
Over the Hill? Which Hill?

This 74-year-old will run, bike, and swim right over any hill - or stereotype - put in front of him

Jason Crooks/Staff Writer

What we might think

I pulled by the side of the road to check my notes -- a pre-interview routine. Let's see, I thought. Lyle Roberts of Burlington, 74 years old, will be going to some athletic competition in Hawaii. It's an Ironman Triathlon. Well, I've at least heard of those.

That's nice they let everybody compete.

I pulled ahead on Middlebrook Drive. A man with dark hair and a stocky build stood on his driveway drinking a cup of coffee. He seemed to be expecting me.

"Oh great -- what, he's got his son out here waiting for me?" I actually said. I got out of the car to introduce myself. As I approached, I saw some sun lines on a face aged enough to pass for a 54-year-old ... but 74? No way.

"Hello, I'm Lyle Roberts," he said.

I waited -- no "Jr." followed his name. (And, for some reason, I immediately felt bad about the chocolate bar and extra-large bowl of cereal I'd eaten for breakfast).

When the training began

BURLINGTON -- At 50 years old, don't most people begin to feel "over-the-hill," welcome a grandchild into the world, or buy a replacement recliner? Roberts evidently didn't think so.

In fact, back in 1982, he just searched out the next hill to run over.

Roberts, who will compete in his eighth Ironman Triathlon World Championship Oct. 15, 2005, didn't even start training for a triathlon until he turned fifty. He had wrestled a bit way back in high school, then ran in road races as an adult, but not until getting inspiration from some tri-athletes did he decide to push for the next level.

"I said: 'That's what I want to do; that's my goal,'" Roberts mentioned, as he looked a bit anxious to get going on his morning bike ride.

So in 1982 Roberts began to train for the triathlon, at first competing in smaller events until he felt he was ready to stretch to longer distances. (The full Ironman Triathlon consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a full, 26.2 mile marathon. And,

no, those numbers aren't typos.)

How long did the training take? Just about a decade.

"I was 60 or 61 when I did my first full-length triathlon," said Roberts. "Then I won the Iowa Series in 1994. That consists of seven triathlons throughout the state."

Training as a seventy-four year young

Now, years later, Roberts still seeks out the toughest hills.

Over 50,000 athletes now compete to get into the Ironman Triathlon World Championships, including a few hundred nationwide in the 70-74 age group. Because of the popularity of the events, there are now 22 races to get qualified for the World Championships.

Twenty-two races, all over America -- and which did Roberts choose? The Adirondack Mountains near Lake Placid, New York -- (of course) -- the course where bikers travel around a grueling mountain trail twice, approach speeds of 60 miles per hour downhill, and then have to climb back up those hills as well.

Wouldn't the plains of Nebraska ride a little easier?

"Lake Placid is a tough course," he admitted. "Not a lot of us 'Iron Gents' participate there."

A disciplined training regimen is the reason Roberts can still compete and win at Lake Placid and Hawaii. He trains between 14 and 20 hours a week, including biking 200 miles, swimming five to seven, and running thirty.

And what does he eat?

Any seven-layer bars?

Dollar-drive-thru deals?

"Anything I can get my hands on," he said, chuckling, then: "I eat a lot of vegetables."

The next Ironman competition

In the next few weeks especially, Roberts will be training hard. He'll ride beside a buddy three times a week, and his wife and "Tri-mate" Betty will be around to also support him. Betty also will travel with him to Hawaii, as she does for most of his competitions. But much of the pushing, Roberts knows he'll have to do himself.

"A lot of it is up here," he said, pointing at his head. "Half of training is training your mind. There's times when your body says 'quit.' There's pain. But you forget all that pain when you cross that finish line."
