeping or eating. In fact, in the years since, I have only missed a handful of workouts. I began coveting new, more efficient equipment, and I sought out creative ways to save money or find resources to bankroll my new obsession. I joined a local triathlon club, hired a coach, and entered more races. I picked up the lingo of the triathlon community and culture—I became a “carbon junkie” and a “weight weenie,” and I found myself often discussing how cool my “power-to-weight ratio” was with others (they were even kind enough to pretend that they were interested!). I started watching cycling and triathlon events on television. I watched with great interest every single minute of the Tour de France and the IRONMAN World Championships in Kona. I lost weight myself. I even began to think about what kind of tattoo I would get when I finish my first IRONMAN.

Looking back, I can say that I have changed my entire lifestyle and become someone new, for better or for worse. Throughout my journey, I have encountered many others like myself, who, starting from non-professional backgrounds, became obsessed with triathlon after starting on a whim. They often say that they “caught the fever,” “got bit,” or that it “got into the blood.” We all seem to have that in common. It truly is something that, if you let it, it will change your habits, your behaviors, indeed, your lifestyle and even your self-concept.

My own road has been enjoyable, but it has also been arduous physically. I have yet to do a full IRONMAN distance event—I will in the next year and a half, but I am working my way up to it. Again, an IRONMAN distance race consists of three consecutive, grueling legs: a 2.4 mile swim, a 112-125 mile bike ride, and a 26.2 mile

run, all of which need to be completed within a certain time limit, depending on the race. The race itself can take up to around 18 hours to complete; even professional athletes struggle to complete the event in less than 8 hours. My plan is that when I finally do it, I will be able to do so competitively and with a decent amount of relative speed. However, I am still a relatively young member of the triathlon community. The number of middle to older-aged individuals who participate in IRONMAN distance events grows every year, despite its incredible difficulty and training demands. I am continually astounded by individuals who are much older than me, and do not come from athletic backgrounds, who decide to do IRONMAN as their first event. Many of them come from sedentary lifestyles. To me, that seems like going from having never swam before to jumping headfirst into a raging storm in the middle of the ocean, or from being an overweight couch potato to climbing Everest, in only a few months time. Yet they do it. Many do every year. I can only imagine how physically and mentally difficult their journeys are. Yet at the same time, the other part of me burns with curiosity to learn about their experiences—I can only imagine how meaningful and powerful their journeys are. Why did they decide to enter the world of triathlon? And why did they decide to attempt an IRONMAN, of all events? Why at their particular age(s)? What kind of setbacks do they encounter? What motivates them to keep going?

### **Research Questions**

The current study aims to explore the motivations of middle to older-aged individuals, who do not come from a competitive athletic background, for choosing to begin training for and ultimately participate in long distance triathlon events (specifically IRONMAN-distance triathlons), despite knowing the involved risks to their own health

and incredible time commitment required for training, and to learn from their personal experiences. Specifically, this study will set out to explore the following questions:

1. What are the motivating factors for non-professional athletes who are middle to older-aged (with little or no prior experience) to begin training for and to compete in an IRONMAN-distance triathlon?
2. What are the factors that help them persist?

The current study will focus on the individual experiences of the athletes themselves, which vary across person and personal circumstance. It will utilize qualitative methodology, specifically grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), focusing on individual interviews with participants for data generation.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review the research literature relevant to the current study. However, it is important to note that while the literature review is presented next, it occurred chronologically at a later stage in the research process, in accordance with grounded theory methodology. In grounded theory studies, the formal review of the literature is delayed until after data analysis, so as not to inform the research questions or influence the data collection. The literature was not consulted to help generate questions, but rather to shed light on the findings that emerge from the data. The following is review of that literature.

In recent years, a significant amount of previous research has been conducted on motivation in general physical activity, however, only a limited amount of studies exist in the literature that investigate the motives and experiences of individuals participating in triathlon. In fact, a recent search of the literature for relevant articles yielded only 76 results, many of which were not pertinent to the current study, as they focused primarily on differences in race performance and/or did not investigate motivation or persistence. This review will follow a format similar to those used by Lovett (2011) and Lamont & Kennelly (2012), however adapted to fit the needs and content of the current study. First, the review will discuss the history and development of triathlon and the IRONMAN race. Second, it will highlight areas of the literature that investigate motives for participating in general sports and physical activity. Lastly, it will review the existing literature on factors affecting participation in triathlon and other endurance sports.

## **History & Development of Triathlon**

As previously noted, a triathlon is a race made up of three disciplines, or legs, done consecutively—swimming, biking, and running. Race distances vary in length from sprint (the shortest) to IRONMAN (the longest). While the individual athletic disciplines involved have been in existence for many years, triathlon itself is a relatively young sport. Many believe that it began in 1975 in San Diego, California, as local athletes wanted to add a swimming component to bike-run biathlon events that were taking place at the time (Ehritz, 2004). The IRONMAN race, however, originated in Hawaii in 1978. At that time, the U.S. Commanding Naval Officer in Hawaii was John Collins. After engaging in some discussion with his wife and colleagues as to who were the better endurance athletes—swimmers, runners, or cyclists— he thought an effective test would be to combine the most difficult endurance race from each discipline into one event, to see which type of athlete would emerge as the best (IRONMAN, 2013). As is the standard today, that event consisted of a 2.4-mile swim, a 116-mile bike ride, and a 26.2-mile run. At the beginning of that first race, it is reported that John Collins remarked, “whoever finishes first, we’ll call him Ironman.” Thus, the IRONMAN race was born (IRONMAN, 2013).

In the years since that first IRONMAN event, triathlon as a sport has grown immensely. The original race in Hawaii had only 12 finishers, out of fifteen participants. Today, thousands of athletes participate in triathlon events every year. In fact, in the last decade alone, USA Triathlon Organization memberships increased exponentially, from around 20,000 in 2000 to a record number of members in 2012—550,446—and it is estimated that well beyond that participate in triathlon events in the United States alone

every year (USA Triathlon, 2013b). Indeed, an extremely large number of races take place annually across the globe, covering all race distances and attracting large corporate sponsors. However, IRONMAN remains the flagship event of triathlon. Most IRONMAN events receive some sort of television coverage, and there are twenty-three IRONMAN events worldwide that serve as qualifying races for the IRONMAN World Championships held annually in Kona, Hawaii, allowing for a large number of athletes from around the globe to participate (IRONMAN, 2013).

In terms of demographics, triathletes tend to be somewhat homogeneous. According to a recent report commissioned by USA Triathlon (USAT, USA Triathlon, 2013b), the majority of participants seem to come from relatively high socioeconomic backgrounds—most are white, well-educated individuals with an average age of 38, and a mean income of \$126,000 (Tribe Group, 2009). One possible factor that may account for the homogeneity among participants is the amount of discretionary income required to actively participate in events across the calendar year. According to USAT, in 2009 the average amount of discretionary income spent (by members) on bikes, bike equipment, race fees, training, running & athletic footwear, and nutritional supplements was approximately \$4,000 in that year alone (Tribe Group, 2009). IRONMAN events alone have a registration fee of \$650, which increases as the date of the event approaches. In order to participate in multiple races, purchase all necessary equipment, and acquire the proper training materials/instruction, an individual needs to have sufficient financial resources to cover the costs.

In the U.S., male participants make up the majority of triathletes, however, female participants still made up 40% of the total, and that number rises significantly every year

(Tribe Group, 2009). Of note, that same report also reported that, across gender, the individuals who participate in the most events per year are also older than the average age (Tribe Group, 2009). Given the popularity of the relatively new sport, it might be useful to learn about why these amateur athletes choose to undertake the physical, psychological, and financial demands of triathlon.

### **Participation in Sports and Physical Activity**

Because the amount of literature available on the motives of nonprofessional endurance athletes is limited, probably the best alternative is to examine the motivating factors for those engaging in general sports or physical activity. Within sports psychology, motivation is a broad topic that encompasses numerous domains including achievement motivation, competitive motivation, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). Additional studies have adopted a slightly narrower focus in defining motivation, highlighting the domains of achievement and competition, social incentives, psychological factors, and physical health (Leidl, 2009; Lovett, 2012). The following sections build upon the model presented by Lovett (2012) to outline relevant literature pertaining to the above themes, however adapted for the current study.

**Achievement and Competition.** It would seem intuitive that competition and achievement are often motivating factors for engaging in sports or physical activity. This notion is reflected in the literature. Achievement motivation is defined as an individual's desire to master tasks, achieve excellence, overcome obstacles, outperform others, strive for task success, persist in the face of failure, and take pride in their talents (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). In sport psychology, Need Achievement Theory (Weinberg & Gould,

2011) suggests two types of individuals, in terms of their personality factors: high achievers and low achievers. High achievers are approach-oriented—they are motivated to achieve success and often experience fulfillment through accomplishment, more likely seek out challenging tasks than low-achievers, and they tend to perform better in competitive situations (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). In contrast, low achievers are avoidance-oriented—they seek to avoid experiencing shame or failure and will avoid competitive and evaluative situations when possible (Gill, 2000).

