

# TimeOut

SUNDAY, JANUARY 23, 2000

East Bay Life • A&E • Books

## OUTDOOR LIFE

# Man puts feet, arms, pedals to the metal

■ Leukemia society's Team in Training helped a newcomer prepare for a fund-raising triathlon

By David Ferris  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**I**T IS DEEP INSIDE mile 20 of the bike leg; just as the pain is hitting me hard, that Orchid Girl makes her move.

She appears off my left handlebar, tall and tan, bent over a sleek bike, her brown-blond hair in a ponytail, I notice, with growing interest, the dainty orchids printed on her bike shorts.

I already swam nearly a mile that morning. I have five more miles of pedaling to do, on this 25-mile bike ride. My legs are yelping for mercy.

And I haven't even started the six-mile run.

But with Orchid Girl to guide me, I think I might make it after all.

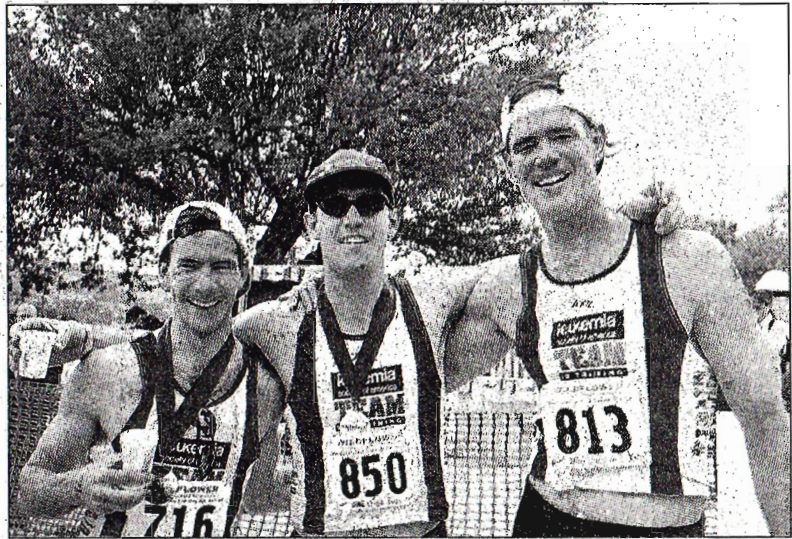
Just then, Orchid Girl takes a hand off her handlebar, presses one nostril closed, and, with a violent snort, sprays the contents of the other nostril onto the pavement.

Suddenly, Orchid Girl is not just an attractive woman — she is an athlete. A rival.

And she is ahead of me.

A new goal seized my tired legs: Beat Orchid Girl.

The Wildflower Triathlon, held each May along the shores of Lake San Antonio north of Paso Robles, is known as "The Hardest Triathlon in America." Its substantial foothills could intimidate the hardest triathlete. And



**TEAM IN TRAINING** helped David Ferris, center, strike up a new friendship with Stephen Price, left, and Terry Berger.

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# Triathlon

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the girl with the orchid-print shorts was just one surprise Wildflower had waiting for me.

The first Saturday of May, 1,000 people swam, ran and biked half the length of an Ironman triathlon; Sunday, 2,000 would do the shorter version outlined above. Among the participants Sunday were 150 people, most of them novice triathletes like myself, who had signed on to do the race with the Leukemia Society of America's Team in Training.

Team in Training offered a deal that was hard to resist. Expert coaches would train us. Each person would be assigned a volunteer mentor for inspiration. I would get a racing jersey and a wetsuit in the bargain.

My part was to raise \$2,700, which would go to fund research for a cure for leukemia.

At a packed kickoff meeting in a ballroom at the Santa Clara Convention Center, leukemia survivors took the podium to tell of their struggles with cancer and their own marathons and triathlons. They knew of participants, even those whose lives had never been touched by leukemia, who remembered Team in Training as an emotional summit in their lives.

I applauded along with the others, glad to be helping people suffering from a terrible disease. But privately I thought: Gimme the workout schedule, already. Cut to the action. Show me the track.

