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Chip Corwin '05

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Bond of Iron

Propelled by the drive to do something big, several Wesleyan alumni strain to reach their sport's Holy Grail.

Story by Chip Corwin '05



Van Miller (above) trains for the bicycle portion of the 140-mile Ironman race.

After deciding to sign up for the Ironman Triathlon, one of sport's toughest events, Van Miller '04 recalls being asked lots of questions, usually starting with the word "why."

"Everyone is kind of like, 'Why would you do something like that?'" he says. "That's a hard thing to try and answer."

It was hard to answer even to himself at times, such as when he found himself doing 100-mile-plus bike rides in scorching heat on lonely country roads. But "why?" is a question you can't afford to ask yourself if you want to finish a race where participants swim, bike and run a total of 140.6 miles, from sunset to sundown, with no breaks. And they even pay to do it.

At the Ironman Wisconsin event held in Madison last September, more than 2,500 people plunked down the \$600 admission price, collected whether they finished or not. Among them was Miller, who works as an admissions counselor for Illinois Wesleyan and was competing in his first Ironman after a year of training in and around Bloomington.

First held in 1978, there are now 21 Ironman Triathlon qualifying races held annually in the U.S. and abroad, culminating in the world championship in Hawaii. The races consist of a 2.4-mile open-water swim followed by a 112-mile bike ride and end with a 26.2-mile run — yes, you finish with a marathon.

According to the many Ironman competitors with Wesleyan connections, thinking of the race as merely a test of pain tolerance is the wrong way to look at it. Ironman competitors don't seek pain; they simply try to satisfy their outsized ambitions.

“Ironman is the Holy Grail of triathlons,” says César Valverde, an associate professor of Hispanic studies at IWU who has completed nine Ironmans in places as varied as Louisville and Switzerland. “I think anyone who starts doing triathlons hopes to do one someday.”

“I needed to prove something to myself,” says Alexis Webb '01, who has participated in the Ironman Arizona twice and plans to do three Ironmans in 2009. “I wanted to accomplish something.”

Ambition is what brought Miller to the starting line of the Ironman Wisconsin. “I started thinking, would I like to do that?” says Miller, who had previously competed in the Chicago Marathon and an Olympic distance triathlon. “Then, could I do it?”

Van's elder sister, Alison, who was in Madison to cheer her brother, says he has a history of dreaming big. “He doesn't get interested in anything unless it's really hard.”

Brandon Christol '04, who works with Miller in University Admissions and was also at the race, agrees. “Van is a very focused person. If he sets his sights on something, there's nothing that's going to keep him from his goal. I don't think I've ever seen him do anything only 95 percent.”

“He's adventurous,” adds fellow admissions counselor Khair Sadrud-Din '05.

That sense of adventure led him to take a caddying job after graduation with classmate Mike Elwood '04 at Bandon Dunes in Oregon. The two lived a Bohemian lifestyle, exploring the Pacific coast in their spare time. When he returned from Oregon, Miller was offered his job in the IWU Admissions Office. But before starting work, he took off again for two months to Australia, Fiji and New Zealand with his fiancé, Laine Twanow '04. In 2006, he traveled to Iceland with Christol and Piotr Dabrowski '04, rooming at the house of a stranger they found through a Web site called couchsurfing.com.

Whether crashing on an Icelandic stranger's couch or training for a triathlon, “My common thought progression is, well, is it something I'd like to do, or is it something I'd regret not doing?” Miller says. “Going to Iceland and Oregon, I thought I'd like to do it at some point in my life and realized there'd be no better time than now. I thought, ‘I'm not getting any younger.’”

With those thoughts in mind, Miller found himself in his car in early September 2007, driving up to Madison to watch his first Ironman Triathlon. “I went by myself, and I knew there was a good chance I was going to sign up” for the 2008 race, he says.

After watching the race, Miller stayed the night with Joe Binder '04 — a Ph.D. student in chemistry at UW-Madison and himself an “ultra-marathoner” — and registered for the Ironman the next day.

Everyday people

“When I signed up, I didn’t know what I was doing,” Miller says, “and that’s when I met Andy Sweet.”

It turns out that Sweet '03 is good to know if you’re planning to make the Ironman commitment.

Sweet has done five Ironmans, most recently last November in Panama City, Fla. He is what you might call an Ironman addict. He finds the race-day atmosphere intoxicating.

“I want to go into a race not knowing if I can do it,” says Sweet, explaining the attraction.

When he watched his first Ironman competition in 2002, Sweet decided he had to do it himself. Only Sweet had an added obstacle — he had broken his neck only a month prior in a mountain-biking accident. “So I was sitting there watching people take themselves to the limits of their natural ability and wondering if I’d ever be able to do something like that again,” he says.

