



TONY SVENSSON/IRONMAN

# GUIDING KONA

By  
Chris  
Foster

A BLIND ATHLETE AND HIS GUIDE REACH A FINISH LINE NEITHER THOUGHT THEY'D EVER SEE.

It's the Question that all short-course athletes dread. It comes up at the gym: Someone walks off the squash court and asks why you're swimming "so damn much." It comes up on the group ride, when a roadie finally stops ignoring you.

"So you're a triathlete, huh?" They'll ask.

"Yeah."

"Oh. What distance races do you do?" (Here we go.)

"I do Olympic-distance racing," and you realize what's happening. You try to cover yourself. "It's a little bit shorter [distances are quickly explained], but I race roughly 20 a year, and I'm on the U.S. National Team, and I raced at

world championships last year and I..."

But it's too late.

"But have you ever done a full triathlon?" (This is the Question.)

"Do you mean an Ironman?" you ask, grasping at straws. "No, I don't do Ironman, maybe when I'm much older [look at you, so passive-aggressive!], but the shorter-course racing is much faster and much more competitive, and I am shooting for the Olympics after all, and I..."

But they're not having it.

"Well, maybe someday you'll get there. To do an Ironman I mean," they console, a look of pity washing over their face. "You should talk to my [sec-



The author and Steve Walker crossing the finish in 14:36:37.



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retary/accountant/squash partner/etc.]. They did an Ironman. You should talk to them."

Somewhere deep in your subconscious, Mike Reilly loudly announces, "Chris Foster, you are not an Ironman."

You are not even a triathlete. You are less.

I'd usually walk away from these exchanges further resolved never to do an Ironman—even silently cursing the "sellout" short-course friends of mine who eventually went to the dark side. I ended up cursing a lot of friends over the years.

After a few hundred of these moments, and after almost a decade of racing, I had dug in deep. I had become a short-course extremist. I was on an Olympic-distance jihad.

"I'll never do an Ironman," I had boasted.

I took it even further.

"I'll quit the sport before I do an Ironman," I had once told a sponsor.

Steve Walker was just the opposite. Steve had wanted to do an Ironman since he was 11 years old. He grew up in Redondo Beach, California, played a few sports and joined ROTC in school. As soon as he graduated from high

school, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and went through basic training. Like many others, he put off his Ironman dreams for life's duties.

After roughly a year in the Marines, Steve went in for a routine medical exam. There, the doctor asked Steve an unusual question—a question he must have already known the answer to—“Are you having trouble seeing at night?”

“Yes! How did you know?” was Steve's reply.

The doctor sent him to a specialist who would later confirm his suspicions; shortly after graduating from high school and joining the Marines, Steve was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa.

Retinitis pigmentosa, or RP, is a genetically inherited degenerative disease that slowly, year by year, diminishes vision. At first, Steve had a hard time seeing at night. Later, his vision became too blurry to drive. Today, Steve's left eye has about the same vision as someone looking through a McDonald's straw; his right eye can only make out lightness and darkness.

When Steve was first diagnosed, the Marines were ready to discharge him in 60 days. Steve would have none of it. His vision was still manageable, he argued. He could still see well enough to do his duty. The Marines' medical liaison disagreed and claimed that Steve wasn't deployable due to his condition.

*As a family, they decided to let Steve pursue his dreams, and so he dusted off his dream of becoming an Ironman.*

Rather than accepting the decision, Steve appealed the discharge. He was only one year into his enlistment, still wanted to serve and wouldn't let his newly diagnosed condition be a crutch or an excuse. He wasn't in denial of his condition, but he wanted to complete his four-year enlistment, so he filed an appeal to the medical liaison's findings.

Steve's appeal worked. Due to the strength of his superior officers' recommendations and his tenacity, he was granted limited duty with the Marines. To Steve's satisfaction, he would only be medically discharged at the end of his four years. The medical liaison said he had never seen such a low-ranked soldier successfully appeal the process—appeals were usually only granted for high-ranking officers nearing retirement. Steve's experience with the Marines gave him his first taste of people's capacity to doubt his abilities. It also gave him a taste of what he could achieve when he tested other people's limits.