I wanted to recover the fitness and energy I had back in college. I wanted to explore new parts of the Bay Area on long bike rides and runs, and strike up new friendships in the process. Any let's-come-together, feel-good part of the project took a firm third place. I would raise \$2,700 — but I wasn't going to like it.

## **Form-fitting**

The Sunday of the race breaks clear and cool, and as the 9 a.m. start approaches, hundreds of nervous racers mill about on the boat ramp leading into Lake San Antonio.

The Team in Training folks are easy to spot. They're the ones in the identical black Quintana Roo wetsuits. The neoprene hugs every curve and ripple and makes one feel as sleek as a superhero — or as naked as a Butterball turkey.

I stretch and regard my teammates without embarrassment. I've met most of them for workouts each Saturday and Sunday morning for the last four months. I've seen them gather, haggard and unshaven, for a long bike tour through the hills outside Petaluma. I've run with them at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco in the driving rain. I've seen them at 7 a.m. in a rubber swim cap and a Speedo.

Wetsuits hold no surprises.

Observing us from the hill above is an astonishing number of specta-

tors. Thousands of people — fireside guitar players, curious parents, keg-toting fraternity boys — have created a tent city in the campgrounds overnight.

The airhorn sounds and the first wave of competitors — high school and collegiate athletes — fling themselves into the water. The green lake surface is churned to white as they make for a far-off orange buoy. At five-minute intervals, two other waves of athletes dive into the lake.

Now it's my turn.

I had trained for the swim by logging about an hour in a lap pool Mondays, Fridays and Sundays. It wasn't easy to learn the swim techniques the coaches taught us. But at least it was predictable; the neat black lane lines marked the way through the calm blue water.

I thought that laps at the YMCA had prepared me mentally for a competitive open-water swim.

Sure. And feeding a pigeon prepares you to feed a vulture.

In late March, the entire team traveled to the lake for a weekend to immerse ourselves in the course, literally. We unwrapped our wetsuits, pulled them on and lined up hip-deep in chilly lake water, poised to swim freestyle nine-tenths of a mile, farther than most of us had ever swum before.

I dove in and everything happened at once.

I was surprised, illogically, that there were no lane lines — just chalky green water so murky I could barely see my hands. A rivulet of chilled wa-

ter breached the wetsuit zipper and rushed down my spine. The cold water against my face created an instant ice-cream headache. All around me, arms and legs flailed; a foot kicked me in the shoulder as a hand poked between my knees.

The clot of swimmers slowly broke up into a line. Deep into the swim, a loose bit of lake weed snagged on my right goggle. I wanted to pick it off, but I had a rhythm going, a rush of water past my ears on each stroke, punctuated by my gasps for air. The stowaway weed would just have to wait until landfall.

### **Easier the second time**

At Wildflower, I realize how well my coaches have prepared me. The water that day is warmer and the crush of bodies doesn't faze me this time. About 23 minutes after I begin, I stagger out onto the boat ramp and struggle to free myself from the wetsuit. Being vertical again makes me dizzy. Dripping wet, I huff up a set of concrete stairs, lined by crowds of cheering onlookers, and into the "transition area," a parking lot thick with racks of bicycles and carefully assembled piles of running shoes, bike gloves and Power Bars.

I put on my helmet, gloves, socks and biking shoes, mount my trusty 1988 Nishiki, and spend the next hour and a half surrounded by the whir of well-oiled cogs and chains of fellow riders as we roll through hills that are baking from spring green to summer gold.

For the race, each athlete's age is

written in big black marker on the back of the calf. It's one of the techniques the race organizers use to keep track of thousands of fast-moving athletes.

For me, knowing everyone's age is racetime entertainment. It's as if everyone has their bank balance tattooed on their foreheads. I cheer inwardly when I pass a 22-year-old (give yourself a few more years, champ) and castigate myself when it works against me (Wait, that guy can't pass me! He's 50!).

But the game has grown old by the time I run into Orchid Girl (age 24, her calf announces). Fueled by a mixture of attraction and competition, I stay close to her until the end — almost.

