



Iron woman

Anuradha Vaidyanathan feels her best when she's competing in the punishing 17-hour Ironman Triathlon. She tells **Madhuri Velegar K** that the triathlon may be backbreaking, but it lifts her spirits

Anuradha Vaidyanathan has achieved what no other Indian has even attempted—she's the only Ironman in India. In 2006, she completed the Ironman triathlon for the first time, a gruelling 17-hour race that begins at 7 am with a 3.86-km swim followed by a 180.25-km bicycle race and finally a 43-km run—all without a break. It requires years of training with state-of-the-art facilities and expert coaches before one can even think of entering the race—all the things that Anu had no access to. What makes Anu's feat even more inspiring is that she chose to train in India instead of the US.

Anu decided to compete in the Ironman when she returned to India in 2004 after completing her engineering degree in the US. Despite the lack of infrastructure, for the next two years, Anu trained diligently. "I used to wake up at 4 am and bike for five hours," she remembers. "If you started that early, you could hit the highway in a couple of hours and that was when the actual training started. There were no training grounds in the city. And with the traffic situation in India..." In addition to the poor facilities, there was also the underlying discrimination



The Ironman Triathlon is a gruelling 17-hour race that requires years of training. Due to the lack of training grounds, Anu had to begin training at 4 am to be able to reach the highways before the roads were clogged with traffic

Initially, Anu couldn't afford spandex and had to race in pyjamas

WHAT IS THE TRIATHLON?

The Ironman Triathlon is organised by the World Triathlon Corporation (WTC). The first Ironman race was held in the US in 1978 by US Navy Commander John Collins. Fifteen athletes competed in the race in the first year and 50 in the next. In 1982, the Ironman Triathlon made history with two women competing for the title. Julie Moss, a college student who was competing only as a research exercise for her physiology thesis, collapsed just yards away from the finish line due to fatigue and dehydration, losing the first place to Kathleen McCartney. Since then, simply finishing the Ironman has been a cause for victory for many athletes. The triathlon was added as an Olympic sport at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney as a shorter distance race. Although there are a number of WTC-sanctioned and non-sanctioned triathlons, the Hawaiian Triathlon is regarded as the most prestigious and punishing triathlon event worldwide. Anu is the only Indian to have competed in and completed the Ironman triathlon.



Anu is the only Ironman in India

against sportswomen. "I've met coaches who told me to stop 'wasting my life' and get married. At one of the sports clubs, they divided the pool so that men and women were separated. So, we got a 12.5-metre area to practise in a 25-metre-long pool. When I objected, I was told to comply or get out. So I did what I had to do," Anu says matter-of-factly. "But I've succeeded. That's all that matters now."

From Ironman to Ultraman

Once she'd successfully completed the Ironman Triathlon, Anu set herself a new goal—to compete in the Ultraman race in Canada in 2009. The race includes swimming for 10 km in the ocean, cycling for 430 km and then running a double marathon of 84 km. "This race happens over three days, but you do get to sleep at night,"

she smiles. Anuradha completed the the Ironman Canada just three weeks after competing in Ultraman, making her the first person in the world to attempt such back-to-back racing.

No Olympics for Anu

While Anuradha is proud that she's brought glory to India, she does not want to compete in the Olympics. "Not unless I get systematic support from the government. But I am not hopeful," she shrugs. "In any case, I believe my true gift lies in participating in long-distance

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ANURADHA PASSES ON THE BATON

For athletes: "All I can say is that you should be positive at all times; working away negativity takes up too much time, and then you've lost the game. Be dedicated to your training. Talk less, do more. Also, wear the right gear. The worst thing I have ever done is wearing pyjamas for a cycle race instead of spandex because I couldn't afford it. I suffered for weeks after, but I learnt my lesson."

For all women: "Exercise can make you happy. You don't have to tell the world that you're going out for a walk or a bicycle ride at 5 am; just get up and go.

triathlons and not the short Olympic one." Anu's low expectations from the government stem from personal experience. "Nobody paid attention to me even after I had completed the triathlon," she says. I was training one day near a film's set and a lot of journalists had gatered. That's when the press first covered me."

When asked about her role model, Anu doesn't have to think about the answer. "It's marathon runner Leelamma Alphanso from Mumbai. She recently shared her training stories with me. The older runners are inspiring," says Anuradha. "After the Mumbai marathon, the media was going ga-ga over Milind Soman's timing. No one spoke about the runners who had completed the race in half his time. This taught me that it's not really about talking about what you do, what matters is that you do it."

Today, in addition to being a sportswoman, she's also the CEO of PatnMarks, an intellectual property rights consulting firm with offices in Bangalore, Chennai and US, and teaches computer architecture at IIT, Ropar. But still, the poor treatment of women in sports in India does rankle. "There are problems of infrastructure, facilities and funding," says Anu. "Also, thanks to our cultural conditioning, we tend to not come out and speak for ourselves. Unless we do, the situation will remain the same." ●