

Jeff Reider

63-year-old Ironman Triathlete.

Interviewed by Susan Kehoe, Ph.D.

Photography by Jerry Zolynsky

Jeff Reider is a mild-mannered dentist who turns into a “superhero” Ironman when he puts on running shoes. A Birmingham resident, he grew up in New Jersey near Ford’s Edison Assembly plant. While studying microbiology at the University of Virginia, he became fascinated with the bacteria causing dental decay. He decided to enter dental school and has been an oral surgeon since 1983, practicing at Midwest Dental.

But about a year ago, Reider became an Ironman triathlete. Not only is that unusual for a 63-year-old man, but he hadn’t exercised in his entire life. “In high school” he said, “I didn’t play sports and was never picked for teams. I did get a letter though; it was for choir.”

Reider’s well-intentioned partner, Chuck, gave him a gift card to a local gym around 2009. He didn’t like the gym, classes or workout routines. But that summer in Harbor Springs, he was inspired by watching people run the July 4th marathon. He decided it was something he wanted to do.

How did you prepare for your first marathon?

At the time, I didn’t think it was necessary to “learn” how to run. You just get up and do it! I drove my neighborhood planning a route and leaving water bottles for hydration behind the bushes. After about a month, Chuck insisted that I at least needed a decent pair of running shoes. That’s when I met my mentor, Tom Artushin, a local runner who works at Ford. He made me promise to meet every Sunday so he could coach me. We connected, and he became my role model. Soon I joined his running group and completed the Chicago marathon. I loved it.

What’s your most memorable marathon?

The first time I ran the Boston Marathon was in 2013. I was one mile from the finish line when the bombs exploded. Uncertain of what happened, the runners were immediately stopped and moved away from the site. It was devastating to learn what occurred. People had dropped everything to run for their lives and all the abandoned backpacks had to be checked before anyone could approach the area. I return every year to run the marathon as a show of support.



How did you go from being a marathon runner to a triathlete? The same way I began running. I was inspired by people completing triathlons and thought I wanted to do it. The Ironman Triathlon may be the most difficult one-day sporting event. That’s because you have to swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles and run 26.2 miles — in that order and without a break. In addition, each of the three events has strict time limits for completion. It seemed like the ultimate challenge, and I gave myself two years to do it. I completed my first Ironman Triathlon in October 2015 in Louisville, Ky. by swimming in the Ohio River, biking through horse country and running through downtown Louisville.

What was your biggest obstacle in preparing for the triathlon? Well, the biggest problem was that I couldn’t swim. I was 61 and never even had my head under water in a pool. It wasn’t the fear of drowning, just the fear of humiliating myself or having to call for help. Swimming is not something you “get up and do,” so I took lessons at Tweak in Birmingham. My friends, Jean and Kai, took me out on Walnut Lake for practice. They would swim ahead and wait for me to catch up, and then continue on until I learned to do the 2.4-mile stretch

independently and in the time specified to stay in the race.

What other sports activities do you do?

Besides Boston, I started doing the 26.2-mile Paris marathon in 2015, as part of my training for the Ironman. Chuck started running with me, and joined me in Paris, Boston and on a run through Big Sur last year. I also brave the cold to do the Polar Plunge on New Year’s Day.

How has being an Ironman triathlete changed your life? Some things come full circle. As the kid who was picked last for the schoolyard team, I was recently named “Class Athlete” at my 45th high school reunion.

Also, my mentor, Tom, who I met when shopping for my first pair of running shoes, became a big part of my life. Last year, he officiated at my marriage to Chuck. Sometimes it’s the people you meet by accident who turn your life in an entirely new direction.

What don’t people know about you?

I have an Ironman tattoo on my ankle. **NS**