

FIRST TRIATHLONS -- DAVID WEINGARD
Excerpt from "First Triathlons – Personal Stories of Becoming a Triathlete"
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DAVID WEINGARD

DOB: 9-26-63

Residence: Manhattan, New York

Occupation: Microsoft sales

First Triathlon: 1991 Westchester Sprint Triathlon, Rye, New York

David Weingard has a passion for running and doing triathlons. He ran the 1980 New York City Marathon when he was just seventeen years old and did his first triathlon in 1991 when the sport was still being discovered on the East Coast. His athletic life took a sudden crash in the summer of 2000 while he was training for an eight-stage survival triathlon. Overly fatigued, he went to the doctor and was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Never the quitter, he learned how to live lift as a diabetic and went on to run the New York City Marathon ten weeks after the devastating news, finishing the race one minute off his 3:43 PR. In 2003 he completed the Lake Placid Ironman and two years later did the 2005 Ironman Coeur d'Alene in Idaho, raising more than twenty four thousand dollars for the juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. "I'm trying to spread the message that we can get through rough patches one step at a time," says Weingard. Up until his diagnosis, his lift was a pretty smooth ride.

"I started running at fifteen and ran on my high school cross-country team. As I became a better runner, I gravitated to long distance and loved it. I did my first marathon at age seventeen in 4:07.

"When I heard about this new sport that involved swimming, biking, and running I was interested and then got really excited when I saw the Hawaii Ironman on television. It looked like an amazing challenge and I thought the cross-training would be good for my running."

Although Weingard was very impressed with the Hawaii Ironman, he never entertained the thought of doing one. He thought it would be just as cool and satisfying to do the shorter distances. Plus he looked forward to the challenge of learning to swim and bike effectively.

"I started to read triathlon magazines, searched for information on how to train, and joined a pool to become a better swimmer. Married with my first child on the way, I thought the focus of training would relieve some of the stress I was feeling. I wasn't looking to win, just wanted to finish.

"I broke out my old college clunker and did some fifteen-mile rides and that was it for the bike training. I didn't do any brick training and as a runner, didn't bother with any special running drills. It actually never dawned on me to link the three sports together. I viewed them as three separate events, not three consecutive events linked with no rest in between. I didn't even bother with a wet suit because I didn't know if I would like the sport enough to incur costs. My attitude was to just wing it and have fun.

"The day of the event, the field of seven hundred mostly first-timers at the Westchester Triathlon didn't really know how to pull this together or what to expect. I clearly remember when people came out of the water they literally took off all their clothes, dried off, and changed into their bike clothes. Men and woman, standing naked in front of each other and not caring. That's how new the sport was. We didn't have the benefit of all the instructional books and magazines that are available today.

"After getting on the bike, I realized I should have done some more bike training. I was tired from the swim and my old college bike, hefty to begin with, felt like it weighed five hundred pounds. That was definitely the low point of the three events.

"Finally, I got to run, the event I had been waiting for all morning. At that time, the run finished on a high school track and I felt like a million bucks crossing the finish line. It was an amazing day and I held on to that T-shirt for fifteen years. Although the marathon was a bigger event, I felt extreme pride in finishing a triathlon."

Back in 1991, to finish a triathlon was a huge deal even at the sprint distance. Weingard did two more sprint triathlons that season and continued to do them for the next seven years, juggling his training while attending to his family of three sons (Steven, Daniel and Jacob) and more job responsibility. In 1998 he stepped up to the half Ironman Triathlon in Rhode Island and finally got hooked.

"After the half, I knew I had to do a full Ironman. I was now committed to investing in a new bike, wet suit, the whole nine yards. There was no going back."

He worked with Long Island Team in Training (TNT) and pioneered their efforts with triathlon. He chose TNT for its support for finding a cure for cancer and related diseases. His mother died of breast cancer at the age of forty so he wanted to raise money for the Leukemia Society in her honor. For six months he juggled family life, a full-time job, the training, and fund-raising for TNT in order to get ready for the Roth Ironman in Germany, in June 1999. At the time, there weren't many Ironman events in the United States, which is why he made the decision to go to Germany. While training, Weingard made the psychological switch from marathoner to triathlete, incorporating all three sports into his weekly training.

Back from Germany, he kept up his weekly training and the next year began training for an eight-stage survival triathlon in the Shawangunk Mountains in New Paltz, New York, called SOS. Feeling abnormally fatigued and experiencing rapid weight loss, he went to the doctor for some blood work and was given the news that would change his life forever. He was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, formerly referred to as juvenile diabetes, characterized by high blood glucose levels. The disease occurs when the body's immune system attacks and destroys the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas, which stops producing insulin.

"My first thought after hearing the news was, *Will I die?* Then I heard all the potential complications like heart problems, loss of vision, amputation. I couldn't believe it. I didn't even know what type 1 diabetes was and I had it. I went home with a blood test kit, an insulin pump, and a needle.

"The only thing I knew for certain was that I would give 100 percent of my energy to fight this the best way I could and vowed not to let the disease change my life. Trying to keep that vow has been a humbling journey."

