



pushing the limits

At the Ford Ironman Florida triathlon in Panama City Beach, athletes of all ages and abilities swim, bike, and run their way toward a grueling, but unforgettable, finish.

by Nancy Henderson ■ photography by Steve Gates

dRESSED MORE FOR THE SLOPES THAN THE BEACH, thousands of spectators are bundled in their coats, swarming the snowy white shoreline to watch the first leg of the race in the 2006 Ford Ironman Florida triathlon. As fans vie for vantage points behind the Boardwalk Beach Resort, a perky announcer warns against trampling the dune grasses. Meanwhile, a handsome athlete plants a good-bye kiss on his girlfriend as fervently as if he were marching off to war. Other athletes jog nervously, and a few practice yoga, oblivious to the rumble of the crowd and the strong northwest wind that will challenge their swim in the Gulf of Mexico.

More than twenty-two hundred athletes will compete in November's grueling triathlon in Panama City Beach, the eighth to be held here, in which participants swim 2.4 miles, bike 112, and run 26.2. Half are first-timers, and about one hundred are professionals. But the majority are amateurs here for the fun of it. Unlike some of her many competitors, forty-nine-year-old Noreen Burke, an energetic, reed-slender nurse practitioner with icy blue eyes, has skipped her warm-ups this

morning. "It's just another training day," she says, laughing. "But I'm nervous." Her sister Betty Groh, who traveled from Boston, hugs Burke before she joins the others in the shallow green water. "She just wants to finish," Groh confides. "She will be awfully disappointed if she doesn't."

Elsewhere on the beach, fifty-year-old Richard Meek psychs himself up for the Ironman, his fourth since 2002. "The ocean at sunrise is generally just like a mirror, so your first lap is no different than swimming in the lake," says the tall, easygoing chief accounting officer from Chattanooga, Tennessee. "The second loop around, you're starting to get some waves and some wind. I'm sure people who swim in the ocean every day have it timed perfectly and know how to breathe and not get slapped in the face with a wave, but I always seem to turn my head at the wrong time."

Today he will have plenty of company. At 6:50 a.m., pros wearing gold caps plunge into the ocean. The crowd, spread like a thick blanket from the hotel to the shore, watches with concern as some athletes veer off course. "I can't believe those waves," says one spectator. Despite their excitement, fans are

polite, apologizing when they accidentally bump someone with a hefty backpack, camera, or sign. "You Can Do It," "See You at the Finish Line," and "Chicks Rule" are just a few such signs spectators carry to support the athletes. After all, they are in the same boat, trying to spot husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers.

Ten minutes later, a much larger group of amateur racers charges into the surf, flailing their arms like broad-winged pelicans diving for fish. A flock of seagulls reels overhead, the white, black-tipped bodies a perfect complement to the throng of jet-black wet suits. "Remember," proclaims the announcer, "the pain is temporary, the gain is forever."

The gain, of course, is exactly why these "ordinary" athletes from around the world spend the better part of a year training for the Ironman. While vacationing with his family in the North Carolina mountains in 1998, Meek, a budding marathon runner, viewed back-to-back Ironman reruns on the only TV station the set picked up. As he watched an eighty-year-old triathlete cross the finish line and narrowly miss the midnight disqualification cutoff, Meek thought, *I can do that*. In 2002,

at age forty-six, he signed up for his first Ironman event in Hawaii, a much tougher ordeal than he'd imagined. After barely finishing the swimming portion of the race after a storm steered him a half mile off course, Meek did finish, despite passing out twice during the run segment.

At 8:07 a.m., right on his schedule for the end of the first lap in Florida, the timekeeper cheerfully announces, "Richard Meek, Chattanooga, Tennessee!" But the self-proclaimed "slow swimmer" is nowhere in sight.

A televised event also inspired Burke, a Bostonian who moved to Panama City in 1992, to give the Ironman a try. For back-of-the-packers like herself, she says, "It's not about speed. It's not about winning. It's about finishing without getting injured. If it takes me 16.59 hours, then that's what it takes. If I'm the last person to cross, then I did it and that's all that matters." Well, that and the cool Ironman tattoo sported only by those who have finished the race.

