

GRMC lands USA **Triathlon** site

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Olympic hopefuls will use local facilities, staff to develop for grueling sport.

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WEST BURLINGTON — In two summers, a TV commentator might just have reason to say that the **triathlon** medalist in the Beijing Olympics trained right here.

Before long, world-class athletes and those who hope to join their ranks could be headed to southeast Iowa to train at USA **Triathlon**'s first-in-the-nation regional training center — at Great River Medical Center.

"Receiving the first regional training center designation is a tremendous accomplishment for the hospital and all of the staff who have worked so hard over the years to make this a reality," hospital Chief Executive Mark Richardson said in a statement, announcing the pact with USA **Triathlon**. "We're looking forward to not only working with the athletes, but also helping improve the overall health of the area by raising awareness of the benefits of exercise and proper nutrition."

In choosing GRMC, the national governing body for amateur **triathlon** events has established a model for similar centers in nine other U.S. regions, and will use the facility to help triathletes improve their skills and help others become competitive in the sport.

The hospital already has been host to two coaching clinics (Canadian **triathlon** star Carol Montgomery attended one), with two additional clinics planned for later this year.

Selection by USA **Triathlon** was the result of a 10-year effort by hospital staff, spearheaded by physical therapist George Van Hagen.

Van Hagen was recruited to the sport in 1996 by veteran Burlington triathlete Lyle Roberts. Two years later he finished second at the national **triathlon** and has been active since, either as a participant or a coach.

Back then, the hospital already was working with minor league baseball and community college basketball players, as well as bike races in the area. **Triathlon** training seemed to be a natural progression.

"We knew we had everything we needed," Van Hagen said, referring to the equipment, interest level and personnel who were themselves triathletes.

A trip to what at the time was USA Triathlon's only regional training site, a now-defunct hospital-based center in Florida, confirmed that view. From there, initial contacts were made, and the work of getting USA Triathlon interested in Great River Medical Center began.

The first significant sign that a partnership was possible came in 2002, when the program director of the organization's national team visited West Burlington and was impressed not only with its facilities, but the support of people representing various community organizations that would work as partners.

While most training center services will be provided by GRMC, partners to the center include the Burlington YMCA, Burlington School District and Southeastern Community College. At the Y, for instance, athletes will use the pool. At Burlington High School, triathletes-in-training will use the running track as well as the pool, Van Hagen said.

If this all sounds mildly familiar, it may be because the hospital announced in 2002 that it was in the running to be named a regional training center, and in 2003 actually conducted its first coaching clinic. The goal then was to begin welcoming Olympic-hopefuls and other triathletes in 2004. Craig Borchard, spokesman for GRMC, said some reshuffling of the leadership of USA Triathlon pushed back the designation to this year.

The hospital got a jump on building up interest in triathlon in and around the Burlington area by launching a triathlon training club called Team BEAST — Burlington Endurance Athlete Sports Team.

Meeting at the Y, the club has more than 30 members, who range in age from 15 to 74.

This July, the team will host the Lake Geode Challenge, an Olympic-distance triathlon. That includes swimming 9/10 of a mile, biking 24.8 miles and running 6.2 miles.

Triathlon made its Olympic debut at the 2000 Sydney games.

Youth and age-group camps also are being planned by the hospital, both to encourage participation in triathlon, as well as to identify young talent for USA Triathlon's Athlete Development Pipeline program. The aim of this program is to develop athletes to fill national and Olympic triathlon teams.

Van Hagen said it takes 10 years or 10,000 hours to develop Olympic-caliber talent.

Athletes will work with 13 certified triathlon coaches, 10 of whom are hospital employees plus three others who reside locally and pitch in with the triathlon club.

On the elite side of the training program, Van Hagen said that coaches who attend clinics here will sell the program through word of mouth. That's already happening, with triathletes from around the country expressing an interest in coming to southeast Iowa.

People have visited from Brazil, Japan, Australia and all over the U.S., Van Hagen said.

Plans call for the development of a human performance lab, as well as a multi-sport training center to work with all kinds of endurance athletes. Demand for training, coupled with existing demand for space in the hospital's rehabilitation and recreation center, could trigger an expansion of gym and pool facilities on the hospital campus.

Professional and youth program trainees who travel to the Burlington area will pay their own way. Triathletes in the Olympic program, however, will receive room, board and training from the hospital as part of its partnership with USA **Triathlon**.

"That's our commitment," Van Hagen said.

Parents whose children — age 8 and older, only — are interested in **triathlon** should contact the Burlington YMCA at (319) 753-6734. Adults interested in becoming competitive triathletes should contact the Great River Center for Rehabilitation at (319) 768-4100.