Since Steve's medical discharge in 2004, his Ironman dreams were put on the back burner. More accurately, they were removed from the stove, sealed in a Mason jar and stored in an underground cement bunker miles away. Instead, Steve focused on living his new life as a visually impaired man with a wife and a young daughter.

In 2013, I was near the peak of my professional career. I was fresh off a big victory at the Fast Triathlon—a huge team event in Brazil that commands a giant audience for its live television show. Coming off a string of top-10 finishes early in the year, I signed up at the last minute for the Redondo Beach Triathlon—a small, local sprint event that I had won a few times over the years. As I was setting up my transition before the race, a friend approached and said he'd like to introduce me to someone.

He said his friend's name was Steve, that this was his first triathlon and that he was legally blind. We shook hands, and I was incredulous. “How could a blind person do a triathlon?” I asked. Steve explained he wore a

tether around his waist (actually a coiled bodyboard leash) attached to his guide's waist during the swim, he rode in the back of a tandem on the bike and he wore a different tether (a thin red shoelace) on the run. The tether on the swim was functional, but the tether on the run was so others knew the situation at a glance.

Steve went on to finish his first triathlon in just over an hour, despite having a terrible time in the wavy swim. (Imagine walking into the ocean with your eyes closed and having waves hit you without any warning.) I went on to win the event by 10 seconds in a sprint finish.

Since competing in his first triathlon, Steve had been bitten by the bug. Despite his declining vision (in fact, partially because it was declining quickly), Steve and his wife decided that if there was ever a time for him to compete in the sports he loved, it was now. The sad reality was that Steve's vision would only decline year by year until he was totally blind. All of the sights of the world around him, all of the visions of his loved ones, would cease to exist at some point in the near future. As a family, they decided to let Steve pursue his dreams, and so he dusted off his dream of becoming an Ironman.

In 2014, Steve completed his first half-Ironman event. Near the end of the year, he further pushed his limits by finishing Ironman Cozumel only 30 minutes before the midnight cutoff. After pushing himself hard on the bike to overcome a poor swim, he suffered on the run and essentially walked the entire marathon. Steve had shown he could complete an Ironman, but he wasn't satisfied with the result.

That same year, Steve and I began training together for tandem time trials. He wanted to be a part of the U.S. Para Cycling program, and he needed to hit certain standards to be considered. Together, on his 50-pound bike, which I called the Deathtrap, we barely hit the mark. In fact, we barely stayed upright due to the lack of strong brakes and my inexperience on a tandem. Steve was almost in more than one bike accident during our rides and he didn't even know it.

In 2015, Steve decided to get serious about cycling. He found a sponsor willing to help get him a proper carbon race bike, and the two of us began to train for Para Cycling Nationals in Chattanooga, Tennessee. We did well, finishing fourth in the road race and fifth in the time trial. Most importantly, we got along famously during the trip.

Later, I would learn that the trip was a sort of audition to see how well we worked together. After we returned, Steve popped the question: He had been offered an invite to the Ironman Championship—would I be his guide?

He was asking me, an Olympic-distance extremist, to give up everything I believed in and compete in one of the most grueling endurance tests in the world. And in only a few months? My first response was no. I didn't have the time, background or the interest. But after talking to a few friends, realizing that I would likely never compete in Kona otherwise, and knowing Steve needed my help, I agreed. I laid down my militant Olympic-distance arms, called for an Ironman armistice and began training my ass off.

Only a few months and many (many) miles later, Steve and I landed in Kona together. I had traveled to races before, always with the goal to win, but this race would be different. Throughout my career, particularly when I was on the U.S. National Team, I imagined all eyes were on me, and at times they were. I'd done interviews (sometimes fun), had sponsor obligations (usually not fun) and pro meetings (fun like a colonoscopy). I usually traveled with other pros, and we usually trained and hung around in a pack.