Similarly, Achievement Goal Theory (Ntoumanis, 2001) suggests that individuals are motivated differently based on their orientations towards a particular task in sport, depending upon situational cues and context. Task-oriented individuals focus on improving relative to their past abilities (Weinberg & Gould, 2011) and “do not judge their self-worth based on the adequacy of their ability and the demonstration of superiority” (Ntoumanis, 2001, p. 398). Conversely, outcome-oriented people focus on comparing themselves with and beating others (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). “These individuals strive to achieve success by demonstrating superior ability” (Ntoumanis, 2001, p. 398).

**Social Incentives.** Because many sports are team-oriented or involve numerous individuals simultaneously, another seemingly inherent motivating factor that has been investigated in the literature is that of the social incentives for engaging in sports or physical activity. Researchers have noted that social incentives such as friendship, group acceptance, and/or the opportunity to interact with others can influence individuals’ motivation for engaging in sports or physical activity (Gill & Overdorf, 1994; Stuntz & Spearance, 2007). Further, individuals with a social goal orientation tend to achieve sport



enjoyment from affiliation from the group and from the social recognition of others (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). King and Burke (2000) also found that runners rated affiliation as one of the reasons they engaging in running, particularly female runners. Similarly, an earlier study conducted with only female participants found that not only were group affiliation and social recognition motives important, but they increased with age (Gill & Overdorf, 1994).

**Emotional Benefits.** A large body of research has been collected over the years on the effects of physical exercise on stress. A study by Landers and Arent (2001) found that individuals with psychological motives for participation in physical activity did so to help reduce anxiety and stress, and better cope with the daily demands of life. Studies by Berger & Molt (2001) and Landers & Arent (2001) demonstrated positive correlations between exercise and anxiety reduction. Taylor (2001) also found that adherence to exercise programs resulted in lower anxiety rates and higher levels of social engagement with others. Concerning depression, Blumenthal et al. (1999) found that exercise reduced participants' depression rates comparable to that of those taking medication. Similarly, Croft (2005) demonstrated how exercise can potentially reduce clinical depression. Other research suggests that the positive effects of exercise and/or engaging in sports on mental health seems to take place across age groups, race, socio- economic status, and gender, and that these effects seem to become stronger as adherence to exercise and activity programs increases (Weinberg & Gould, 2011).

**Physical Health and Appearance.** Physical health benefits are another obvious reason that individuals engage in sports or physical activity. The associations between regular exercise and physical health benefits such as healthy heart functioning, lowered

risk for disease, and other such issues are well known. However, research indicates that beyond the obvious health benefits of exercise, other physical health-related factors influence individuals' decisions to engage in physical activity. The modern American society values fitness, physical appearance and attractiveness, and being thin, despite rapid increases in general obesity rates, and it is known that exercise plays an important and often underrated role in weight loss and weight maintenance (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). Therefore, physical activity to lose and/or maintain weight, though it contributes to better overall health, may often be classified as a self-presentation motive. Indeed, Leary, (1992) found self-presentation a significant factor influencing individuals' exercise behaviors. According to Hausenblas, Brewer, and Van Raalte (2002), self-presentation "is the process by which people attempt to control and monitor how they are perceived and evaluated by others" (p. 3). Research has shown that many individuals experience elevated levels of anxiety when they anticipate others' perceptions of their physical appearance and body composition to be negative (Hart, Leary, & Rejinski, 1998). Therefore, in order to portray an appearance of attractiveness or fitness, some individuals may choose to engage in sports or physical activity (Ogles & Masters, 2000, 2003). While this finding occurs for both males and females, research indicates that it seems to hold particularly true for females, who have been shown to list concern about weight as a strong motive for engaging in physical activity (Gil & Overdorf, 1994; Masters, Ogles, & Jolton, 1993; Masters & Lambert, 1989).

### **Factors Affecting Participation in Triathlon and Other Endurance Sports**

Researchers Ryan and Deci (2007) state that "sport and exercise epitomize motivation—people being moved to act—for these activities require exertion, energy,

focus and sometimes a great deal of discipline” (p. 1). Endurance sports such as triathlon, cycling, long-distance swimming, or marathon often require the individual to spend a significant amount of extracurricular or leisure time participating in training, particularly for non-professional athletes (Lamont, Kennelly, & Wilson, 2012). Yet, while an extreme amount of variance exists in the actual ability of these athletes, the majority of them willingly subject themselves to the grueling physical training and significant time requirements inherent to the sport, all the while knowing that they will likely not reach the winners’ podium (Smith, 1998, 2000). These athletes also often do so, knowing that the time commitment required for training may cause significant difficulties in keeping time or work commitments (Lamont & Kennelly, 2011). Many make significant and even drastic changes in their schedules and lifestyles in order to accommodate their training, even treating it as a second job (Lamont & Kennelly, 2012; McCarville, 2007). Further, Masters, Ogles, and Jolton (1993) noted the following about participating in endurance sports:

Running a marathon does not simply consist of arriving at the starting line at the designated time and enduring several hours of labor before arriving at the finish. Rather, the marathon is the result of months and sometimes years of daily preparation. Apart from the obvious physical and psychological effort that running a marathon requires, the participants may also alter work and eating schedules, cancel or postpone engagements, spend time away from family, and so on. Clearly, training for a marathon is not a trivial event in the lives of either the runners or those with whom they have significant relationships (p. 135).

Researchers have offered numerous rationales for studying the motivations of endurance sport athletes, such as facilitating construction of and adherence to training programs, marketing the event itself, and promoting regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle to the general public (Brown, O'Connor, & Barkatsas, 2009; LaChausse, 2006; Markland & Ingledew, 2007; Ogles & Masters, 2003). However, little knowledge exists regarding the motivations of non-professional triathletes, despite the growth of triathlon over the past decade. What studies on motives in endurance sports do exist have focused primarily on runners (specifically marathon runners) (Bond & Batey, 2005; Masters et al., 1993; Ogles & Masters, 2000, 2003; Smith, 1998, 2000) and, to a lesser degree, on cyclists (Brown et al., 2009; LaChausse, 2006).

A current search of the literature only yields a small number of studies that are specifically focused on the motives of triathletes. One such study highlighted stress relief and recreation as a possible motive (Landers & Arent, 2001) for engaging in triathlon. Another study suggested that some individuals enter triathlon as a personal challenge, and aim primarily just to finish the event (Clingman, & Hillard, 1987). One study investigated the relationships between mood state profiles and individuals motivated to participate in a triathlon (Bell & Howe, 1988). Similarly, a more recent study investigated the relationships between participant perfectionism and motivation orientations (Gucciardi et al., 2012). A more recent study investigated self-deterministic behaviors and states of flow among triathletes (Lamont & Kennelly, 2011). Other studies found in the literature include research that has been conducted targeting motivation within specific populations or domains. One such study investigated motives specific to the disabled athlete population (Furst, Ferr, & Megginson, 1993). A different study

highlighted data concerning triathletes' decisions as consumers, for both competing in and making purchasing decisions regarding triathlon (Lovett, 2011).

Beyond motivation, research investigating the persistence factors for triathletes in training and competition is also limited. In a recent search, only one ethnographic study was found that investigated how triathletes endure prolonged psychological and physical discomfort (Atkinson, 2008). While rationale has been offered for investigating individuals' motives for engaging in endurance sports (Brown, O'Connor, & Barkatsas, 2009; LaChausse, 2006; Markland & Ingledew, 2007; Ogles & Masters, 2003), the question remains—why do triathletes persist? As previously noted, beyond the intense physical and mental training required by participation, triathletes and other endurance sport athletes often undergo and maintain significant life changes in order to accommodate their training and participation, without expectation of remuneration or reward. Some studies have been conducted investigating the personality characteristics of persistent triathletes (Clingman & Hillard, 1987, 1988; Gucciardi et al., 2012), however, persistence among triathletes remains largely uninvestigated in the literature.

The current study is intended primarily for researchers in sport psychology, as well as for endurance athletes (as well as would-be endurance athletes) in the general public and their coaches, trainers, and colleagues. It is hoped that the conclusions of the study will help inform future research and practices in coaching and training non-professional endurance athletes. It is further hoped that the conclusions of the study will help inform the field concerning underlying motivations for non-professional endurance athletes. Perhaps by furthering our understanding of these motivations, new avenues of research will be opened to help understand and assist these individuals.

