



## Triathlons Are for Women Too

### How to Find Your Inner Athlete

By Kathy Kent, President, Heart Zones Cycling and Personal Training  
and Sally Edwards, "Head Heart", Founder and CEO of Heart Zones

My name is Kathy Kent. I consider myself an average person. I am married with two children and live in Suburbia, USA. In the spring of 1996, I was 33 years old and thought I was just like everybody else.

I was sitting in the doctor's office when I picked up a women's sports magazine and read the advertisement for a women's-only triathlon. It was a "sprint-distance" triathlon (½ mile swim, 12.4 mile bike, 3.1 mile run) sponsored by Danskin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I asked myself some simple questions: Could I swim a ½ mile? Of course I could! I was on the high school swim team. Could I bike 12.4 miles? Well, I thought so. Everyone's biked as a kid. And I still had my Raleigh 10-speed in the garage. Could I run 3.1 miles? I wasn't so sure, so when I got home, I put on my shorts and ran around the neighborhood. Then I got in the car and measured the distance. It was 2 miles, so yes, I would be able to run 3 miles. But, could I do them all together? Something told me to do it, and I sent in my registration that night. I was going to train to do my first triathlon.

I rode my bike with my neighbor Bob on Saturdays. He taught me how to put air in my tires and change gears (although I'm not sure I ever did that year). I hired babysitters so I could get in 15 minutes of swimming, and I got up at 5 am to run before my husband left for work. During the day, I did what most stay-at-home moms do: make meals, clean the house, play with the kids, run errands.

I finished my first Danskin that year and had so much fun that I knew I wanted to do it again and again. I signed up for the race again the next year and even a couple more races. I was getting faster and I was doing better. I was starting to win in my age group. I noticed something else, too. More and more women wanted my advice for training for their first triathlon. So I pioneered a swim/bike/run group at our local YMCA, and within three years, I and my other coaches had almost 100 women training for their first triathlons.

These women were just like me when I did my first triathlon, but they came in all shapes, sizes, colors, religions, skill levels, and ages. I have trained several grandmothers throughout the years, and I have trained my very own daughter, who at age 14 will do her first Danskin this year. I have trained pear-shaped bodies, apple shaped bodies, pregnant bodies, and dancer-like bodies. They all finished. I have trained women with heart disease and cancer. They all finished. Their reasons for doing their first triathlons were all different, yet all the same. Every woman was reaching for something out of her comfort zone, whether it was to affirm a belief in herself, or to be the athlete she was never told she could be, or to support a friend. They were all looking inside to find their inner athletes – we all have one.

### Why (and How) We Do It

Why else do so many women want to do a triathlon? The reasons for participating in sports haven't changed much over the years: As adolescents, the number one reason girls participated in a sport was for fun, and the second reason was for physical activity. Not coincidentally, many of the women recently surveyed by Danskin on why they did a triathlon cited both the "fun factor" and getting in shape. However, many also point to the non-intimidating environment offered by many women-only triathlon series when asked why they choose triathlon over other sports.

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There are many women-only triathlons across the country, but one that deserves special distinction is the Danskin Series, now in its 16<sup>th</sup> year. The Danskin started in 1990 with just three races of about 150 participants each, but now has grown into the largest women-only triathlon in the world, with 8 races scheduled in 2005. Some, like the one in Seattle, have as many as 5,000 entrants. To date, Danskin and national spokeswoman Sally Edwards have helped over 140,000 women cross the finish line!

Heart Zones, a training and education company, recognized the need for training and camaraderie for women entered in the Danskin Triathlon. Joy Hermsen, National Director of the Heart Zones Training Center for the Danskin Series, says, "Women tend to know what they want in a training program and they do their research very well. This is probably based on the fact that most women juggle a lot of tasks throughout the day. They must make decisions about their training that maximize their efficiency and effectiveness." One participant from Team Danskin said, "I loved the fact that I got instant training partners. We had so much fun supporting and offering encouragement to each other during our workouts that we didn't want the Team to end. Many of us still get together for our workouts, even after the race."

