

Athletes “tri” for awareness in multi-country campaign

by Lindsay Kelly
LITTLE CURRENT—Sixteen triathlons. Eleven countries. Four continents. Eight months.

It sounds like a challenge faced by contestants on TV’s *The Amazing Race*, but for Ottawans Heather Thomson and Brian Doan, the test is very much a reality that is set to begin on March 29.

Some may say they’re crazy, others may just gape in awe at their tenacity, but the pair is focussed and ready for the challenge, which has a greater, and more personal, purpose than stretching their bodies to the limit.

“We’re raising awareness for acquired brain injury and testicular cancer,” explains Ms. Thomson, who, along with Mr. Doan, recently stopped by the Expositor office on their way to Lake Manitou, to visit her parents Duane and Rosmarie Thomson.

Each of the competitors has been affected by the otherwise unrelated conditions in very personal ways. Ms. Doan’s sister, Tammy, lives with an acquired brain injury, following a serious car accident in 2005 that left doctors with little hope that she would recover from a vegetative state. Luckily they were wrong.

Tammy has made progress, regaining some communication ability and continuing to make progress with her motor skills. It’s a slow process, and there is still so much researchers don’t know about the brain, Ms. Thomson says. The triathlon challenge is one way in which she’s hoping to bring more awareness to the condition and spread the word that funding for more research is needed.

“I wanted to do something,” she muses. “You feel very helpless on the sidelines—there’s not much you can do. And I wanted to do something to help the community, not just Tammy.”

That Mr. Doan is up and running at all could be considered a miracle. At the age of 27, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer, a disease he says is socially taboo because people are reluctant to talk about what’s happening “down there” in mixed company.

Despite finding it in its early stages, the cancer had already moved into Mr. Doan’s lymph nodes and a radical orchiectomy (testicle removal) and radiation followed. The experience left the long-time triathlete

changed forever, and he adopted a “go big, or go home” attitude to match his big personality



Starting in March, Heather Thomson and her partner Brian Doan will compete in 16 triathlons spanning 11 countries and four continents, all within a period of eight months. Ms. Thomson was inspired to take on the challenge to raise awareness of acquired brain injury—a condition with which her sister lives after a serious car accident.

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He has raised thousands of dollars for cancer research through racing (an account of which can be found at his website www.nutsaboutcancer.com), but the multi-country race circuit he’s about to take on is the biggest test yet.

“I believe that we have to suffer like those who have suffered (from acquired brain injury or testicular cancer),” he says. “The way we push ourselves is nothing compared to the way they push themselves every day.”

It’s with these experiences in mind that the couple embarks on their eight-month-long journey. Each of the 16 races is a half-

Ironman, which comprises a 2-kilometre swim, a 90-kilometre bike and a half-marathon, or 21-kilometre run.

Training for the event is intense: Ms. Thomson, who completed her first triathlon in 2006, trains six days a week for



Brian Doan has been an avid triathlete since his teenage years, but a brush with testicular cancer 10 years ago gave competition a new meaning. He hopes to raise awareness of the disease by competing in a series of triathlons around the world with partner Heather Thomson.

about 10 or 16 hours during the peak of training season. Training for past races, she’s even taken to the backroads of Manitoulin to help her get into prime shape. And yet, the pair plans to do all this while each holding down a full-time job.

In fact, rather than take time off work to complete their goal, they will travel between Ottawa and the far-flung race venues—working during the week, compet-

ing on weekends. It’s a hefty schedule—not one that leaves a lot of time for playing tourist.

But the pair is looking forward to seeing a host of exotic, new locales, some of which include St. Croix, Austria, Switzerland and Singapore. Though some of their time in each location will be spent resting, racing and refueling, Brazil stands out as a point of interest.

“Neither of us have been to South America before, so that will be neat,” Ms. Thomson says. “And we both love Europe, so that will be nice, too.”

There’s no question that the challenge ahead is a big one, and November 10—the day of the last race—seems eons away at this point, but Ms. Thomson easily puts things into perspective. The people who live with acquired brain injury or testicular cancer “can’t make their bodies do what we take for granted,” she says, so any physical strain the racers experience just makes them feel that much more alive.

There’s a final little twist to this intriguing tale of perseverance and determination: it’s never been done before.

Mr. Doan has already consulted the Guinness Book of World Records—a tome he treasured as a kid—and there’s no record for someone completing this number of races in so many places in such a short period of time. But, not surprisingly, the pair aims to change that, too.

“If we’re successful, I’ll definitely be submitting it,” he grins.

To learn more about the Tri-The-World Awareness Challenge, visit www.tritheworld.ca, where you will find information about how to contact the racers, make a donation, or get more information about acquired brain injury and testicular cancer.

