



The Quest gets Personal in Individual Sports

By Bill Gosse

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Swim 2.4 miles! Bike 112 miles! Run 26.2 miles! Brag for the rest of your life.

This is the battle cry for those who compete in the Ironman Triathlon.

Warm water, strong, gusting winds and extreme heat combine to set the stage for the most honored and prestigious triathlon event. Many consider this to be the most difficult and demanding competitive sporting event.

What could drive someone to compete in a grueling event that tests the limits of endurance?

Ask those who compete in ultramarathons.

Some of the ultramarathons held in this country make the Ironman look like a race for the faint of heart.

Take the Barkley Marathon as an example. It's a 100-mile run this time of year through the wilderness of Frozen Head State Park near Wartburg, Tennessee.

The course consists of a 20-mile loop with basically no help along the way.

With more than 50,000 feet of total vertical climb, the Barkley is thought to be one of the more challenging ultramarathons held in the United States. Some people say it is the toughest trail race in the world. The first mile alone climbs 1,500 feet.

Since the race began in 1986, only 7 runners have ever completed the course within the cutoff time of 60 hours.

Why would someone run through the hills of Tennessee, ripping holes in their clothes and flesh for 60 hours?

They do it to compete.

I may not be signing up for the Barkley anytime soon, but I certainly have an appreciation for those who compete in individual sports.

Whether its Tiger Woods trying to be the first to win the PGA's calendar grand slam, a high school cross country runner pushing for a personal best or a swimmer daily getting up at the crack of dawn to swim countless laps, you have to respect those who prod themselves to their physical and mental limits, and then even more.

Bicycling, track, wrestling and gymnastics are a few sports that may be conducted with teams involved, but when it comes right down to it, these athletes are on their own.

In team sports, a teammate can pick you up – cover your mistake. In an individual sport, the only one who can pick you up is you, and the mirror might be the only way to find answers after a loss.

Because there is no finger-pointing involved, these sports are refreshing. In team sports, the spectators seem to have all the answers. Here it's up to the competitors.

As a rule, those in individual sports don't seek the approval or publicity that others in the sports world seek. Their quest is very personal, pitting themselves against the competition or the clock, and they show great sportsmanship during the entire process.

What could be more pure than sport for the sake of sport?

An accomplished marathoner once said, "Don't limit your challenges, rather challenge your limits."

Whether you are training for your first Bellin Run, competing in one of the local marathons or swimming across a lake, many of the feelings of accomplishment, of facing a challenge and overcoming it are the same.

It comes down to the desire and focus to go farther than you ever could have possibly imagined. To get to the point where you think you have given all you have to give, but then do more.

How can you not admire someone like that?