

If at first you don't succeed, Tri Tri again

By LYNDA GRAHAM-MURRAY

For The Hawk Eye

Feeling bad because your vow to get up and go to the gym has only gotten you as far as the couch? Listen up, sofa spuds and couch potatoes. It doesn't need to be like this.

One group of exercisers keeps it up year-round and they're — not surprisingly — name The BEAST.

BEAST stands for Burlington Endurance Athlete Sports Team. Don't panic. Those that join them need not be an athlete nor do they have to master all three triathlon sports to be a member. BEASTs bring a desire for improved fitness, exercise-oriented and fun.

They're serious enough to have a team mission statement: Team BEAST is dedicated to enthusiastic people interested in triathlon, endurance or multi-sport activities with desire to have fun while training and getting into shape.

The buddy system

"I joined Team BEAST on a dare from my running partner, Susie Shivers," said David Luers, 47, Burlington Fire Department's chief of operations. "Now, instead of one training partner, I now have 10. Plus three coaches."

Luers lost the use of excuses like "It's too cold" or "It's too hot" when everyone else was still working out so his training became more consistent. He completed three Sprint Triathlons and one Olympic distance tri last year along with numerous running road races and two half marathons.

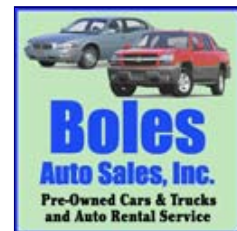
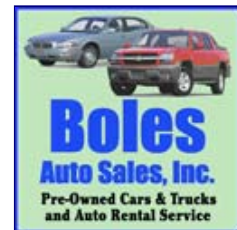
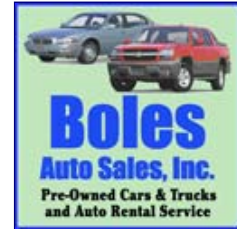
"I did all this without injury and with energy to spare," he said, flashing a contagious smile. Luers is convinced Team BEAST was behind his success.

"I won't say I'm fast, but I can go the distance."

His running pal, Shivers, is still training and is on the same workout schedule as the rest of the group. She's planning on competing at the St. Louis Marathon with the rest of her BEAST friends.

Research shows humans are social beings. Most of us will exercise at a higher intensity and for a longer duration when exercising in the company of others. A do-it-alone exercise video quickly loses appeal. But when someone's counting on you at the gym, there is a hefty motivator to get there.

Cosmo Leone, 47, radio personality and program director for Clear Channel radio, is a BEAST member and a black belt in Tae Kwon Do.



"I've practiced martial arts for 22 years," he said, " And I wanted to learn something new, to tackle a new challenge."

Others get involved for the socialization factor.

"The greatest reward for me has not been the improved fitness, the competition or the awards," said Lori Rudy, age 42, a marketing associate at Cady Insurance. "While those benefits have been great, it's the friendships and camaraderie of the other members that have made joining the club one of the best decisions I have ever made," she said.

Rudy, who is nicknamed Charlie's Angel looks like she walked off of TV shoot, Rudy joined BEAST on a bet with her husband, Tom, 41. The bet was this: Lori would teach her husband a thing or two about distance cycling if he would teach her to swim. Tom has an impressive swimming resume. In high school he was named All-State two years in a row, and still holds the 200-yard freestyle record at Burlington High School. Son, Braydon, a sophomore, is trying to break. Tom also competed in the Big Ten while swimming at Iowa.

"We had no clue of what we were getting ourselves into," she said. Under the guidance of a quartet of Olympic USAT-certified coaches, they had a great first year of competition and found themselves on the medal stand in either individual performances or as part of a team.

One, Two or Three

There are numerous members who only train in one or two sports, not all three.

"We want to make it clear that we are not just a triathlon-specific club," Tom Rudy said.

For example, take Mike Hunter. Hunter, 57, is assistant systems improvement manager at American Ordnance Plant and a phenomenal biker. He won the state time trial championships last summer, but he will not train as a runner. He will not train as a swimmer. His teammates find this perfectly acceptable. Everyone will eat his dust on the bike.

Team BEAST was formed last year to be the premiere training club for southeast Iowa. Sponsors include the Burlington Area Community YMCA/YWCA, Great River health Systems, Clear Channel Radio and Running Wild Sporting Goods Store.

What propels this group of 42 individuals between the ages 15 and 74 to train at the high end of the spectrum in a nation of sofa spuds?

Olympic-caliber coaches

Coaches George Van Hagen, Angela Kome, Michael Hunter and John Hunsaker are available to assist and answer any question members might have on training, skill perfecting and injury prevention.

"This club is a blessing to a lot of us," Leone said. "You would have to pay \$200 a month in other cities for all the instruction we get for a mere \$90 a year."

The Rev. Patrick Genereux, 58, rector at Christ Episcopal Church echoed Leone's enthusiasm for this value-added club. "It is a great bargain. Right here in Burlington we can get Olympic-class training without paying thousands more."

