

Iron Man

Dayspring man running, biking and swimming competitively at age 69

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Triathlete Ron Allen exits the LaHave River after completing a training swim. (Judy Allen)

Life's a journey along an unpredictable highway of challenges and opportunities.

Typically inscribed on a headstone are two dates, separated by a dash. This seemingly insignificant horizontal stroke is actually the most important element of the inscription.

Simply put, the dash, devoid of detail or context, signifies a life lived between the dates of joyous birth and inevitable passing.

Ron Allen, an affable 69-year-old Dayspring resident, seems to be living his dash to the fullest.

By his own admission, Allen let his physical well-being get out of control after marriage to Judy and the birth of the couple's first of two sons. He weighed more than 250 pounds, and was listless.

In his 40s he made up his mind he was going to lose some weight, or run the risk of dying young.

Allen started riding a racing bicycle and learned that being physically active was invigorating. In his mid-50s, he combined bike riding with running — a pairing that made him feel even better.

"When I was at these events and around other like-minded, often younger, individuals I was feeling healthier, and I was exposed to so much fun and enthusiasm. It was three or four hours of good vibrations. I forged some good friendships," said Allen.

"I'm not comfortable being around people who look at life through a negative lens. If I'm going to be an example late in life, I might as well set myself up as a good example," he said.

In 2002, Allen added swimming to his bike/run training, swimming measured laps from the dock at his home on the LaHave River. Soon afterwards he entered a few sprint triathlons — 750-metre swim, 20-kilometre bike race and five-kilometre run. He didn't place high in any of his races, but he didn't embarrass himself either. And he felt better. He had dropped weight and was relatively fit.

Allen worked in a management role at Michelin in Bridgewater, retiring in 2007 after 37 years.

In 2003, Allen learned his company had an opening for the famed Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii.

“With little experience, I thought I would go for it. I qualified through Michelin and went to Hawaii. It was both the best and worst thing that happened to me in my life. I trained all summer before the event, then I finished the Ironman in 17 hours and 15 minutes. In order to receive the finishing medal and T-shirt I had to finish in 17 hours. Talk about my 15 minutes of infamy,” said Allen.

“That said, I have since completed eight triathlons and I wouldn’t trade Hawaii for any of them. Yes, it was my worst experience, but that first race in Hawaii opened my mind,” he said.

“It altered my life. Participants had their ages printed on their legs. During the race I was passing men and women who were in their 70s, even a man in his 80s, I thought to myself, wow, if these people can do this, maybe there’s hope I can do this, even into my mid- to late-70s,” said Allen.

“That’s when it was implanted in my brain that you don’t have to give up doing things like this as you age. I came home and decided I was going to keep training and competing,” he said.

Allen’s zeal for training was challenged when, in 2004, he was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation. “I struggled with that for five or six months. Every time I tried to train, my heart would be all over the map. It was frustrating. Instead of training, I was beating a path to my family doctor and cardiologist,” said Allen.

When his condition improved in late 2004, Allen received the green light to ride with a group that planned to bicycle across Nova Scotia to raise awareness of heart disease and cancer. He became involved with the Heartland Tour, a bike ride that promotes the benefits of physical activity, and for the past eight years has been riding with members of GiveToLive, a group that organizes long-distance bike rides to raise money for cancer-related charities.

Organizers of GiveToLive say their organization has become rooted in the belief that everyone can be happier and healthier through generosity, fitness and the achievement of the extraordinary.

Allen participated in GiveToLive’s most recent initiative — the Big Ride, a 1,600 kilometre relay ride from Ottawa to Halifax. Fourteen riders, aged 25 to 69 (Allen), paid \$250 each to cover the cost of the escort motorhomes. Each rider, who also personally paid for meals and expenses, had to raise at least \$4,000 to participate. More than \$150,000 was raised for cancer research during the ride.

The GiveToLive group, which also supports Brigadoon Village, an Annapolis Valley camp for chronically ill children, has raised more than \$2 million in the past five years.

In September 2013, Allen competed alongside 8,000 competitors, including 240 Canadians, at the World Triathlon Championships in London, England. Hampered by a hernia injury, he was not happy with his time, but he finished in the middle of the pack among 85 entrants in his age category.

For the record, Allen’s best time in the triathlon was posted at the Penticton Ironman in 2007, where he completed a 3.8- kilometre swim, 180-kilometre bike race and 42 kilometre run in 13:25:24, much faster than his first Ironman in Hawaii, where officials almost had to use a calendar to time him.

Allen gives back to a sport that has given him so much by volunteering at various races throughout the province, assisting with organizational duties and ensuring riders are safe along the routes.

So, what’s next for a perpetually-in-motion guy who turns 70 next May?

“I’m going to participate in the Big Swim next year from New Brunswick to PEI,” said Allen.

Allen offers this advice to seniors looking to improve their level of physical activity.

“Start by walking two blocks, then three, then work up to longer distances — maybe swimming at the new pool in Bridgewater. Start putting one foot or one arm in front of the other. Do it with a friend, but just do it. Just because you’re in your 60s or 70s, it doesn’t mean it’s all over,” said Allen.

“Things don’t work as well as they used to, but if you stay active, you’ll keep rolling,” he said.

Ron Allen’s dash is alive and well.

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