## Chapter 3

### METHOD

Qualitative methodology was chosen over quantitative methods for two main reasons. First, unlike quantitative research, the current study does not aim to try to confirm or disconfirm a particular hypothesis. It instead intends to explore and describe the participants' experiences. Further, the current study concerns itself not with what happens at IRONMAN events, differences in athlete performance, or other observable outcomes, but rather with the narratives provided by the athletes themselves that lead up to the event.

Second, the data collected does not lend itself to numerical study or comparison—a hallmark of qualitative study. Quantitative research aims to test hypotheses, be replicable, and generalize findings to the general population of interest. Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to qualitative research as that which “produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p. 17). Further, they mention that qualitative methods can “give the intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods” (p. 19).

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was chosen as the primary means for data collection and analysis, because it allows the researcher to gather a substantial amount of detailed data from a small amount of subjects (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Further, grounded theory seemed to best fit the intentions and design of the current study. In quantitative research, bias is addressed by rigid control and standardization, which can discourage the sharing of individual stories and limit or deny the inclusion external factors such as environment or context (Mishler, 1986). Conversely, the current study is

directly concerned with the athletes' experiences as they are “‘lived or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’” (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 7), with particular interest in individual narratives and contexts. There was no guiding theory—having such may possibly limit the data that could be gathered from participant interviews. Further, as per grounded theory, the literature was not consulted until after the data collection was completed, and only for comparative or explanatory purposes.

The data collected for the current study centered around participants' perceptions of their motives for initiating training and participation, risks associated with training and competition, motivations for continuing training and competition beyond the first race, and how participation has affected participants' well-being and way of life. As in accordance with grounded theory, these areas were subject to change as the interviews developed. Following the interviews, transcripts were immediately investigated and coded to identify themes and concepts important to the study. These themes were then compared against future interviews, in order to systematically seek disconfirming accounts or evidence, as consistent with grounded theory (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001).

## **Participants**

The current study is interested in the motivation and persistence factors for middle to older-aged individuals from non-professional athletic backgrounds who choose to begin training for and ultimately participate in long distance triathlon events. Purposive sampling was employed as the primary strategy for recruiting. “Purposive sampling is a procedure by which researchers select a subject or subjects based on predetermined criteria about the extent to which the selected subjects could contribute to the research study” (Vaughn *et al.*, 1996, p. 58). Thus, to help identify and recruit eligible

participants, it was decided that only individuals who began training after age 40 would be included, to ensure that all participants were middle to older-aged. Age 40 was chosen arbitrarily, as it seemed an adequate cutoff given the criteria. It was also decided that the current study would look to local triathlon clubs or social groups that are centered around triathlon training, and from them recruit individuals for interview. A simple internet search for triathlon clubs/support organizations in Arizona yielded 12 eligible clubs that were listed in the greater Phoenix area: AzTriClub, Phoenix Triathlon Club, Landis Tri Club, First Wave Triathlon of Arizona, Tri Scottsdale, Freak Factor Triathlon Club, One Multisport Triathlon Club, TriSports Triathlon Club, Haus Tri, Team Triology, Triple Sports, and Team Anthem. Therefore, it was decided that eligible participants (individuals over the age of 40 from a non-professional athletic background and who have competed in or are training for an IRONMAN distance triathlon) would be recruited from these clubs/organizations.

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), invitations for research participation were distributed via email to the respective triathlon organization administrators/listservs. The email included a brief description of the research, an explanation of the requirements for eligibility, an explanation of the time required for participation, an expectation that the interviews will be audiotaped, and an explanation of data storage. The email will also explained that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from or discontinue participation in the study at any time. After the recruitment materials were sent out, 7 females and 3 males replied and volunteered for the study, ranging in age from 42 to 63. These respondents were then contacted and scheduled for an interview. All interviewees reported coming



from non-professional or even sedentary backgrounds, and that they had completed at least one IRONMAN-distance event prior to the interview. All reported being employed full-time, and six reported having one or more dependent children at home. At the time of interview, the volunteers were given an informed consent form that described the current study, its risks and benefits, and participant confidentiality issues. Participants were reminded that they are allowed to withdraw from the study or stop the interview at any time without consequence. All signed forms were kept on file in the research supervisor's office in accordance to IRB requirements.

### **Interviews**

After completion of the informed consent/confidentiality explanation process, the participants' consent forms were collected. All forms were kept in a locked file cabinet, along with the transcripts of the interviews. The files were only accessible to the primary investigator. Transcripts were labeled by number and not by name, in order to ensure confidentiality. All information will be shredded at three months past the completion of the study.

Before any interviews took place, the researcher rehearsed by conducting mock interviews with the researcher's advisor, until both felt the researcher was ready to collect data. Interviews were then scheduled with the actual participants. All interviews were open-ended and therefore varied in duration, depending on how much the interviewees chose to share. Thus, interviews ranged from 40-90 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped with a small, unobtrusive audio recording device. For confidentiality purposes, no videotape was used. All interviews took place at locations of the interviewees' choosing. Seven of the interviewees requested the interview to take place

at their own place of residence, and the remaining three requested local cafes/coffee shops.

All interviews began with some general questions not related to the study, in order to put the participants at ease and promote comfort and rapport. The interviewer was one who has some experience with endurance sports, and therefore interviews also began by discussing recent local and international events that may have been of mutual interest. This was done to help develop a working alliance and move the participant toward the target information. At such a point, the interviewer began with the grand-tour question/prompt (Spradley, 1979) of “Tell me about how you got into triathlon.” From there, the interview was allowed to shape itself, however, the interviewer made sure to ask at some point regarding why the participant chose to undergo training/participation in an IRONMAN event.

At the conclusion of each interview, the participant was given a chance to clarify points if he or she desired, as well as add any additional information. Upon completion of transcript analysis, the participant was provided with a copy of the transcript and the themes identified by the researcher, and he or she was given the opportunity to review the data and offer feedback and edits, if desired. To prevent data contamination and/or participant bias, each participant who chose to review the data was requested to not disclose or discuss their experiences with others until after the completion of the study. None of the participants chose to submit feedback or edits regarding their interview transcripts.

### **Additional Data Sources**

The current study is primarily concerned with participants' narratives, experiences, and histories. Beyond content provided by the participants, the researcher elected to take notes both during and after interviews to assist with coding purposes, while striving to uphold confidentiality at all costs. As noted above, a formal literature review was conducted after the interviews were completed, and additional investigation was conducted concerning general information regarding the history and development of triathlon. The current study therefore did not employ measures for data collection outside of those described above.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analyzing data throughout the interview phase of research for comparison and guidance of future interviews is an important aspect of grounded theory. Accordingly, interview transcripts were continually analyzed and compared in order to generate common themes that emerged from the data. Themes were identified by the existence of multiple statements from different participants that indicated a similar, shared experience (i.e. facing an obstacle to training). The notes and memos written by the researcher were also continuously compiled and analyzed, looking for possible descriptive codes for these themes, such as "injury" or "choosing to begin training to expand one's social network." These themes/codes were then presented to the participants for feedback. Lastly, in accordance with grounded theory, the themes were also constantly checked against the interview transcripts as the process progressed to help provide new insights and additional new codes (Seidman, 2006).

Because coding was taking place concurrently to interview transcription, it became requisite to determine an order that provided randomization, while at the same time allowing sufficient time for subsequent interviews to be coded. As previously noted, all interviews were given a number, ranging from 1-10, in the order that they were conducted. To determine the coding order, upon transcription of the interviews, it was decided to divide the available transcripts into first and second halves, based upon interview order. From those two halves, transcripts were chosen randomly from alternating halves of the interview order to create a coding order, which was: (the numbers referring to transcript numbers): 5 2 4 7 10 6 3 9 1 8.

For coding procedure itself, the current study followed the phases outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1990), specifically that of open coding for data categorization, axial coding for category connection, and selective coding for individual foci among the categories. During the open coding phase, data was investigated looking for main ideas conveyed by the participants. Additional notes and memos were compiled during this phase, and checked against the transcripts. From this data, basic categories were identified in the data, such as “motivators,” “difficulties,” “supports,” or “race experiences.”

Following open coding, axial coding then took place to investigate the relationships between categories. For instance, “motivators” was divided into sub-categories of “physical health improvement,” or “commemorating the loss of a loved one,” which in turn was linked to sub-categories of “difficulties,” such as “joint problems” or “grief.”

Lastly, selective coding took place to select categories that need further investigation or specificity, as well as identify phenomena that were central to the data supplied by the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, when axial data appeared to be complex and intertwined, further investigation was warranted to find the underlying construct. For instance, “identity shift” emerged as a central phenomenon found through selective coding.