Hands-on clinics

Monthly clinics are conducted October through May.

Past topics have included:

- Running technique
- Bike maintenance and handling skills
- Nutrition
- Swimming mechanics
- Running shoe selection
- Sports psychology.

Gary Szymula, 54, a clinical psychologist at Great River Medical Center, is a fellow member who covered that last topic. He encouraged the group to practice mental preparation.

"Mental practice can do for the mind what stretching does for the body," Szymula said. "It is like taking your brain to the gym," he said.

The club is more than a triathlon club. It's a friendship club. In addition to training, members also enjoy social gatherings where they can enjoy dinner, picnics, and family events in a non-training environment.

Is there friendly competition between members? Lori Rudy nodded "But in the end everyone is encouraging their fellow teammates," she said. "We all want each other to succeed."

Kevin Brueck, 37, a project leader at General Electric originally joined BEAST while training for the 2005 Boston Marathon. He had a tough season the year before and was seeking a solution to training that would leave him fresher. Cross training for three sports was it.

"I have started to really enjoy the bike portion, and bought a new bike in July," he said.

He joined the team with a "pound the pavement" kind of attitude, but he — and other BEAST members — have been inspired to achieve feats they never thought possible.

"I had a terrible open water swim at Tri-Hawks, my first full triathlon, Brueck reflected, remembering Sept. 18, 2005, in Coralville. The weather started as overcast and ended clearing into sunny blue-skies with temps in the 80s. This race was a sprint distance involving a 500-yard swim, 15-mile, very hilly, bike and a 5K run.

The open water swim was the first event.

"I was physically the last person out of the water," he said.

He was also totally exhausted. His entire body ached. It would have been easy to quit at this point.

"I have never been that tired in my whole life," he said.

The bike ride was the second phase of the race. Brueck pushed and started to pass competitors on the bike. One more phase to go, the run, the third and final phase of the competition. He continued to pass runners in the running segment "My greatest boost came from the BEAST members all cheering me on."

His body was on cruise control, the roar of the cheering crowd echoing in his ears. The motivation from coach VanHagen allowed him to pick off a couple more competitors right before the finish line. In a miraculous comeback, Brueck had passed 180 competitors and finished fourth fastest runner in the entire competition!

Leone said he's is also light-years ahead of his wildest dreams.

"Fifteen years ago I had a complete knee blow-out. I never thought I would compete in triathlons," he said.

"This April, I plan on completing my first half marathon. Not bad considering there was a lot of people who thought I would need a brace just to walk again."

Where does this unparalleled motivation generate from? Lori Rudy offered an explanation.

"The inspiration comes from the encouragement, fellowship and support of club members. This has been the best reward anyone could ask for," she said.

Funny and fast

There is a lot of friendly banter keeps the laughter flowing. Laughing 10 to 15 minutes per day has been associated with a reduced rate of illness and heightened calorie burning. Laughing is healthy. It helps the body's immune system, it keeps you healthier, it cures depression, it reduces stress, and induces sleep.

Perhaps the giggling helps them to pedal through the pain,

Many members have nicknames. Van Hagen has been called Father Duck since someone noted at a competition how proud the coach must be now that his ducklings were swimming. His wife, Terri officially is Mama Duck.

Brueck is the "Pied Piper of animals." They seem to follow him wherever he trains. "Last summer while biking, he was chased by a dog, a horse and a pig.

"We also had to ride through a bunch of chickens on the road, dodge five dead raccoons — a raccoon family massacre — and had two deer jump in front of us," he said. "All of this was during one ride. Only in Iowa!"

Luers, nicknamed Fast Fireman Dave — or FFD for short — has a sense of humor that breaks up the monotony of training.

"Just when I think I can't endure riding a stationary bike any longer, Dave cracked a joke that has me totally forgetting my sore legs and struggling to straddle the bike I am laughing so hard." said Jude Langhurst, 53, a human resources representative at CNH.

Rudy became "wrong-way Rudy" when she misunderstood the run portion of a race. The sun heated up the course to over 80 degrees that September day. Bagpipes filled the air prior to the start of the Olympic Distance race — .75-mile swim, 18-mile bike, 5-mile run.

It was at this same race that Leone bent over creating his religious shorts. You know, the holy pair. The peak-a-boo version. Rudy received a map and compass at the end-of-the-year bash, while Leone received a patch kit to fix those beastly shorts!

Langhurst is teased for her speed work off the track and her most unusual bike stops. She unclips both feet from her bike pedals at the same time, resembling a flamingo landing, thus the nickname, Flamingo.

Members of BEAST have lofty goals ranging from the St. Louis Marathon to Burlington's 10K Great River Bridge Race in May.

Team BEAST will be putting out the red carpet on July 15 when it is host to the Lake Geode Challenge. This is an Olympic distance triathlon of .9-mile swim, 25-mile bike, and 6.2-mile run.

"We are optimistic we can attract 150 to 250 racers from all parts of the country," Rudy said. "They should make their goal as they already have entries from as far away as Minnesota.