With a lot of conviction and personal faith, ten weeks later he ran the 2000 New York City Marathon, finishing one minute off his personal best time. He checked his blood levels every three miles during the marathon with a testing kit he carries in his shorts pocket. He also carries glucose tablets and an insulin pump clipped to his shorts. But Weingard doesn't let the extra baggage of having type 1 diabetes interfere with his running or his life. In June 2001 he ventured back into triathlons, a very risky undertaking.

"The risk of doing a triathlon of any length as a diabetic is that I have to disconnect from my insulin pump during the swim. For anywhere from half an hour up to two hours, my body is exercising at a high level but not getting the insulin it needs. I could become groggy, disoriented, I could pass out; and I could even die.

"I selected a sprint distance for my first reentry into the sport and was very scared. I was literally starting out all over again, being very cautious and conscientious. I had to prove to myself I could do it. My doctors weren't comfortable with it, just told me to be careful. The irony of diabetes is that the one thing you can do for maintenance prevention is exercise, stay in shape, and follow healthy nutrition. But doing exercise, especially extreme exercise, and keeping on top of my blood sugar levels is very complex. To prepare for the triathlon I did simulations of what I would do on the day of the race: got up at the same hour, ate the same foods at the same time. The swim is the most difficult phase of the triathlon for me because during the swim I can't monitor myself"

He pulled off the sprint distance early in the summer 2001 season and then took a chance and competed in the Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon in San Francisco, a major comeback for Weingard for many reasons.

"I was very, very nervous doing Alcatraz. For the first time since being diagnosed I would be without my insulin pump for almost two hours. I left the pump inside my bike helmet at transition and walked away thinking I could die out there in the chilly waters of San Francisco Bay. Boarding the boat to Alcatraz, I kept looking at the shore hoping I would make it back. The mile-and-a-half swim seemed to take forever. Half way there, I looked up to see San Francisco in front of me and Alcatraz behind me. I had been gone for over an hour. I knew I had to focus and not panic if I wanted to reach shore and see my kids again. I put my head back in the water and didn't stop till I reached shore. Finishing that triathlon was a turning point for me. I knew I could go farther.

In 2002 he completed the Eagleman Half Ironman in Maryland, his first major distance triathlon as a diabetic. He practiced for months, monitoring his blood sugar levels, insulin regulation, and diet. He taped a testing kit to his bike aerobars and tested his blood sugar seventeen times during the six hours and twenty minutes it took him to complete the course.

"I cried when I crossed the finish line at Eagleman. I felt in some way I had beat diabetes. And I knew I could go on and do a full Ironman as a diabetic."

He immediately started training for the 2003 Lake Placid Ironman, and raised eleven thousand dollars for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (GDRF). He completed the event, becoming one of a handful of type 1 diabetics in the world to ever complete an Ironman race. After Lake Placid, David continued marathon and triathlon racing, and in June 2005 he completed Ironman Coeur d'Alene in Idaho. He clocked his fastest swim time despite breaking a bone in his hand four weeks prior to the race. In November 2005, he ran his twenty-fifth New York City Marathon in 4:37, just thirty minutes over his time as a seventeen-year old. Every day, every event, is a test for Weingard. At Lake Placid it rained and his testing kit stopped working. Now he travels with a backup kit. "My testing kit looks like a cell phone propped up on my bars and I get a look of crazy looks. Someone asked me if I was sending e-mails during the race.

"We all have tough moments in life and need to know we'll get through them. Living with diabetes and continuing my life as a triathlete has taught me anything is possible. My triathlon life came full circle in 2005 when I returned to the Westchester Triathlon. When I did my first one in 1991 I was a young, healthy twenty-seven-year-old kid. Fifteen years later I returned a dad of three boys and with diabetes."

Weingard has raised close to fifty thousand dollars for JDRF and the Leukemia Society. He is a sought-after speaker and inspires everyone who meets him with his courage, discipline, and accomplishments. He doesn't let diabetes get in the way of meeting his goals. He receives e-mails and letters from people around the world asking for advice and thanking him for his positive energy.

Weingard is currently looking for a way to combine his professional background with his passion for helping people with diabetes by launching an online service, www.fitness4diabetics.com, that will provide integrated fitness and nutritional services to people with diabetes.

"The Ironman motto is 'Anything is Possible.' I've taken that motto as my own. In believing that anything truly is possible, my accomplishments have allowed me to make a difference in the world by giving people the confidence that they too can live with, and overcome, their own obstacles."

What He's Learned

"I can sum this up in two thoughts: Always be prepared for anything, and always have a positive attitude no matter what obstacles come your way. Being prepared means having backup gear. Flat tires happen. Make sure you have a spare and know how to put it on. Warm days turn cold and vice versa. Make sure you have extra clothes for any weather condition. As a diabetic, my backup gear also includes extra insulin pumps, testing kits, and other medical supplies. If any of my medical supplies fail me, it can be a lot worse than a flat tire; it could be more like a flatliner.

"And if that flat tire happens, approach it with a positive attitude. Don't waste energy brewing and stewing over what went wrong. Fix it and get on with the race. You never know who else may have had a flat tire, or a bad swim, or developed a sore blister. Stay focused on your own race and in the end, be proud of your accomplishments."