## Chapter 4

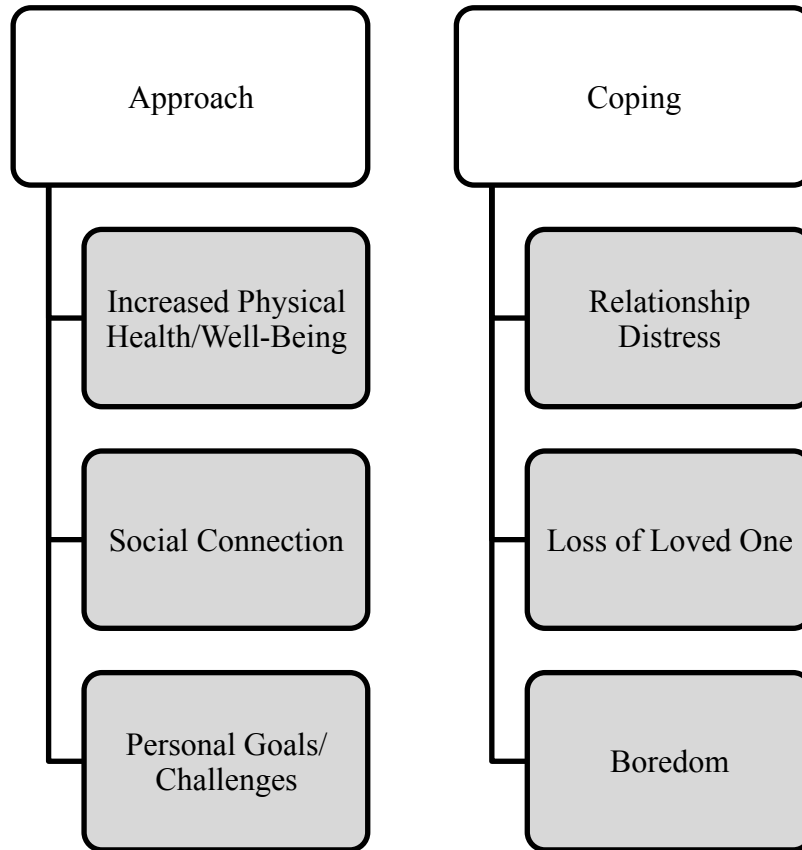
### RESULTS

Throughout the interview process, all interviewees followed a similar pattern in organizing their narratives—they first spoke about their motives for choosing to enter triathlon, followed by the obstacles/challenges they faced that caused them to at times consider terminating training. All interviews then tended to conclude with elaboration on the factors that caused/helped them to persist in their training during difficult periods. Results are therefore reported in three sections using that same order: *Motivation themes*, *obstacle and challenge themes*, and *persistence themes*. Within each section, the identified themes are grouped into broader thematic categories. An explication of each thematic category is given, along with a description of each individual theme within the respective categories, followed by a summary of each category. The description of each theme is accompanied by illustrative quotations from the interviews to give some idea of the variability in expression of the theme. In these quotations, participants' actual names are replaced with pseudonyms, in order to preserve anonymity.

#### **Motivation Themes**

Analysis of the data revealed a wide array of themes for choosing to engage in triathlon. In accordance with grounded theory, the researcher was completely ready to abandon or merge themes if the data suggested it at any point. Therefore, the themes relevant to motivation that are reported in the current study are grouped into two categories, *approach themes* and *coping themes*. Approach themes are those that indicate a conscious, intentional approach towards achieving a particular positive goal or outcome. Coping themes are those that indicate the use of triathlon as a means to cope

with or adjust to a particular negative situation or event. Figure 1 illustrates these categories and themes.



*Figure 1.* Motivation Themes Identified in the Current Study

### **Approach Themes**

**Increased physical health/well-being.** Increased health and well-being includes a broad spectrum of motives for participation in triathlon that involved improving physical health and the functioning of the body. Many of the triathletes interviewed listed improving their own physical health or well-being as a personal motive for choosing to enter into the world of triathlon, particularly in the face of getting older and experiencing the effects of aging. As Frank stated, “I started [triathlon] to get healthy. I

didn't want to wait for diabetes or something to creep up on me. Another interviewee, Steve, said, "I think I got into it because I saw it as a way to be active and stay healthy...I needed something that wouldn't make my knees hurt, and I took a look at the swimming and biking [involved in triathlon] and was like, so why not?" Establishing a personal fitness routine was also mentioned by some the interviewees, as they reported initially hoping that the long-term time commitment required for training for an IRONMAN event specifically would help them to develop lasting positive health habits that would in turn improve their overall health and longevity.

Other interviewees reported viewing triathlon as a way to improve their body composition and/or body image. They reported that they felt dissatisfaction with their appearance and/or health at a certain point in time, and that they saw triathlon and IRONMAN as a possible path to change. For example, one interviewee reported,

One thing I swore [when I was younger was that] I won't grow old and fat, but all those rounds of beers and wings and golf...and after so long I just got tired with how I was living...I certainly didn't like the way I looked. I knew that IRONMAN would be a long-term commitment that would probably change that.

**Social connection.** Social connection includes utilizing triathlon as a place to make new friends, establish oneself within a possible new group, obtain external support, and interact with others generally. Many of the participants remarked that they joined a triathlon club or began working out with other triathletes as a means to make new connections and/or new friendships. Some reported feeling triathlon to be attractive because they wanted to make new friends, and triathlon wasn't exclusive to the "ultra fit"



or those who “have been doing it forever.” As Kim said, “there’s a place for everyone—beginners and elites. And I liked that. I quickly found a group of like-minded people that I fit in with, and they became like family to me.” One such participant reported feeling that triathlon was the avenue by which she was able to meet and make new friends after having moved from out of state to a new area:

I kind of, you know, left most of my friends back in [a different location] when I moved here, and uh, I made a couple of friends at work and they all worked out a lot...so I started working out with them...and they were talking about doing the half [IRONMAN], so I...just kinda made the decision just like that, off-hand.

Some interviewees also mentioned that they got into triathlon because of a suggestion from a friend, or even what they described as “peer pressure.” As Amy said:

I always ran just a little bit, and then [my friend] got my into doing a 10K...and I met some girls...and we started training together. Then one day [a friend] said ‘oh gosh, one day I would like to do a triathlon.’ So it was a suggestion from my friends.

Similarly, from Janine:

I was like, ‘are you sure? What they [triathletes] do is crazy—Can we do it?’ And they were all like, we totally can! So it was a suggestion from my friends—I guess it was kind of like peer pressure.

**Personal goals/challenges.** Personal goals and challenges includes initiating training for triathlon as a means to accomplish a personal goal or challenge, to challenge oneself to do something totally new or fear-provoking, to obtain some sort of status or

recognition, and/or to gain confidence in new domains. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned challenging self at least at some point in the interview as a factor that motivated them to begin training. As Amber said:

I was a volunteer at IRONMAN, and then I kept volunteering at IRONMAN going, ‘man, I would love it if I could have done this, but I can’t. I saw the crowds, how they cheered them on, and all the hooplah when they crossed the line. I wanted it so bad. Then one year I saw some people that looked as old as me that were doing it. I thought to myself, ‘hey—they are even in worse shape than me. If she can do it, I can!’ I wanted to challenge myself like that. And so I made the goal to do it right there.

Participants noted that achieving personal goals and accomplishments was also a significant motivator for undertaking triathlon, specifically IRONMAN. A good number of the participants reported achieving the IRONMAN status as a motivating factor. Jennifer said, “it’s so cool that once you finish one, you are an IRONMAN, and no one can take that away from you...there’s no statue of limitations on that...I wanted to be an IRONMAN.” Another interviewee reported that she wanted to finish an IRONMAN as a marker to herself that she had overcome her fear of water. For others, simply accomplishing a long-term goal was their motivation. Others reported that just the desire to finish the race was enough.

### **Coping Themes**

**Relationship distress.** Relationship distress involves participating in triathlon in order to cope with distress associated with relationship difficulties such as divorce,

frequent arguments/altercations, or other relationship issues. One interviewee reported using triathlon training as “an excuse to get out of the house and think by myself [during a difficult relationship]” or to “just be selfish for once...it felt really good.” Others reported using triathlon as a way to deal with the difficult emotions and experiences accompanying divorce came up for a number of the interviewees. One such participant said:

I went through a divorce back in [a previous year] and was feeling depressed, but I didn't want to do medications. I didn't want to do any of that. I knew I just needed to get out. So I decided to [begin training] as a way to do that. It became my meds. And it helped—I got out of that funk and my life has been different ever since.

Similarly, another interviewee mentioned, “At that point in my life, my wife at the time wanted to leave and move [to another state] so she did...and it was kind of like a tough time in my life...so I just kinda needed something else.”