Athletes get seasick all around her in these choppy wind-whipped swells, but Burke holds her own. Later, she will liken the sensation to "being in a washing machine—you're up, you're



ABOVE: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Noreen Burke battles a strong headwind during the 112-mile bike portion of the triathlon. Burke prepares to enter the chilly water. Four-time Ironman competitor Richard Meek shares some last-minute advice with first-timer Burke the night before the big race. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Athletes from the amateur field complete the morning's rough swim through a choppy Gulf of Mexico.



ABOVE: (LEFT TO RIGHT) Noreen Burke's excitement after finishing her first Ironman is palpable. A group of hula skirt-wearing spectators line the course, cheering on passing athletes.

down, you're up, you're down." She concludes the swim at 8:31 this morning, a half hour earlier than she'd predicted. Back on dry land, volunteers in the "stripper zone" help her peel off her tight wet suit. (The current no-nudity rule was prompted by a Japanese competitor who forgot to wear a swimsuit underneath his wet suit one year.) Sprinting through the hotel breezeway and into the changing tent, Burke emerges moments later in black-and-yellow biking garb. She stops to dole out hugs to her sister, brother, and roommate before pedaling west on South Thomas Drive. Meek's Litespeed bicycle is still on the rack.

As fate would have it, the lanky Tennessean who endured seven flat bicycle tires during the Ironman Florida race in 2004, had just finished the morning's first swim lap when his daughter flagged him down in a panic. Instead of cycling and running, Meek spends the rest of the day at a local hospital, where emergency-room doctors treat his wife for a gallbladder attack. His early dropout "is disappointing," he admits, trying hard to mask his feelings. "But there will be another race."

Back on the course, headwinds torment the cyclists for at least forty miles, giving Burke a hard time, too. Along the flat route, well-wishers relax in lounge chairs, flash attaboy signs, and clap for the athletes. Thankfully, by mid-afternoon, the wind has turned into a gentle breeze as more bikers return amid yells of "Welcome back, darlin'" and "Way to go!" There are triumphant grins, furrowed brows, looks of relief, and faces showing intense concentration. Seven hours after the start of the bike segment, as the sun lowers itself into the ocean, Burke wheels through the last transition arch. Without faltering, she embarks on the final leg of the race, the 26.2-mile run.

The six-mile stretch inside St. Andrews State Park is lonely for an extrovert like Burke. Even in this wildlife-rich park where snowy egrets crouch over shallow ponds, white-tailed

deer graze near nesting turtles, and alligators sun on the sandy banks, Burke finds herself running alone in the dark. Relieved to be back on the main road, she weaves through a patchwork of neighborhoods where residents wave from their homes. Because finishing (not winning) is her goal, she walks part of the way, stopping to chat with fellow racers and volunteers.

On the upper parking deck of the Boardwalk Beach Resort amid a village of event sponsor tents and an elbow-to-elbow crowd, Burke's supporters wait. A full moon hovers overhead, and the temperature dips into the upper forties as athletes cross the finish line and fans cheer their athleticism and perseverance. One dad jogs along with his little boy asleep on his shoulder. Another man playfully mimics a horse, pretending to prod himself as he gallops toward the ribbon that marks the finish. Other racers simply muster a smile as they gingerly limp on sore, blistered feet after a long, punishing day. Then, precisely at 9:39:52, a victorious Burke beats her fifteen-hour goal with minutes to spare. Her fan club—roommate, siblings, friends, running buddies, and local triathlon teammates—whisk her off to celebrate. Her time doesn't come close to that of the overall winner, Germany's Jan Raphael, who at 8:22:44, hobbled across the finish line before Burke returned from the bike course. But finishing first is not the point for Burke.

Despite her success, she says one Ironman competition is enough. "I don't need to do it any more," Burke explains. Unlike Meek, who vows to return next year, Burke is satisfied. "I just didn't wanna wake up at fifty or sixty and say, 'I wish I'd done that.' Now I did it, and I can go on to do something else. And I still get the tattoo."

Editor's Note: The 2007 Ford Ironman Florida is November 3. Please see "Things to Do, Places to Go, People to See" on page 70 for details.