



“There’s more to life than Hollywood”

Former Baywatch star, Alexandra Paul, talks about training and competing as an endurance athlete.

When the call came in, I didn’t hesitate. “Yes!” I said, “I’ll do it.” It was January of 1997, and the Ironman Corporation was asking if I would train for and compete in the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon nine months away - a 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike and a marathon. Never mind that I had never cycled more than 14 miles (two decades ago), never ran more than 10 miles, and never even done a triathlon before. I also had a busy acting career, having just shot a new series and starring in several movies right after a five season stint on the international hit show *Baywatch*. My personal life was full too: I was dating the man whom I knew was my soul mate and the United Nations had just commended me on my environmental work on the human overpopulation issue.

I said yes to this call that came out of the

blue because I remembered so vividly reading an article in *Sports Illustrated* when I was 14 about this new race called “The Ironman” that combined three sports and covered over 140 miles. It seemed crazy back then, because in 1978 people thought running a 10K was obsessive. The *Sports Illustrated* magazine was my twin sister Caroline’s subscription: she was the jock in the family, captain of every school team, while I played second string soccer, softball, volleyball and basketball. If the sport had a ball, I sat on the bench. My magazine subscription was to *Psychology Today*. But this story about the first Ironman awed and inspired me. I said to myself, “I want to do the Ironman one day. I am not fast, but I have stamina”. I had discovered that stamina from swimming back and forth across our



local lake. Cream Hill Lake was 1.2 km each way, and Caroline and I would swim it four times easily, training on our own for summer swim team.

Years passed, I stopped swimming and became a jogger and gym member. I forgot about the Ironman until 20 years later, when the powers that be at Ironman Corporation thought it might be good marketing to have a “celebrity” attempt the race. They picked me.

I jumped at the opportunity because I didn’t want to look back on my life and see only movie after movie filling my days. As my agent Tim said to me when I told him I wanted to take time off to train for this race, “There’s more to life than Hollywood”.

There was something deeper too. As an actor, you can be extremely talented, work very hard and still not get a break. So much is out of your control. With endurance sports, if you work hard, you very likely will reach your goal. No matter how successful an actor you are, there’s always a feeling of waiting for the phone to ring for your next job. Training for the Ironman, I wasn’t waiting for anyone.

Going out of my comfort zone so completely was not easy. I was concerned that being out of show business for almost a year would hurt my career – wouldn’t people forget about me if I took so much time away? The training program that my coach, Ironman winner Scott Tinley, wrote for me was also very challenging. Even Scott didn’t think I would have the discipline to follow it, but I did. That year, I raced 14 shorter triathlons, and my first marathon. By autumn, I was ready, and on a warm, windy October day I joined 1500 other competitors on the big island of Hawaii and competed in the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon. My whole family came to Hawaii to support me: at mile 8 of the run I saw my mother handing out water to athletes. My twin sister wrote “Go Alexandra!” in chalk all over the bike course and my brother ran the last bit of the race with me. My boyfriend ran with me at the finish line. I finished the race in a respectable 13:18:52.

When you follow your heart, you get



unexpected blessings. A surprise benefit of my Ironman experience was that it actually did help my career. Starring in a show like *Baywatch*, people sometimes typecast me as fluffy and insubstantial. Finishing the Ironman turned that around and garnered me respect. Training for and completing this race remains a highlight of my life– not only did I have the courage to take on a totally new challenge, but I proved to myself that I can do anything to which I put my mind. I had been right all those years ago, I do have stamina.

My knees, however, didn’t. After several marathons, I had knee surgery and, in 2003, I had to stop running completely. It was very disappointing, but I remembered the words of my agent Tim: “There is more to life than Hollywood.” Well, there is also more to life than running, and I found it in long distance swimming. My first ocean swim race, in 2004, was 6.2 miles (www.aquamoonadventures.com). Two years later, I raced a 10 mile ocean swim in Hawaii (www.mauichannelswim.com). I came in last out of 18 solo swimmers with a time of 8 hours 46 minutes, but I didn’t care, because even though I was far behind the winners, I wasn’t sitting on the bench anymore. I was proud to have finished. The waves were so rough that many swimmers were getting seasick, but I felt happy and comfortable the whole way. In 2009, I chose a race that was a little longer, the 18K Fiji Swim (www.fijiswims.com). The water was placid, so I bettered my Maui Channel time by almost 2 hours.



I still came in fourth out of four swimmers, but the accomplishment was exhilarating.

Endurance sports have not only kept me in shape, they have provided adventure, travel and self-confidence, and enriched me in ways I couldn’t have imagined. When I could no longer run, I discovered long distance swimming and I learned that when one door closes, another one really does open. When the phone isn’t ringing, I know that I still control my destiny, because there really is more to life than Hollywood.

Next up? A race longer still - maybe a swim around Key West? (<http://www.swimaroundkeywest.com/index.html>).

To follow me on the web, please check out my internet site: www.alexandrapaul.com