**Coping with/commemorating loss of loved ones.** This theme includes specifically choosing triathlon as a way to cope with or find new meaning and closure in previous personal losses. It also includes using triathlon events as a way to honor a loved person's memory. Three of the interviewees related that participating in triathlon/IRONMAN helped them do work through grief for lost love ones. It also became a means to find new meaning and commemorate their memories through their triathlon experiences. One such interviewee said:

[The month in which a particular IRONMAN race is held] has a special meaning to me. My dad passed away in [that month] at the age of 50, and

you know, I was like this is my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday [in that same month], and it was like a tribute to my dad, in a way, and something I just wanted to do for myself...

Another interviewee reported that she decided to undertake training for IRONMAN to preserve the memory of those she had lost. She said, "I wanted to honor my brother, and my friend...[who passed away from cancer]...we used to ride [bicycles] every weekend together...they can't be there physically, but it's a way to...keep them there to keep them a part of your experience."

**Boredom.** The theme of Boredom includes using triathlon as a way to deal with the boredom of previous workout plans/routines or routines that the interviewee felt to be unsuccessful. It also includes using triathlon as a way to overcome general boredom, such as competing in triathlon as a hobby. As one interviewee said:

At that time, I had just turned 40. I didn't have any kids or anything. I had time and disposable income. I was kinda just looking for something...so one day I went down with a friend to watch [the local] IRONMAN, and I was like, holy cow, that's just amazing...and it's something I'd always wanted to do and so I was, like, okay, why not now?

It was the thing I was looking for.

Many of the participants mentioned having tried different exercise programs in the past, only to at some point discontinue due to boredom. They the reported feeling that triathlon was the first program to actually "stick" for them. As Suzy said:

...I was always trying to get into the habit of working out and, you know, falling in love with fitness...[but] it was hit or miss, on or off, you know

things like that...but it wasn't really until I found triathlon that I found something I've actually stuck with...I think I was so busy worried about crashing or drowning or something that I didn't think about [the fact that] I was exercising.

In summary, the athletes' statements regarding their motivations for initiating training are varied. Responses tend to be one or a combination of factors indicating movement towards a particular goal or outcome, such as improved health, making new friends or connections, or achieving personal accomplishments. Other responses tend to center around dealing with negative environmental stressors, such as relationship issues, coping with loss, or avoiding boredom.

### **Obstacle and Challenge Themes**

While the current study focused primarily on motivation and persistence factors, analysis of the data also reveals four themes that illustrate obstacles or challenges that threatened the participants' motivation to train, and/or their ability to persist. The themes emergent from the data are that of time, injury, fear/self-doubt, and interpersonal difficulties. As they are relatively few in number, the themes are not grouped together into categories; rather, they are reported independently.

**Time.** Time refers to respondents' shared experiences of time constraints or training/work/family schedule conflicts that were problematic, or required careful navigation. A majority of the athletes interviewed reported time as a significant obstacle. All interviewees were employed full-time, and reported that due to the time required by training for triathlon, balancing home life, work schedules, and training time was often

difficult. As one athlete said, “I travel a lot for work, and that makes it really hard to adequately train, not to mention your diet goes out the window [during traveling].”

**Injury.** Another significant obstacle for a majority of the participants is injury sustained during training that threatened the ability to continue. Most participants mentioned having to deal with some injury or another at some point during their experience. One athlete said, “at this age, if it’s not one thing, then it’s another. I’ve had to deal with a billion different injuries.” Another athlete reported that 10 weeks before IRONMAN, she was hit by a car while cycling, resulting in a separated shoulder and fractured ribs. She said, “I didn’t think I would make it...the doctors said it was highly unlikely. I was just like, how can I do the race like this?” Numerous interviewees reported that they contemplated discontinuing training due to injury at some point.

**Fear and doubt.** Fear and doubt includes internal struggles that caused participants to either contemplate discontinuing training, or question their ability and desire altogether. A number of the participants reported fear or self-doubt as an obstacle that caused them to think about quitting. Much of this was based around the swim portion of the race. Some interviewees mentioned fear of open-water swimming conditions and crowded race starts as a source of significant fear. Suzy said, “I made it to race day and almost quit that morning. I looked at the water and cried. I wasn’t afraid of the water, I was a afraid of the other 1500 athletes in it.” Similarly, others listed self-doubt as a reason they contemplated terminating participation. As one interviewee said, “I didn’t think I could do it...I’m 62, and I was like, I can’t do this, and I’m wasting a lot of time. I should stop.”

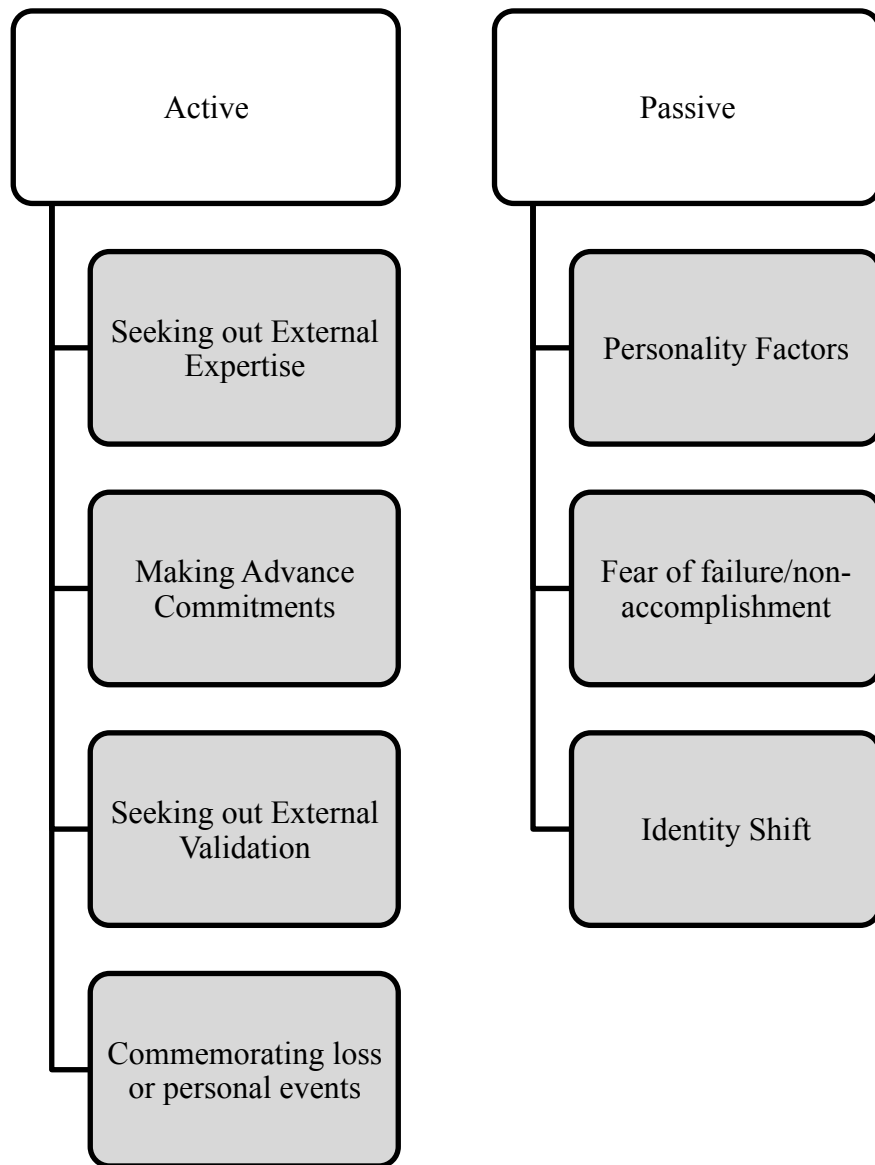
**Interpersonal challenges.** Interpersonal challenges refers to relationship difficulties with partners/spouses, friends, family members that occurred for the participants in result of training. Many of the interviewees reported experiencing interpersonal challenges during training caused them to consider withdrawal from training. Specifically, many of the participants related difficulties with their spouses/partners due to the demands of training. One such athlete said, “my husband’s a night owl...and I have to get up at 4:00[A.M.] on weekends to get in my long ride, so I started going to bed at 8:00 or 9:00 [P.M.], after a bit he was like, ‘okay this is getting ridiculous.” Others reported that the time spent away from their partner (due to training) was also problematic. One interviewee said, “I’m gone for like 8 hours training on Saturdays, and it just happens—while you’re gone, she finds some hobby of her own to fill the time...and then you get back and want to do something together, but she’s like, ‘I found this now and I like it.”” Many of the interviewees reported feeling that their partners were supportive initially, but that after they completed their first IRONMAN, that support began to wane considerably. Some reported that the decision to continue training and racing was causing significant strain on their current relationships. Others reported feeling that because they had made fitness such an integral part of their lifestyle, their partners began to be “jealous and resent it,” and that they did not know how best to resolve the issue.