### **Special Challenges for Women**

Over the last decade, the growth of triathlons and in the participation of women has prompted USA Triathlon to develop a Women's Commission to explore issues in training and racing and to help promote the advancement of women in triathlon (for more information, see: [http://www.usatriathlon.com/Commissions/women\\_commission.htm](http://www.usatriathlon.com/Commissions/women_commission.htm)). Sherri Wattenbarger of the commission states that "most of the roadblocks facing women are of a practical nature. Women still shoulder a disproportionate amount of child care responsibilities and household duties. Thus, the typical woman tends to have less free time to devote to training than the typical man. Furthermore, women tend to make less money than men, and this is an expensive sport."

Sherri further states that "it is very difficult to find appropriate equipment unless you fall within the size ranges of the average male triathlete. In many instances, 'unisex' really just means 'we don't care enough about female athletes to make appropriate clothing and equipment for you, but we'd like you to pay good money to buy this ill-fitting clothing and equipment because you don't have any other choice.'"

We all learned in sixth-grade health class that female bodies are very different from male bodies, but the manufacturers don't quite seem to get it. And, by the way, we are not all thin and buff like the pro-females. Women triathletes come in all shapes and sizes, from tall to short, from thin to voluptuous. We need clothing and equipment to fit our shapes. We tend to have wider hips, shorter arms, and narrower shoulders and feet than men. It is particularly difficult to find bicycles made for petite women, as well as wetsuits and tri-specific clothing of all sizes. However, some manufacturers do get it, like Terry Bicycles, which makes equipment and clothing designed especially for female bodies.

Finally, she adds that "Some women lack mentors in the sport, although that is rapidly changing. Many women seem to approach triathlon training in a very communal way – they like group workouts and especially companionship when they train. If women can't find this locally they are less likely to be active members of the triathlon community. Some of this desire for training groups is due to concerns about personal safety on roads and trails. However, it also stems from the tendency of women to create relationships around their activities."

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## What Do Women Want?

Having support is important to women, and coaches and training programs developed by and for women help provide the necessary framework within which to train. A good coach recognizes the differences between men and women and the different words that motivate each. I remember Canadian coach Lance Watson once saying to an audience of male and female USA Triathlon coaches, "Men, be careful how you coach your women. You may be very comfortable saying, 'Come-on ladies, pick it up here.' But do you really think that a female athlete who is sweating and grunting and running at maximal effort wants to be reminded of everything 'ladylike'? Think of a better way."

Support comes to women in many forms and Danskin has continued to be the best women's triathlon series for another reason: It is the only race series in the country that offers a national spokesperson who speaks to women. Sally Edwards, a triathlon pioneer, is an entrepreneur, author, and inspiration to every woman who completes a Danskin triathlon. Sally adds credibility through her lifetime of achievements (16 Ironman finishes, an Eco-Challenge, and an U.S. Olympic marathon qualifier among them). This year, at the Seattle Danskin in August, Sally will finish her 100<sup>th</sup> Danskin, finishing as she always does: dead last, so that no other woman has to.

At a recent speaking engagement for both men and women, Sally asked the question, "How many of you have ever thought that you might finish last in a triathlon?" About half of the women raised their hands, compared to very few of the men. But it's more than that, according to Hermsen. "Sally speaks to the heart. She makes everyday people feel like they can achieve fitness and success."

It's been 10 years since my first triathlon and I've added a couple of Ironmans and a few marathons to my list of finishes. I've continued to coach both men and women, and I lead a bike group for women who are looking to "raise their games" and learn new skills. I've taught women to get in touch with their hearts. I'll travel to and finish three women-only triathlons this summer (Danskins), and they are still my favorite. For most women, and for me, it's about learning, sharing, and teaching others. And when my clients begin teaching others, that's when I know I've succeeded and that they've succeeded, too.

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Kathy Kent is the president of Heart Zones Cycling and Heart Zones Personal Training. Kathy leads certification programs and seminars and is the editor of Trainer Connection newsletter. She also finds the time to coach athletes of all levels in swimming, cycling, running, and triathlons. Kathy is a USA and Heart Zones certified triathlon coach who lives near Chicago with her husband and two children.

Sally Edwards, the Head Heart of Heart Zones. A founder of the sport of triathlon (and a Triathlon Hall of Fame inductee), most of Sally's recent races have been performed in her role as the National Spokeswoman for the Danskin Triathlon Series. Sally has finished every Danskin Triathlon (as of 2005, sixteen years worth) dead last, as the "Final Finisher," inspiring more than 100,000 other women to make it across the finish line in front of her. The year 2004 marked her 100th last-place Danskin finish in Denver, Colorado on July the

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