Often we'd get questions from age groupers about what to eat, wear, do, etc., on race day. We were the stars.

And yet here I was in Kona, only a few months after agreeing to compete at the biggest event in our sport. Sure, I knew people from the industry and a few pro athletes here and there, but I was not a part of that race, really. In fact, I wasn't a racer at all (Ironman was very clear about that: I had to sign a form waiving my right to a finisher's medal or official finishing time). I was barely a participant. I was more like a sherpa. Not in the "I have to sherpa my spouse's things around" sense of the word. That's more like an assistant.

I was more like the Sherpa people of Nepal who actually do the climb with their charges. Sure, they schlep the gear (which I honestly did very little of; we had spousal assistants for that!), but they also lead the way up to the peak. They're well trained, and they've usually done the trek many times. But sometimes they're

not experienced. Sometimes it is their first trek. Sometimes they die on the mountain. Days before the race, I read about Phur Temba Sherpa in a People magazine article. Phur Temba was completing his second climb up Everest on April 18, 2014, when a massive avalanche hit together with 15 other climbers. He was the expert, the guide, the pro, but he was a relative newcomer to the peak.

This was my greatest fear. Hawaii would be my first attempt at the Everest of triathlon, and there were no guarantees that I could handle the conditions. How would my body react to the heat, the humidity, the wind, the stress? What did I know about Ironman? What business did I have guiding anyone at this distance?

My Olympic-distance extremism had made me a purist, but it had also made me entirely out of touch with long-course racing. I didn't even know what a fast bike split in an Ironman was. Four hours? Fourteen hours? Fast or slow, it all sounded like too much bike riding to me. I pic-

tured myself as a ragged member of the Taliban about to go onstage and give a TED talk about the synergistic efficiency of techno-capitalism in Silicon Valley.

In the days leading up to the race, I got questions like, "Are you racing too?" as people eyed my entirely unshaven legs, arms, chest, (back!) and face. I was Steve's helper for sure, but probably his brother. Probably a schlepper. Definitely not a racer—even my wristband was the wrong color.

And yet I didn't feel much like a schlepper when the cannon went off on the morning of October 10. As always, we were tethered together by his coiled bodyboard leash. It gives Steve about 3 to 4 feet of room to wander before the coil pulls him back. The tether does a great job of keeping him close without him having to constantly hit me. The other visually impaired duo in Kona were two Australians: a visually impaired athlete with far more advanced RP than Steve and his guide who happened to be a former pro

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as well. The Aussies had no tether, and the guide had to swim around his athlete, constantly herding him from all sides like a border collie.

My greatest fear during the swim—one that caused a mild panic during the first 10 minutes—was that another swimmer would become entangled in our tether, and the tether would break. In the pile of 2,000 age groupers, I imagined losing Steve, him swimming out to sea, forever. But nothing like that happened.

Assuming headwinds in both directions are normal, the bike was equally uneventful. Steve and I were buffeted by crosswinds and headwinds in the steaming lava fields. Our custom tandem held up well (luckily we chose a relatively shallow 58-mm carbon wheelset), but we still suffered uphill with our total combined weight of almost 400 pounds as temperatures hovered around 103 degrees Fahrenheit. Later we suffered through driving rain near the Hawi turnaround.

*Steve fought all of those limits, as well as the ones I had created for myself. Steve showed me that limits were entirely arbitrary.*

The bike is certainly one of the places that having a partner is a huge benefit. Most obviously, we are combining our efforts for the entire ride, working together to push the tandem and doing our best to keep our pedaling in sync. On the downhills we flew past other athletes like an out-of-control freight train (though I promise I was mostly in control).

Aside from the obvious physical benefits, having a buddy alongside was a psychological boost. Steve even acted as my personal bartender, mixing my drinks in the back so I could keep my hands safely on the handlebars in the front as gusts buffeted our bodies.