In summary, the athletes interviewed all report having experienced obstacles or challenges throughout their experiences that threatened their motivation, as well as their desire to continue training. These obstacles fall around four major themes—*time, injury,*

*fear and doubt, and interpersonal challenges.* All interviewees mention encountering at least one of the above challenges, if not more.

### **Persistence Themes**

Analysis of the data also revealed a number of themes contributing to interviewees' persistence in long distance triathlon. Figure 2 illustrates these categories and themes. These themes are grouped into two categories, *active persistence themes* and





*Figure 2. Persistence Themes Identified in the Current Study*

*passive persistence themes.* Active persistence is based upon whether the theme indicates deliberately taking some sort of action or steps in order to promote one's own ability and/or desire to persist. Passive persistence is based upon whether the theme indicates a reliance (conscious or unconscious) on internal characteristics or traits in order to promote persistence.

**Active Persistence Themes**

**Seeking out external sources of knowledge/expertise.** Seeking out external expertise includes statements that indicate consulting with an external source (i.e. a book, coach, fellow athlete) for help or advice concerning an issue or concern in training or racing. Numerous participants reported having turned to outside sources for instruction when they faced struggles during training. Kim said, "When I had questions, or when I was scared about something, I'd go read about it. I think I read almost every book you can find about triathlon." Similarly, some of the interviewees reported that they often turned to sources on the Internet to find out about workout plans, and suggestions for overcoming obstacles. A good number of participants reported that their local triathlon club or group also served this purpose. One interviewee said, "If I had a question or was scared about something, I'd take it to the girls. We'd compare notes and usually figure out a way."

Almost all of the participants also mentioned having hired a professional coach to help them structure their workouts and to serve as a source of knowledge and help when questions and challenges arose. As Frank said, "I think the best thing I ever did was hire [my coach]. He gets me all my workouts—I just turn that over to him. That way, I know

that I'm doing enough, or training right for IRONMAN." Almost all who were interviewed related that having a coach or having an external source of knowledge helped them to feel that they were training at a level sufficient for finishing their respective races.

**Making advance commitments.** Making advance commitments refers to deliberately placing oneself in a situation from which it is difficult to withdraw (i.e. a financial or interpersonal obligation) in an attempt to force oneself to follow-through with a commitment related to triathlon. A number of participants reported feeling that making commitments in advance was a significant factor in helping them to persist. Some mentioned that making advance financial commitments helped them to continue when training was difficult. As one interviewee said: "IRONMAN is 650 bucks, let alone travel costs. In the end, it's at least 1,000-dollar investment just to be in the damn race...so I thought about that every time I wanted to quit...[there was] no backing out."

For others, keeping commitments made to others was significant. Interviewees mentioned that they often trained with friends or fellow club members, so they often went on bike rides or runs together. Many reported that doing so helped them to persist. One such participant said:

There were a ton of days that I wanted to just quit. I didn't want to get up at the crack of dawn anymore just to get in my swim or my bike [workout], or it was too hot outside, or I'm sick of running...but I kept thinking that [a friend that I train with] is out there right now, and she's waiting for me...so I had to go. That made me get up and get those workouts in.

**Seeking out external validation/support.** Seeking out external support includes turning to others (both directly and indirectly) for validation, encouragement, or support during difficult times in training. Many of the interviewees reported that seeking out support or validation from external sources helped them to persist. For some, navigating having to balance a training schedule with home life required them to have open communication with their spouses/partners. One interviewee said, “I always went to [my partner] when I wanted to quit. He reminded me why I was doing it, and gave me the encouragement I needed to keep going.” For others, just spending time with other athletes appeared to be enough. As one participant stated, “we all went to dinner together a lot during that time [training for IRONMAN], and we’d talk about all our struggles and that helped a lot.”

A number of participants also reported relying on comparisons to others for validation and encouragement. One interviewee said:

To be honest, any time I was struggling, I’d just take a look around at the other athletes. I’d see someone much, you know, bigger than I am making it, and I’d be like, ‘if she can do it, I sure as hell can!’ ...or I’d think that I’m the slowest one, and then I’d compare my times to the other girls’[in the triathlon club] times and I’d see that we were actually pretty close.

That actually really helped me keep going.

Individual or group comparisons such as this were somewhat common across the interviewees’ experiences. Other comparisons were more competitive in nature. One interviewee remarked, “I knew that [my competitor] was out there this morning, too. That got my butt out of bed more than a few times.”

**Commemorating loss or personal events.** Similar to the motivation theme of coping with loss, commemorating loss or personal events includes any use of commemorating a personal event or loss in a way that actually increases the desire to continue training or racing. Indeed, some interviewees mentioned that personal commemorations were helpful to training/racing persistence. Some reported that they actually looked forward to long solitary workouts, as they served as a place for the interviewees to silently think about and work through some of the grief associated with others' passing. Others that were using the experience as a way to commemorate their memory reported that doing so alone helped them to persist. One participant related the following experience:

My brother gave me a penny with the year that my [other] brother passed away on it. I kept that penny with me when I ran or when I was on my bike, and every time it got tough, I'd think of the penny in my bag and of my brother...I reminded myself that I dedicated it to him...and that would get me through it.

Participants also mentioned that commemorating personal milestones helped them to persist. One interviewee said, "I wanted to do this when I turned 50. When it got hard, I reminded myself that, and that kept me going." Others mentioned using triathlon as a way to celebrate anniversaries or other personal events helped them to persist. Kim mentioned, "I did my first sprint with [2 other friends] and we are so close now...we do that same race every year as a tribute."

## **Passive Persistence Themes**

**Personality factors.** The theme of personality factors includes the athlete's reliance on internal traits and/or characteristics (i.e. perfectionism, tenacity, etc.) to help them persist. For many of the interviewees, while they may not have been aware of them doing so at the time of training, they reported that relying on internal traits and/or characteristics helped them to persist. Of these traits, one that seems to emerge from the data was the ability to automatize the process. One interviewee said, "I don't mind all the workouts...I just kinda go into a mental machine mode...the workout list goes in, and I do it without even thinking." Similarly, another participant stated, "I can just turn on the lizard-part of my brain, even when I don't want to, I can just kind of trick myself that way to get out the door."

Another trait/characteristic that appears to emerge from the data was that of rigidity. Many of the interviewees reported feeling that in order to persist, they relied adhering fastidiously to a training and diet regimen. One interviewee said, "You'll find a lot of us Type-A people in triathlon. We are pretty anal about things, and stick to plans pretty well...that definitely helps me, at least." Further, numerous interviewees mentioned that in order to adhere to their respective training programs, a significant amount of planning and preparation was necessary. As one interviewee mentioned, "I had to plan out meals for my family in advance, arrange transportation for my kids to and from school in advance...I had to plan around my work schedule. You have to be pretty OCD to pull it off."

Competitiveness also emerges from the data as a trait that appeared to help some of the interviewees persist. Some of them mentioned the drive to win an age group or

beat someone else's time as a significant persistence factor. Others mentioned staying competitive within their own training group or triathlon club as a factor. One athlete remarked, "I finally found something I'm good at. I've been lucky enough to podium at a lot of my races. I like that."

**Fear of failure/non-accomplishment.** This theme includes allowing the fear of a perceived negative outcome to unconsciously serve as a catalyst for continued training. For a number of the interviewees, the fear of failure or not accomplishing one's goal actually served as a persistence factor. Some reported that because the decision to complete an IRONMAN was a significant investment of time, money, and personal resources, they were significantly afraid of not being able to finish, or what that would mean for them. One such participant said:

I think the fear of IRONMAN, my fear of IRONMAN, is what drove me. I was so afraid of it. [My colleague] and I did most of our training together, and he was so confident...I, on the other hand, was just the opposite. I was so afraid. I wanted to finish but was afraid that I wouldn't...and my fear drove me, I think. If I hadn't been that afraid, I don't think I would have succeeded.

Another such individual related her experience of failing to finish IRONMAN on three separate occasions, before finally finishing on her fourth attempt. She said, "I didn't want to be an honorary IRONMAN. I was so afraid after all that time—5 years of training, that I wouldn't that badge. That fear kept me going."

**Identity shift.** Analysis of the data also indicates a shift in identity that occurs around triathlon as a theme that was common for all participants. This involves at some

point changing how one sees him or herself, or taking on “triathlete” as a salient self-identifier. By doing so, training and racing becomes more of an automatic process or a means by which athletes maintain their new identity. All of the athletes interviewed mentioned at some point something about how they view themselves currently versus in the past. Statements such as “the old me,” “the me 3 years ago,” or “the new Kim” were commonplace throughout the interviews. One interviewee said:

When I stated [trithalon] it was just for the accomplishment...Now I'm an IRONMAN...I can't imagine what my life would be without it. I feel weird when I don't get my workout in, like a part of me is separated. Four years ago I would have laughed at you if you would have told me I'd be like this...but now, it's a part of who I am and I love that.

