Ironman Benefits the Entire State

By Linda Jane Kelley

(Dr. Richard Kelley is traveling. His column will resume next week.)

This morning the sports world turns its attention to the little town of Kailua-Kona on the “Big Island” of Hawai‘i. When the cannon fires, nearly 2,000 of the world’s fittest professional and amateur athletes will begin the Ironman World Championship. They will swim 2.4 miles (3.9 kilometers), ride their bikes 112 miles (180.2 kilometers), and run 26.2 miles (42.2 kilometers – the distance of a marathon) along the Kohala Coast with over 25,000 spectators cheering them on. Like other major sporting events in Hawai‘i, the Ironman World Championship’s economic impact reaches far beyond race day and provides our state with phenomenal marketing exposure.

The first Ironman Triathlon took place in Honolulu on February 18, 1978, the result of a wager among friends over who was fittest – the swimmer, the cyclist or the runner. That morning, 15 athletes – swimmers, cyclists and runners – plunged into the ocean at Ala Moana Beach Park, not realizing the history they were about to make and that an entire new sports industry would be generated in their wake. Today, in addition to the now-annual triathlon in Hawai‘i, Ironman is a global industry. Amateur and professional athletes travel to races around the world in an attempt to qualify for “the Superbowl of triathlons” – the Ironman World Championship, now held in Kona every October.

This year, athletes from 48 states and 64 countries qualified for the Ironman World Championship. The 2,000 competitors each bring an average of four additional people with them and stay in Hawai‘i for at least a week. Half of them will also travel to at least one other island in Hawai‘i after the race.

Many of the over 5,000 volunteers are also out-of-state visitors who plan their vacations around Ironman. Hundreds of journalists and dozens of corporate sponsors and businesses that cater to triathletes and sports events also descend on Kona for race week. These visitors fill hotel rooms, condominiums and vacation homes; rent cars; dine in local establishments; hire catering companies, florists and musicians for parties; and shop at local businesses and farmers’ markets. Many local businesses hire additional temporary employees during October to help during this busy month.

Hawai‘i’s Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism reports that Ironman generates more than $20 million in direct sales each year from out-of-state visitors specifically traveling to the Big Island for the event. As a result, tax revenues for state and county governments – general excise tax (GET), transient accommodations tax (TAT – the hotel room tax), and fuel and individual income taxes – also grow by several million dollars.

Ironman focuses tremendous national and international media attention on Hawai‘i. The race is the state’s largest media-credentialed event. Over 300 reporters, many of them international, pick up credentials during race week. The live, race-day webcast on IronmanLive.com provides 17 hours of streaming video, which has historically generated over a million “hits.” Television broadcasts of the race also display Hawai‘i’s beauty, culture and climate to more than 200 million homes worldwide, just at the point when the weather is turning cold and snowy in most of the continental U.S., Europe and much of Asia. In December, NBC airs a 90-minute Ironman show, with numerous encore broadcasts on the Universal Sports cable network. ESPN International provides worldwide next-day coverage of the event. Social media adds another layer of exposure with official updates on Facebook and Twitter plus individual postings.

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Ironman’s impact does not stop in October. Over the rest of the year, numerous training camps are held on the Hawai‘i Island. Groups ranging in size from five to over 30 athletes and coaches spend anywhere from a weekend to a full week cycling on Queen Ka‘ahumanu Highway, swimming in crystal-blue Kailua Bay, and running along legendary Ali‘i Drive. Some professional athletes will train in Kona for weeks or a couple of months, sometimes bringing their families with them for an extended stay.

The Ironman World Championship is not only exciting to watch on race day, its impact to our local economy is significant and the worldwide marketing exposure it provides is priceless. It is another successful example of how sports tourism benefits Hawai‘i’s economy.