Ironman Triathlon: Big Impact on Hawai‘i

By Dr. Richard R. Kelley

The 2010 Ford Ironman World Championship, held on the “Big Island” of Hawai‘i last Saturday, was the latest edition of a world-class athletic event that has brought tremendous benefits to Hawai‘i for 32 years. This mind-boggling event is the “Super Bowl, Wimbledon, World Series, World Cup, and Tour de France of triathlon competition all rolled into one.”

The World Triathlon Corporation, the parent organization of the Ironman World Championship and the Ironman Foundation, has also been extremely generous to many charitable organizations, particularly in the Kona area. Unfortunately, neither the organization, its staff nor its thousands of volunteers have received recognition commensurate with the economic activity, job opportunities, and community benefits that the Ironman races have brought.

According to Ironman.com, the first race with the Ironman format was conceived in 1978 when several athletes on O‘ahu were arguing about who was more fit – swimmers, runners, or others. “Navy Commander John Collins and his wife, Judy, dreamt up a race to settle the argument. They proposed combining three existing races together, to be completed in succession: the Waikiki Roughwater Swim (2.4 miles), the Around-O‘ahu Bike Race (112 miles, originally a two-day event) and the Honolulu Marathon (26.2 miles). ‘Whoever finishes first, we’ll call the Ironman,’ said Collins.”

Fifteen men started in the initial event held on February 18, 1978. Only 12 completed the race, led by the first Ironman, Gordon Haller. His winning time: 11 hours, 46 minutes and 58 seconds.

That challenging, multi-skilled, all-day race format immediately became popular and now, 32 years later, many races with somewhat similar formats are held around the world. However, only races with the original 2.4-mile (3.9 km), 112-mile (180 km), 26.2-mile (42.2 km) format, and sanctioned by the World Triathlon Corporation may use the Ironman name.

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Unlike the Honolulu Marathon, an athlete cannot just send in an application and pay a registration fee to participate in the Ford Ironman World Championship. The field is limited to 1,800 top athletes, most of whom qualify by performing exceptionally well in one or more of 28 Ironman Triathlon races in the U.S. and other countries, including Australia, Austria, Brazil, China, France, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, South Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

For Hawai‘i-based athletes, entry is a trifle easier. They may qualify by participating in the Rohto Ironman 70.3 Hawai‘i Race, a half-Ironman-distance triathlon held on the Big Island each June.

Two hundred additional athletes win a race slot through a lottery, which is open to anyone and everyone worldwide.

The Kailua-Kona-based staff of the Ford Ironman World Championship, which includes my daughter Linda Jane Kelley, works literally around the year and around the clock to handle the thousands of details that must all come together perfectly. While the race is always well organized and exciting, there are several related stories to be told that go beyond who won and what records were broken.

To my knowledge, no one has done a detailed study of the Ironman Championship’s financial impact on Hawai‘i like the one that Hawai‘i Pacific University does every year for the Honolulu Marathon. However, here are some rough data from available studies:

- Ironman athletes stay on the Big Island an average of 8.32 days (12.16 days statewide).
- Almost half of Ironman participants or their companions travel to other islands in Hawai‘i before or after the race.
- Total sales generated annually in the state of Hawaii: $25.9 million.
- State and county governments receive at least $1.4 million in taxes from that revenue each year.

The one thing that has not been studied at all is the additional economic impact and job opportunities generated by Ironman athletes who come to Hawaii throughout the year to train on, and familiarize themselves with, the Kona course.

Ironman races in Kona also focus tremendous national and international media attention on Hawai‘i, annually bringing the islands, via television, to more than 100 million homes around the globe. That exposure is priceless.

For the past eight years, the Ironman Foundation has auctioned off several race entry slots on eBay. All auction proceeds are given to national and Hawai‘i-
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based charities, with the Ironman Foundation picking up all the administrative costs. This year, four slots were auctioned off for $40,000 or more apiece. (Just think of it – four people were willing to pay $40,000 or more for the privilege of exerting themselves to a point that might literally kill someone who is not in tip-top shape!)

Above and beyond that, the Ironman Foundation has been extremely generous to the Big Island. Here is a partial list of what it has done:

- 2007 County of Hawai‘i – Parks and Rec. bleachers – $32,286
- 2008 Hospice of Kona – 15-seat van, insurance, and gas – $40,000
- 2008 Volunteer Fire Company – Fire Truck – $55,720
- 2008 Cash Donations $ 50,000 – to organizations such as Ronald McDonald House, American Cancer Society, Red Cross, Elison Onizuka Space Center, Hawaii Junior Life Guard Program, Friends of the Library Kona, Special Olympics, Society for Kona’s Education and Art, Schools, Kona Historical Society, Habitat for Humanity, and others
- 2009 People's Advocacy for Trails Hawai‘wi – 15 seat van, insurance, and gas – $36,000

The generosity of the Ironman Foundation does not end there.

The race needs some 28 aid stations along the Ironman course, most of which are staffed by the members and supporters of nonprofit groups. Each participating group receives $500.

Finally, over several years, the Ironman Foundation has raised more than $1 million for the construction of the first YMCA facility in Kailua-Kona.

Yes, for many reasons, Hawai‘i has been very lucky to have the Ironman World Championship in our state for 32 years. The Ironman races have brought us great economic benefits and wonderful job opportunities, and the Ironman Foundation has been extremely generous and helpful to many nonprofit groups in Hawai‘i, particularly on the Big Island.

I think the hard-working Ironman staff in Kona and the organization’s Florida-based world headquarters, plus thousands of local workers and volunteers, all deserve a big, sincere Mahalo! 😊

Truly an “Ironman,” Chris “Macca” McCormack won the Ironman Triathlon in 2007 and wins it again in 2010

“Ironwoman” Mirinda Carfrae comes out on top in 2010