Despite our decent ride (just over six hours), we suffered mightily on the run. On the first section through Ali'i Drive, fans gave tons of encouragement. Most understood that I was Steve's guide and that he was visually impaired. For some reason, as we went on later into the day, people seemed to think our tether and matching outfits were a gimmick, and we were just friends doing an Ironman together. One volunteer even yelled, "You're tied together! That's a great idea!" Well, not really, we both agreed.

But the fans and volunteers weren't everywhere. In particular on the soul-crushing emptiness of the Queen K Highway at night, where our run devolved into a run-walk. We spent most of the final miles on the highway in total blackness. To put it not so elegantly, it was the blind leading the blind. Every now and then I caught a glimpse of another poor athlete in the darkness, but it was more like zombies passing each other in the night.

But all of the zombies and the chafing and the shuffling walk-running were quickly forgotten as the two of us staggered our way back into town. As anyone who has done this race can attest, the final stretch down Ali'i Drive is nothing short of amazing. The bright light, the loud crowd, the announcer—all of it is a jarring contrast to the previous 14 hours of quiet focus. It is sensory overload after being trapped in a deprivation chamber for an entire day.

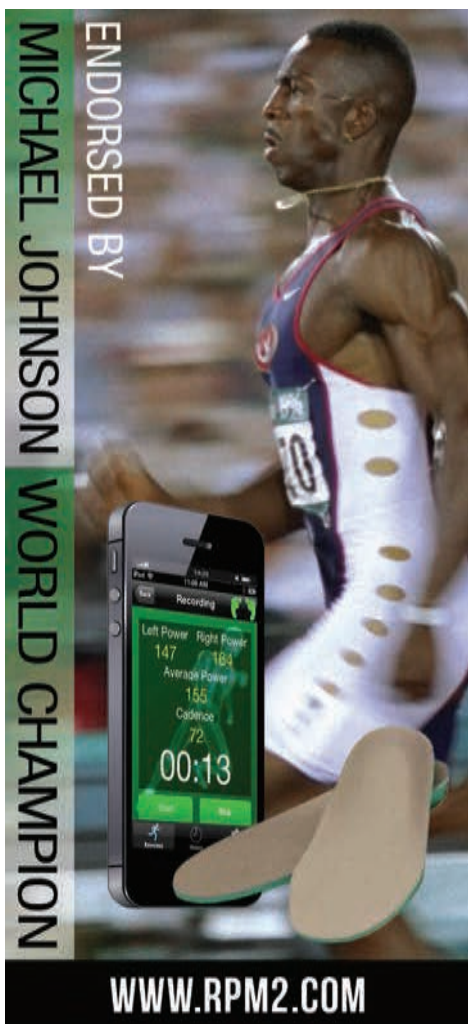
Just ahead of us, a physically challenged handcycle finisher had been stuck at the lip of the finish line (Ironman, for the love of God fix this!) and had finally gotten himself dislodged. This emotional spectacle sent the crowd into a cheering crescendo. As Steve and I crossed the line together a few moments later, the announcer told the crowd that Steve was a blind athlete and it created an inspirational perfect storm. It peaked as Steve picked up his daughter and held her high on his shoulders. There wasn't a dry eye on the street.

I was once a pro who had spent his entire career avoiding Ironman. I didn't think the distance had anything for me, and I had said it was something that I shouldn't do. I had put massive limits on myself.

Steve was once a Marine with an entire future ahead of him, who someday dreamed of doing an Ironman. He thought it was only a matter of time. But then Steve was told his time was up; he couldn't even be a Marine anymore. Later, his condition said he couldn't do any of the things that he had wanted to, including Ironman. His blindness had placed massive limits on him.

But Steve fought all of those limits, as well as the ones I had created for myself. Steve showed me that limits were entirely arbitrary—whether they're set by the outside world, your own body or your own mind. The two of us fought our limits together in one of the most formidable challenges in sports. In the end, we guided each other. **A**

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