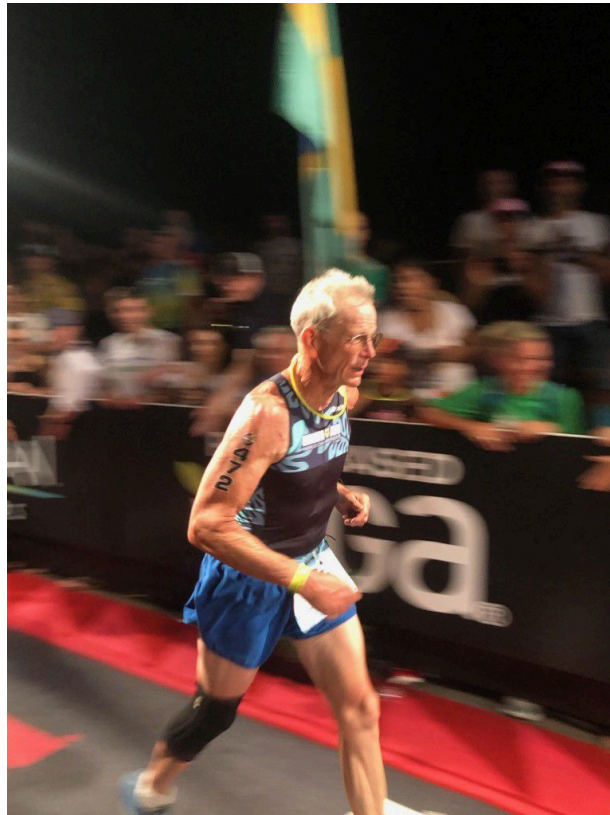


Crescent City man is all IRON

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It takes a real iron man (or woman) to qualify for the world championship of international triathlon competitions.

But longtime Crescent City resident Russ Burnette, 72, has routinely gone more than that extra mile to compete at the most-recent IRONMAN World Championship Oct. 12 in Kona, Hawaii.

In his second go-around at the IRONMAN, Burnette finished the 2.4-mile ocean swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile marathon in 16 hours, 7 minutes and 40 seconds, good for 21st place in his age group. Of the 35 athletes competing in his age group of 70-74, seven didn't even finish.

Burnette has come a long way since he competed in Crescent City's very first triathlon in 1984, swimming 10 laps for his relay team. His two teammates completed the 12-mile bike ride and the 3-mile run.

"It went really well. I enjoyed it. It got me hooked. After I was done, I thought, 'Gee, I wish I could do the whole thing myself.'

"The next year, I competed as an individual," Burnette told The Triplicate by phone from Kona.

Burnette said he'd been swimming a while to stay in shape and a friend got him into running, so it wasn't much to add in the bike training. The regimen consisted of running three days, riding three days and swimming three days a week, with some overlap in the training.

The rest was eating right, getting plenty of sleep and no drinking or smoking, "an easy way to stay healthy," Burnette added.

Clay Speaker, 68, has trained with Burnette since those early days and never ceases to be amazed by his senior training partner. "He's the kind of guy who just goes on and on, never slowing.

"But he's also a gentleman racer. He'll never cut you off or talk smack. He'll just keep pushing you to your limits," Speaker said.

From his first "sprint" triathlon in Crescent City, Burnette progressed to more-challenging levels of competition — Olympic, half and full triathlons.

After completing a half ironman in Arizona, Burnette signed up for a full triathlon in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, finishing better and better four years straight. In 2009, he finished second in his age group, good enough to qualify for the IRONMAN World Championship for the first time.

But disaster struck on the beach the day before the big race.

"A boogie boarder slammed into me from behind and cracked a rib. I thought there was no way I was not going to participate, having come all this way to do it. So, I started out, not sure I could finish, but I did," Burnette said.

He finished in 14 hours, 18 minutes, "actually a decent time for 10 years ago. I thought then, 'Gosh, I wish I could do this healthy.'"

His daughter, Debbie Benton, who lives on Maui, said there's a key part her father usually leaves out of his triathlon tales. "My dad is a very humble guy. But his first triathlon, he was not able to do because he was diagnosed with melanoma cancer of the eye," Benton said. "He was given a 20% chance of living."

Luckily, Benton said, the only thing he lost in that race against cancer was his eye. He's been in remission since 1984.

But being a one-eyed athlete did not prove conducive to competing in triathlons. "He has a glass eye, so he had to train himself to swim in a straight line so he wouldn't go in a curve," Benton said.

Burnette also deals with a blind side while biking and running. "He makes for a good pirate at Halloween," Benton added.

It would take nearly another decade before Burnette qualified again for the championship.

Knocking out two birds with one stone, Burnette traveled to Maryland last year to visit his sons, Luke and Erik, and to compete in the IRONMAN Cambridge. In that race, Burnette literally went the extra mile to win

his age group.

“I came in first. I shocked myself. That’s an automatic entry to the world championships. And I did pretty well — 13 hours, 45 minutes. But I ran an extra mile,” Burnette said.

He said the marathon course had several out-and-back laps. By the third lap, it was getting dark and he ran right past the sign to turn around.

“There were these young gals telling runners to turn around. They didn’t say boo to me. So at mile 23, I knew something was not right. If I keep going, I’m doing 30 miles,” he said.

By the time he turned around, his worried daughter caught up with him at the finish line. She informed him that even with the extra mile, Burnette still finished nine minutes ahead of his age group’s second-place finisher.

Unfortunately, his return to Hawaii for the championship proved less than ideal. “Gosh, by my standards, it was awful,” Burnette said.

It was hot, humid and windy. “The winds were the worst in my life. Three slight, Asian women got blown off their bikes in the 30- to 40-mph winds.

“I almost went down once. I think the bike bounced a little bit, but I held on and kept going,” Burnette said.

It was the swim that took the biggest toll on him. This year, Burnette said, race organizers chose to switch from an “en masse” start, involving all the athletes at once, to a staggered start by age group.

So he was in the last group of men to head into the water and was quickly overtaken by the young, elite women swimmers.

“I see out of the corner of my eye a wall of foam engulfing me. In order to avoid them, I kept veering off to the right, and kind of zig-zagging in between the buoys,” Burnette said.

The swim took him 20 minutes longer than normal.

After making up time in the bike ride and moving into 15th place, Burnette said, the wheels came off in the marathon. The heat and humidity having gotten the best of him, he began walking at mile 12.

“By mile 19, after frequent stops for food and hydration at the aid stations, Burnette felt rejuvenated and finished the race running. He came in under the “did not finish” cutoff with an hour and five minutes to spare.

Meeting him at the finish line were the 24 family members in matching T-shirts proclaiming “Russ Burnette Support Crew Kono 2019.”

“To have 23 people with cowbells and yelling at the finish line is an emotional experience to be a part of,” Benton said.

He said he plans to take an extended break from training for triathlons, something his wife of 50 years, Marshann, appreciates. “She’s pretty impressed, but she’s probably getting to the point of being tired of standing out there 14 hours waiting for me,” Burnette said.