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Hunter Lussi: Atypical Ironman



By Hunter Lussi As Told to Michele Deppe

One thing I know for sure is that you've got to have good people around you, especially if you want to be in top physical condition. When it comes to fitness, my family is intense! My younger sibs—my sister, Tyler, and my brother, Morgan—are two of the most coordinated people on the planet. They're both nationally ranked soccer players. My mother was an all-state soccer and lacrosse player, and my dad was a Lake Placid Hall of Fame figure skater. My parents are the kind of people who do triathlons for fun. And my grandfather? An Olympic skier.

Then there was me. At one point, I was teased for being a fat kid. I wasn't very coordinated. I could barely do a couple of push-ups. I wasn't happy sitting around eating junk food in front of the TV. Thankfully, my parents helped me find swimming. Being fat helped me swim with less effort than my brother and sister, and I could stay in the water forever without getting cold. And what you've heard is true—fat floats!

Since swimming was going well, I started working on running and biking, too. I set some goals and got good coaching. The results were amazing. I became the Youngest Half Ironman in a U.S.A. Triathlon (USAT) Certified event at 12 years old, and the Youngest Ironman Distance Finisher in a USAT Certified triathlon at 13 years old.

After those successes, I wanted to keep reaching. Even though our swim team was good and won the city championship every year, I knew I could do better. I was willing to work harder. When I was 14, Bob Bowman, Michael Phelps' coach, invited me to swim at the North Baltimore Aquatic Club, which is number one in the United States.

I thought my old coach would be happy for me. He wasn't.

Leaving behind my old swim coach, who was also my friend, mentor, and golfing buddy, wasn't easy. At first, he didn't take it too well. It was hard for about a year, because we would see each other a lot at my school. He would ignore me.

On the first day my new swim team could have laughed at me. They were all much faster, and, technically, almost perfect. But I was an "open water swimmer" who thrashed around in the water and didn't know how to kick. They welcomed me and showed me how to swim faster.

That helped me see how good friends bring out the best in you. By contrast, my cousins chose some bad friends. My teenage cousins are nationally ranked ski jumpers, great water skiers, and awesome soccer players. The oldest is going to an Ivy League college this fall. My cousins are really cool, but they did something really stupid. They sneaked out of the house at 3:00 a.m., went to a party, and got drunk. Driving home, they were in a terrible car accident. Luckily the air bags worked, and everybody survived. My cousins said they thought going to that party would make them feel cool and grown-up.

Being a grown-up is basically about how you think. My dad taught me that sometimes you need to think beyond your age. He said most successful triathletes are around 30 years old, so I would need to think like a 30-year-old if I wanted to compete well and finish.

A triathlon is like life. Just because it's challenging, you can't panic. You prepare and train the best you can. Then you have to be grown-up about it. Thinking like a grown-up is how I push past pain, rough water, jellyfish stings, upset stomach, broken bike shoes, flat tires, fierce wind, rain for 15 hours, freezing, burning up, not reapplying sunscreen and feeling sick from 2nd degree burns, diarrhea, dehydration, chaffing, a smashed toe, etc. (Hope I am not talking you out of wanting to do triathlons!)

Next, I'd like to qualify for the Olympics, in the triathlon or the long distance, open water swim. I've got goals for myself, and for America, too. I've even lobbied Congress. Labor Day has become my target for "America's Tri for Health." Cookouts are great, but my goal is to get 200 million Americans to "tri" exercising on Labor Day with their friends and families. Everyone could participate in a 500-yard swim, 10-mile bike ride, and a 2.5-mile run/walk, or just one of these, every Labor Day and spend the rest of the year training. Your family can get intense about getting in shape. Check out my Web site (www.americastriforhealth.com/), where you can also find good "Fitness Friends," to help support you. Setting a goal to exercise with other people is cool, and will definitely help you get lean, strong, and fit.

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