After recovering from his injury, Sweet completed Ironman Wisconsin in 2004. During his recuperation, he took inspiration from the athletes he’d watched two years earlier. “I thought, ‘It’s not just elites.’ The vast majority are everyday people; they work nine-to-five and get their training in when they can. I thought, ‘These guys are doing it, and I want to see if I can do it.’”

When Sweet offered advice to Miller on how to train for his first Ironman, he emphasized the mental aspects of the race. “The popular misconception is that you have to train as if



Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies César Valverde (above, with daughter Ema), at the finish of Ironman California in 2001. Valverde, who has competed in nine Ironmans so far, says that training for the race is the greatest challenge.

you're doing each race (swim, bike, and run) individually," Sweet says, "and then you will have the feeling that you're overwhelmed."

The ritual of training for an Ironman is as much a part of the experience as the race itself, says Valverde. "The race is the cherry on top. It's getting up to train on those rainy days or icy, snowy days. If you do the training right, you can do things you never thought were possible, but that's at the end of a process."

To get in shape for the Ironman, Miller typically trained 10 to 14 hours a week. To keep himself fresh, he would alternate the three disciplines — swimming, biking and running. The easiest of those for Miller, a former Titan cross-country captain, was running. "The hardest for me were the long bike rides," he says.

Miller did three 112-mile bike rides to prepare. Each ride took around seven hours to complete. On his first outing, he didn't apply sunscreen properly and still carried the sunburn marks three months later. His second was in the rural areas outside of Bloomington. "I just rode around cornfields for 112 miles," he says. "It was 94 degrees. It was pretty miserable. Throughout the last hour I had to fight the urge to just lie down on the side of the road. I just wanted to go to sleep."

He did his third 112-miler on the Madison course. When he finished, Miller realized he didn't have the energy to drive back to Bloomington. "I just reclined in the driver's seat in an Arby's parking lot. All I could think was, 'I can't imagine running a marathon right now.' It was an 'oh no' moment."

Other long rides weren't so bad. Those took place in his living room with the aid of a prop for his bike. Miller said he caught up on a lot of movies. "All I had was a little TV-VCR combo and two fans. I watched 25 movies on VHS from the '80s and early '90s." During one ride, he viewed the entire Star Wars trilogy consecutively, plus a Tom Cruise flick. "I finished Return of the Jedi," he says, "and I still had to put in Days of Thunder."

Entering a new realm



Miller expresses elation as he crosses the finish line at his first Ironman.

Despite the hours of training, nothing could really prepare Miller for race day.

"Your head just plays all kinds of games with you," Valverde says. "There is a devil on your shoulder who says you should quit."

"Demons will sneak in" your head, says Sweet. After being out on the course for so long, "it's hard to tell which ones are

coming from reality or from boredom. Naturally, our own minds try to trick us.”

It’s the struggle to overcome mental doubts as well as physical exhaustion that makes finishing an Ironman such a transformative experience. Every person who crosses the tape at the end of the 140.6-mile race hears his or her name over the PA system. “When you hear the announcer say, ‘You are an Ironman,’ you enter a new realm,” Sweet says. “You did something you thought was only for elite athletes. You’ve done something that brings you to a higher level.”

Asked to define that “new realm,” Sweet says that it’s “a brotherhood, a family. It’s just the shared knowledge that it takes so much commitment, so much time. It’s the physical and emotional side that defines that new realm. All the things you’ve worked for have come to fruition, and you’ve maybe inspired someone else.”

“There’s an energy at an Ironman event that’s hard to explain,” Webb agrees. “It touches anyone who races in it, who volunteers for it or who comes to watch and support the athletes.”

“Everyone’s pumped up to see you,” recalls Byron Lubenkov ’04, who did the Ironman Wisconsin in 2003.

As runners at this year’s Ironman Wisconsin came in, they often grabbed their children from the crowd to cross the finish line together, and it was easy to tell that these Ironmen and women were filled with joy — not so much out of relief that it was over, but more so because they had tested their limits, body and soul, and had indeed discovered new realms of possibility.

Miller finished 85th out of 152 in the men’s age 25-29 division with a time of 12:34.0. Pulling him through those 12-plus grueling hours were thousands of fans who packed the sunny streets of Madison, cheering on each competitor. “I couldn’t have hoped for a better day in terms of weather, fans and how it all played out,” he says. “I have no regrets.”

Shortly after Miller crossed the line, he recalled a mix of feelings during the race that ranged from doubt to elation. There were times I was thinking, ‘Holy cow, this is tough,’” he said. “But then there were moments of realization that I’m really out here doing it.”