Many of the interviewees reported feeling that they now stay involved in triathlon because it has “become a part of [them].” Similarly, some athletes mentioned that they enjoyed having the personal status of IRONMAN or triathlete, and that they continue to participate in order to maintain that image/identity.

A number of participants also reported changes in self-knowledge and self-perception that aided persistence. One said, “I feel more confident now, that's for sure...I also learned that I can accomplish big tasks if I want.” Many of the interviewees made remarks such as Amy, who said, “It's all incremental...once I did a sprint, I knew I could do an Olympic. I did an Olympic and then thought about a half [IRONMAN]. Once I did a half, I knew I could do a full.” Similarly, the majority of the participants referred to their own changing metric for progress. One such interviewee said, “The early short rides seemed so tough, but now a 50 or 60-miler is easy.” Other participants

mentioned that having accomplished the IRONMAN has helped them to know themselves and their limits, which has also helped them to persist, while simultaneously being able to slightly scale back their workout regimen. As Frank said, “I know for sure what my limits are now. Even if time goes by and I don’t train, and someone asks me if I want to do a 60-mile ride with them, I know I can, no problem.”

In summary, the athletes’ statements regarding the factors that fostered their persistence in training are varied. Again, responses tend to be one or a combination of factors indicating deliberately consulting external sources of knowledge, making advance commitments, seeking out validation from others, or dedicating their performance for a personal event or commemoration. When not consciously taking steps to promote persistence, persistence themes tend to indicate reliance on personality factors, unknowingly using fear as a persistence factor, or having achieved a shift in self-identity from lay person to triathlete.



## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION

A critical component of grounded theory is to let the data speak for itself—to let the theory emerge from it (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the current study, the data consisted of interviews with non-professional triathletes over the age of 40. The narratives taken from these interviews were rich with information concerning the participants' experiences, and their reasons for initiating and persisting in training for long-distance triathlon. Many of the themes that emerged from the data were consistent with previous research conducted on endurance athletes and those who engage in sports and general physical activity.

Interviewees' responses as to why they began training tended to group together into two categories, approach and coping, based on whether they entered triathlon to achieve a certain goal or to increase activity, or whether they did it to cope with a negative experience. In terms of approach, improved health and well-being motives were prevalent in the data. The theme of engaging in triathlon to improve physical health and/or increase longevity was emergent in the data, and is consistent with research literature (Masters, Ogles, & Jolton, 1993; Masters & Lambert, 1989). Specific to the older triathlete population, the theme of training to increase longevity also was found in the data, consistent with prior study (Masters, Ogles, & Jolton, 1993). The identified theme of choosing to begin training for triathlon in order to improve one's appearance and/or body composition and image was also consistent with previous research (Gil & Overdorf, 1994; Masters; Weinberg & Gould, 2011).

Engaging in triathlon due to its social incentives was an approach theme that was also manifest in the data. Consistent with previous research, interviewees reported engaging in triathlon in order to seek out new friends or opportunities to interact with others (Gill & Overdorf, 1994; King & Burke, 2000; Stuntz & Spearance, 2007). Using triathlon as a way to be recognized by others for one's achievements was also consistent with the literature (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). Achieving personal goals or challenging oneself was also a prevalent approach theme that was consistent with previous research (Lamont & Kennelly, 2012).

Concerning coping as a motivation factor, participants reported specifically using triathlon as a means to cope with difficult or negative emotions, a finding consistent with previous studies (Berger & Molt, 2001; Blumenthal et al., 1999; Croft, 2005, Landers & Arent, 2001). However, in the domain of coping as a motivating factor, three themes emerged from the data that were not previously reported in the literature. The first of these was coping with boredom. Specifically, a number of the interviewees appeared to have initiated training in triathlon out of boredom or dissatisfaction with previous attempts at achieving a level of physical fitness. Other participants reported feeling bored with their every day routines. These individuals seemed to look to triathlon as something new and exciting due to its constant testing of personal limits and physical endurance. This appears to coincide with Atkinson's (2008) finding that many triathletes exhibit some indications of masochism, as they enjoy the pain and struggle that often accompanies endurance training.

The second theme not previously mentioned in the literature that emerged from the data was that of using triathlon as a means to cope with relationship difficulties.

Previous research indicates that many individuals engage in sports and physical activity to escape or avoid negative emotions and/or situations (Landers & Arent, 2001; Weinberg & Gould, 2011), however, some participants in the study specifically mentioned choosing training for IRONMAN as a way to get away from a dissatisfactory relationship, or to deal with the negative emotions associated with divorce/termination of a relationship.

The third motivational theme not previously mentioned in the literature emergent in the data was that of using triathlon to commemorate or deal with the loss or grief. A number of interviewees specifically mentioned that they chose to enter into IRONMAN to honor the memory of a loved one. Others mentioned entering into triathlon in order to commemorate an age milestone, which could possibly be construed as a loss of youth. These individuals appeared to see triathlon as an activity that was both sufficiently epic in scope to be deemed a worthy task for honoring the loved one, and difficult enough to be sufficiently meaningful. Others chose triathlon because physical activity was something they shared with the lost loved one. By engaging in the long-distance event, they appeared to be able to honor the loved one's memory, and bring new meaning to their own experience.

While the current study was primarily interested in motivation and persistence in long-distance triathlon, themes also emerged in the data around obstacles that triathletes appear to face in their training that threaten continuation. Consistent with the literature, a significant pervasive theme was that of time constraints as a threat to persistence (Lamont & Kenelly, 2011; 2012). Financial constraint as a threat was also an emergent theme consistent with previous study (Lamont, Kennelly, & Wilson, 2012). Injury as a threat

to persistence was another consistent theme (Atkinson, 2008; Weinberg & Gould, 2011), as was fear and doubt (Atkinson, 2008; McCarville, 2007; Weinberg & Gould, 2011). However, the current study also found an obstacle/challenge theme that was not previously listed in the literature, that of interpersonal challenges. Numerous interviewees reported feeling continued training for triathlon contributed to relationship struggles with their partners/spouses. Specifically, participants reported experiencing arguments over changes in schedules, imbalances in family/parenting responsibilities due to one partner's increased training, resentment of the athlete partner's body transformations, and/or general changes in lifestyle due to training. Many interviewees reported this to be the most difficult challenge of all faced throughout the training experience, as well as the most unanticipated of all challenges.

Beyond motivation, the current study also identified numerous themes in the data concerning motives for persisting in training and triathlon. These themes were grouped into two categories, active and passive, based on whether individuals took conscious, deliberate steps to foster persistence or whether they relied on existing, internal traits or characteristics to promote persistence. While a number of studies exist suggesting the rationale for examining factors that affect motives for participation in endurance sports such as running (Brown, O'Connor, & Barkatsas, 2009; Markland & Ingledew, 2007; Ogles & Masters, 2003), and cycling (LaChausse, 2006) the themes identified in the current study are specific to persistence among non-professional triathletes and are thus not previously listed in the research literature.

The first active persistence theme that was prevalent in the data was that of seeking outside sources of knowledge. Athletes reported that when they had questions or

struggles, turning to other sources—books, coaches, other athletes, etc.—often helped them to overcome challenges and persist in their training and racing. The triathletes reported that the outside expertise helped them to increase their own competence within specific domains (i.e. biking, swimming, running, injury prevention, equipment maintenance), which caused them to feel more confident. This draws strong parallel to that of the role of competence and competence acquisition in self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997). It is possible that acquiring new knowledge enabled the athletes to feel more competent, and thus increase their self-efficacy, which in turn promoted their persistence.

The second active persistence theme that emerged from the data was that of making advance commitments. Like the ancient Roman soldiers who burned their ships to prevent backing out of a battle, numerous interviewees reported that making the financial commitments in advance deterred them from withdrawing from training. Similarly, making commitments to training partner or fellow triathletes also seemed to have a similar effect. By making prior commitments, the participants were able to increase accountability and motivation to persist.

Similar to the motivational factor mentioned above, commemorating a loss or personal event also emerged from the data as a common active persistence factor. A number of individuals who took part in the study reported that when they felt like discontinuing in both training and the actual race event, they drew strength to continue from dedicating their experience to someone else, or to a personal milestone.

