

Ironman athletes look beyond finish line



Beyond the physical and mental determination to achieve their personal goals lie very poignant reasons Heather Thomson and Brian Doan will compete in 16 half Ironman triathlons this year.

Starting March 29 in California, the Ottawa athletes will race in 11 countries on four continents in eight months to raise awareness of testicular cancer and Acquired Brain Injury (ABI). Newfoundland Ironman 70.3, taking place July 27, is one of their stops along the way.

"With all the races Ironman has in the 70.3 series we wanted to pick strategically, and we wanted to hit as many countries as we could," Heather explained via telephone from her home in the nation's capital. "It's really important for us to race in Canada and Newfoundland is it."

This will be Heather's first visit to Newfoundland. Brian traveled to the province as a child but was too young to remember the trip. Internet research, the Newfoundland Ironman 70.3 website (www.ironmannewfoundland.com) and friends from the province are filling them in on what to expect. "I haven't met anybody from Newfoundland I haven't liked," Heather said. "From the pictures I've seen of the coastline and the hills I can tell it's a beautiful part of the country. I wish our time there was-

n't going to be so short but that's part of the deal!"

"When we participated in Ironman Lake Placid (in 2007) we were amazed at the professionalism and the attention to detail," Brian added. "It seemed a natural transition to go with the Ironman 70.3 series as it moves to half iron distance races. If you're going to travel halfway around the world to do a race, you want to know that when you get there you'll find the level of quality, the level of safety and organization that you've come to expect. That's why this is a perfect fit"

Heather's only sister Tammy sustained a traumatic brain injury in a serious motor vehicle accident in 2005. Initially, doctors told the family she would never progress beyond a vegetative state. Today, she is communicative, continues to make progress with her motor skills, and has recovered well beyond what the doctors predicted. "The challenge I face pales in comparison to the challenges my sister faces every day," Heather said. Her goal is to raise awareness about ABI and the need for more public programs that address physical rehabilitation as well as cognitive and behavioral needs.

Brian competed in his first triathlon at age 16, but moved away from the sport when he entered his 20s. With the diagnosis of testicular cancer 11 years ago came the realization that "life is short." The 38 year old now has nine marathons to his credit and proudly sports an Ironman tattoo. Brian has raised thousands of dollars for cancer research and uses Ironman and marathon racing to challenge himself to do more. In 2008, he hopes to reach as many men and women as possible; to share his story and give them the courage to detect cancer earlier.

"It's not about the money someone sends us for our charities, though that certainly helps; it's more about the awareness," Brian said. "It's the people who are going to tell their friends to wear a helmet. And if it makes one person do a self examination then our mission is accomplished!"

The couple trains 15 hours a week to physically prepare for a schedule that includes races in Singapore, the United States and Europe. Most days start with a 5:30 a.m. swim before heading to their jobs with the federal government. Training continues after work.

The mental preparation comes from years of competing, and from each other. "It's something we really believe in so it's easy to be dedicated, and we're a great support system for each other," said Heather, who at 38 is also an accomplished athlete. "When one doesn't want to get up at 4:30 in the morning the other one can get them moving. And there are some mornings you'd



rather stay in bed," she laughed. "It's nice to have that dependable partner to get you going when you don't feel like it."

Once the race season starts, the athletes will move away from core training to focus on maintenance and recovery. "I think racing is going to be the easy part," Heather predicts. "The challenge will be the travel!"

Support for the couple's mission is growing. Heather and Brian receive emails from people eager to share their own stories, and who want to express their support. For more information, visit www.tritheworld.ca

DID YOU KNOW?

*A nod and a wink means "Hello"
Nippers are long-legged mosquitos*

In Western Newfoundland:

*For more information:
www.newfoundlandlabrador.com*

www.ironmannewfoundland.com