

Ed the triathlete

Ed Zerke didn't intend to become a triathlete. He was a very successful collegiate swimmer who transitioned to rugby and rowing during graduate school, and fell in love with team sports. He stumbled onto the sport of triathlon in a quest to find some meaning in his life. In 2000, after a difficult and emotional ending to a long and meaningful relationship, Ed needed a "reason to get up in the morning." As a former college athlete, he naturally turned to sports to help fill the void in his life. For years, Ed had watched inspirational stories from the Ironman Hawaii competition on TV. Looking for inspiration in his own life, he searched the web to learn more about Ironman racing. While searching, he noticed that Ironman Florida had open slots – so he signed up. Just like that. With his emotional life in ruins, and no triathlon experience, Ed set out to train for an Ironman – in under a year!

Ed DID successfully complete that Ironman. In the fall of 2000, he finished Ironman Florida (IMF) in an impressive 11:31.13. When he crossed the finish line, he felt an incredible sense of relief. All of the intensity and fear that drove him throughout his training finally melted away. It was a feeling he would never forget. Since then, Ed has completed 2 additional Ironman races – Ironman USA in 2002 and Ironman Wisconsin in 2004. He gives a great deal of credit and thanks to the people who helped him along the way, like John Buechler, a TriCAT and five-time Ironman, who gave him encouragement and advice on training, nutrition, and mental preparation.

Ed has come a long way since his early days in triathlon. Now, Ed is a seasoned triathlete, a three-time Ironman, but like the rest of us, he was a novice once. When Ed raced his first 70.3 mile race, the 2000 Eagleman triathlon in Cambridge, MD, his nutrition plan consisted of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and pretzels. As he was unpacking his Ziploc baggies of PB and J and pretzels in the transition area, his neighbor sarcastically commented, "Power bar must not know what they are doing," to which Ed innocently replied, "What? Peanut butter and jelly is good!"

Not only has Ed's race nutrition improved since then, his transitions are a little smoother too! During the same Eagleman race in 2000, his transitions were ridiculously long - and it's no wonder; Ed had an entire change of clothes for both the bike and the run. In addition, he had to pin his race number onto his bike shirt and his running shirt! Instead of simply being a triathlete that day, Ed had to change from a

Tri-PROFILE



Ed Zerke coaching at Ironman Lake Placid 2006
Photo by Dan Hicok

Ed Zerke Athlete Coach Mentor Friend

By Shannon Hicok

You'll never know unless you tri...

swimmer to a biker, and then to a runner. I can only imagine how big his transition bag was!!

I find it comforting to know that such a successful triathlete and coach started by making the same type of rookie mistakes we all make.

Somewhere along the line, Ed went from simply participating in triathlons to coaching people for them. In much the same way that he entered the sport, he entered coaching almost by accident.

Ed the coach

Ed is a gifted coach and has a natural ability to inspire others. As a matter of fact, he was inspiring other triathletes before he even became a coach. As he was training for his first Ironman, he shared his ups and downs with other swimmers on his Masters team. One of those swimmers was Julie Oplinger. Without realizing it, Ed's stories were helping to inspire Julie to complete her own Ironman. Julie has since completed three more Ironman races. In turn, Julie helped Ed see that he would make a great coach. She thought he could inspire new triathletes in much the same way he had inspired his training partners. Ed was reluctant at first, but Julie's association with the Leukemia and Lymphoma society led him to become a triathlon coach for their Team in Training. It was during this time that he realized the gift he had, and fell in love with coaching.

Eventually, Ed's passion for coaching, coupled with his business background and strong encouragement from some of his Team in Training athletes, led him to create his own team: Tri-Team Z. The team was initially created to help a small group of athletes train for Ironman USA in 2006, but it has since grown to a team of approximately 200 athletes. Ed's team is unique because it includes athletes of all ages, sizes, and abilities, with goals ranging from merely completing sprint distance races to qualifying for The Ironman World Championships. Ed knows exactly how to inspire and motivate each of his athletes in both individual and group settings. Some athletes need "tough love" to get them going, and others need constant praise. Somehow he knows exactly who needs which type of encouragement. I know this firsthand, because I am honored to be one of Ed's athletes. I don't think I would have had the motivation to begin competing in this sport if it hadn't been for Ed and Team Z. Many times he has said just the right thing to get me off the couch and out on the road.

When I asked Ed what advice he would give to the readers of Tri-DC, he stated:

"You only need 3 things to be successful in triathlon:

1. A goal
2. An intelligent plan
3. .. and a little guidance along the way

You just have to have the guts to set the goal – leave the plan and the guidance up to your coach." ★