Concerning passive persistence, one factor consistent with the literature that was evident in the data was personality (Bell & Howe, 1988; Clingman & Hilliard, 1987;

Gucciardi et al., 2012; Lamont & Kennelly, 2012). Many interviewees reported feeling that relying on inherent traits such as competitiveness, rigidity in adherence to goals and structure, and tenacity. Numerous individuals interviewed seemed to be able to turn training into a non-conscious process, which in turn enabled them to persist in their adherence to training regimens. Others seemed to rely on their competitiveness to keep them going or to give them impetus to persist in multiple events.

A second passive persistence factor that was uncovered in the data was that of fear of failure/non-accomplishment. Some athletes that were interviewed seemed to be motivated by the fear of not finishing the race or not accomplishing their goals. They appeared to be more afraid of failure than of the training or event itself. Similar to Need Achievement Theory (Weinberg & Gould, 2011), these individuals appear to be low-achievers, and thus tend to avoid experience shame or failure (Gill, 2000).

Lastly, a passive persistence theme not previously reported in the literature that seemed to be pervasive across all interviews, and perhaps most strongly, was that of identity shift. All interviewees reported at some point having experienced a significant change in how they view themselves, and how they regard themselves as an athlete. All interviewees came from non-professional, non-athletic backgrounds, yet all of them currently consider themselves athletes. All interviewees at some point mentioned seeing themselves differently from when they began training, sometimes unconsciously. It appears that for those that persist, an identity shift occurs in which individuals begin to see themselves as triathletes, and persistence becomes an inherent trait that accompanies that shift in identity. Rather than not look forward to a rigorous workout, these individuals relish their fitness. Similarly, they may even experience guilt or feelings of

discomfort, even dysphoria, if they miss workouts. They also appear to achieve a significant amount of self-knowledge. It becomes normal to them to know just how much activity their bodies can endure, and what their bodies need in terms of nutrition and rest. Further, these individuals also tend to take on the status of IRONMAN like a badge, with many of them going so far as to solidify their accomplishment with a permanent symbol such as a tattoo or a special piece of jewelry.

### **Limitations**

This study has limitations that may affect the accuracy of its findings and should be acknowledged. First, the researcher was one who comes from a triathlon background. This may have been helpful in that it provided a level of understanding and empathy for the experiences of the interviewees, as well as helped the interviewees feel more comfortable and therefore willing to share personal information. However, it also precluded the possibility of bringing a true “beginner’s perspective” to the study, which may be a limitation. Similarly, the researcher’s own prior experience may have allowed bias to be introduced into the study.

Second, because the current study was interested in a particular age group (over 40), competing in a particular distance (half or full IRONMAN), there was a deliberate limitation of scope in the study. The current study did not investigate the experiences, motivations, and persistence factors for younger individuals, or those that compete only in short or intermediate-distance events. This limit in scope deliberately excluded potential participants, thereby limiting the study.

Third, because of the relatively small amount of literature that exists on non-professional triathletes, if something emerged in the data that was unclear or difficult to

understand, one could not turn to the existing literature for further explication. While this limitation was beyond the control of the researcher, it still served as an important limitation to the current study.

Lastly, the current study also focused exclusively on the experiences of individuals that continue to persist in their training for triathlon events. It would be beneficial to also gather data on individuals who are not currently training, or have discontinued training indefinitely. Doing so may shed further light on motivation and persistence factors, particularly on the factors that cause athletes to choose to discontinue.

### **Implications for Future Practice and Research**

The outcomes of this study may have implications for future practice and research. Given current obesity rates, this study may shed light on factors that may help not only motivate at-risk individuals to engage in long-term physical activity, but also to persist. Numerous interviewees remarked on how they were able to replace previous bad habits, particularly concerning nutrition and inactivity, with more healthy behaviors. If investigated more fully, this phenomenon may be particularly helpful to public health policy and initiatives, as well as inform self-transformation practices.

While the current study is limited in its scope and inference to larger populations, it does highlight some themes not previously mentioned in the research literature. Including these themes in future quantitative investigations on motivation in sports psychology may make for more robust findings.

Coaches and sport psychology professionals may also benefit by including some of the findings of the current study in practice. One such recommendation would be to utilize a tiered approach to triathlon training for non-professional athletes (i.e.



encouraging athletes to start with shorter races and progress systematically to longer ones, rather than start training for IRONMAN immediately). Doing so may help facilitate competence acquisition at a steady pace and allow sufficient time for the above-mentioned identity shift to occur. Further, coaches and sport psychology professionals may also help foster training persistence by educating would-be triathletes on the relational hazards of training, and actively planning how to navigate relationship issues that may occur.

## **Conclusion**

The idea for the current study grew out of my own experience with triathlon. I started because I gave in to peer pressure from my sister and brother, and because I wanted to improve my own physical fitness. However, I quickly became engrossed in the sport, and found myself becoming more and more invested. At some point, I realized that I had changed—I had become a triathlete, and that sudden onset and fervor with which it came piqued my curiosity. Why would someone get into it, coming from a non-professional athletic background, and having never really experimented previously with biking or swimming? However, what was even more interesting to me was the individuals who like me, seemed to start on a whim, but unlike me, were much older. Why would a middle-aged person simply up-and-start training for an IRONMAN? This purpose of this study was to investigate exactly that—the motivations, experiences, and transformations of individuals over the age of 40 who decide to participate in long-distance triathlon, despite coming from non-athletic backgrounds. While our answers vary, we all share one thing in common: triathlon has changed us.

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

## INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

Several conditions pertaining to the interview protocol as suggested by the regulations of the Committee on Human Subjects Research will be met. These include the following:

1. The interview subjects will be informed as to the nature of the research being conducted prior to their consent to participate in the study.
2. A signed letter of informed consent to participate in the study will be obtained from each participant.
3. Interview subjects will be informed that their participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, without prejudice, or penalty.
4. Every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview subjects.
5. Permission to audio-tape conversations will be requested and all interview subjects will be informed in advance when recording begins.
6. Interview subjects will be told of the accessibility of their individual transcripts so that they may suggest changes and/or corrections to the researcher.



APPENDIX B  
COVER LETTER

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Charles Claiborn in the Department of Counseling and Counseling Psychology at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study on the experiences of non-professional athletes as they prepare for and compete in long-distance endurance triathlon events.

I am requesting your participation in an interview that will involve approximately 1-2 hours of your time. The interviews will be audiotaped and the tapes will be kept in a secure place. The tapes will be destroyed after 1 year. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research may be published, but your name will not be used. If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me at (435) 851-2552.

Sincerely,

T. Michael Liddell  
Doctoral Student  
Arizona State University

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL\*

Thank you for agreeing to this interview today. I am going to ask you some general questions about your experiences training and participating in triathlon. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research may be published, but your name will not be used. If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me at (435) 851-2552.

Tell me about how you got into triathlon.

Tell me about how you decided to do an IRONMAN.

What does it mean for you?

What has been most difficult about the process for you?

What has been most helpful to you during difficult times in your training or racing?

How have injuries affected your experience, (if at all)?

What is different about you now, compared to when you started?

What have you learned about yourself through the process?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Thank you.

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\* While the interviewer will present the material/questions provided in the agenda, the interviewer will also ask additional questions not listed here, dependent upon the information provided by the interviewee (as dictated by grounded theory). Thus, not all interviews will be uniform in length or content.

APPENDIX D

AUDIOTAPED INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

## AUDIOTAPED INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Researcher:

Address:

Phone:

E-mail:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. Your participation will involve an audiotaped interview session lasting approximately 1-2 hours. This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the experiences of non-professional athletes as they prepare for and compete in long-distance endurance triathlon events. The information and conclusions of the study will be used to write a research paper that may be published. The interview will be transcribed and made available to you in order to check the accuracy of the transcription. The transcripts will not be available to any other individual without your permission.

Your suggestions and concerns are important. You are therefore encouraged to ask questions at any time about the nature of the study. Please contact me at any time at the address/phone/email listed above. In addition, if you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through Ms. Karol Householder at (480) 965-6788.

I guarantee that the following conditions will be met:

1. Your real name will not be used in the written report; instead, you and any other person or place names involved in the study will be given pseudonyms that will be used in all written records.
2. No audio-tapes will be used for any purpose other than to do this study, and will not be played for any reason other than to do this study.
3. The audio-tapes will be kept in a secure place to which no one other than the researcher has access. The tapes will be erased after 1 year from the completion of the study.
4. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point of the study, for any reason, without penalty and without any prejudice, and the information collected and recorded will be turned over to you.
5. You may receive a copy of the transcript and/or report so that you have the opportunity to suggest changes and/or corrections to the researcher.

Do you give consent to participate in the above study?

YES \_\_\_\_\_

Do you grant permission to the researcher to be quoted directly?

YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

Do you grant permission to be audio-taped?

YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the terms indicated above:

Respondent's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the terms indicated above:

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_