I wish I could say I crossed the finish line a nose ahead of her, got her phone number, and have booked us on a bed-and-breakfast tour of Vermont on a bicycle built for two.

But it was not to be. On the final, plunging hill, Orchid Girl hunched over her handlebars and whizzed out of sight. Last I saw of her, she was running at a fine clip out of the transition area while I still fumbled with my shoes.

Our coaches had warned us to avoid dehydration by drinking plenty. No problem. I'd equipped my bike with two water bottles the size of coffee thermoses. During the bike ride I diligently drank them both and chased them with another bottle a volunteer handed me.

Maybe I should have remembered what my mother told me about running too soon after drinking lots of water.

I'm only a few strides into the run when I realize the scope of my problem. It isn't that my stomach is sloshing with too much liquid. "Sloshing" presumes there's some room for liquid to move. No, my abdomen was as full as a water balloon. A water balloon I have to carry six miles.

I pride myself as a runner. I expect it to be my best event, especially considering how many Wednesday nights I'd logged on the track, sprinting up

steep San Francisco city blocks, lunging up the bleachers at Kezar Stadium.

This was more like a nightmare, one of those sheet-tossers where a monster chases you in your concrete boots. *Nooooooo*, I think, as cramps hit me and a man four decades my senior passes by at a brisk clip. *Not meeeeeeee*. As I waddle past a crowd of college students, a girl yells out to her classmate, "Yeah, Kate! Way to beat the guy!"

I wish that cramps were the only malady I suffered that day. But another affliction, one that's harder to diagnose, strikes me during the bike ride and returns in flashes until the finish line.

It begins when I spy the first of my fellow team members biking in the other direction. They are easy to spot in the blue-and-white jerseys. In the blur of passing we each lift a fist and yell the most trite encouragement imaginable:

"Go team!"

Big deal. But as I bend back to the task of cycling, I find my view of the road ahead has become a watery, wavy mess. Oxygen, which I need in copious amounts at this point, is blocked by the lump in my throat. I hear an asthmatic wheezing sound. It takes me a moment to register it's coming from me.

### **Generous souls**

I'm thinking about the 44 people who wrote the checks that got me to my fund-raising goal. They were among the 125 to whom I'd sent a plea for money. It's not easy, hitting up people for funds. But the rewards arrived in the form of reply letters, two or three each night. Some contained encouraging words. All included checks. Some, from family and good friends, I had hoped for. Others were simply amazing: \$17 from my sister's old boyfriend; \$50 from my dentist; an astounding \$250 from a friend's ex-roommate.

And I'm also thinking about how the 150 people on my team had taken a triathlon, surely one of the loneliest sports around, and turned it into

a group effort.

There were mornings I hadn't wanted to jump into a cold pool. There were nights I wanted to read a book instead of licking envelopes. But I did what was needed, encouraged by the prospect that at that very moment, somewhere in the Bay Area, one of my teammates was most likely doing the same thing.

I love you guys, I think as I wipe my nose with the back of my cycling glove. I love all you guys.

### **I'll get over it**

I'm sure I'll be free of my odd affliction once I finish the bike ride. The run never doubles on itself so I won't see my teammates. But I wasn't counting on the Team in Training well-wishers who line the running course in small lawn-chair encampments. At the sight of my jersey, they holler, "Go team!"

I beam, raise a fist, wheeze, think how glad I am I'm wearing sunglasses.

My condition turns critical after I cross the finish line. I tumble into the arms of Hillary, my mentor, who congratulates me. I'm unable to respond in any coherent way.

I grab some orange slices and high-five my teammates who have also crossed the finish line. They chat happily and do instant replay; I nod and smile like a foreign tourist. The sunny day has turned overcast, but no matter. The trees, the lake, people's faces — they've never looked brighter.

The giddy illness clings to me for half an hour. When I'm ready, I do what's needed to get it out of my system.

My treatment comprises of walking away from the group, crouching with my elbows on my knees, and taking a few moments to sob with pure joy.

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*David Ferris regularly covers Berkeley as a Times staff writer. He ran three triathlons after Wildflower, including another with Team in Training, and is trying to decide where to compete next.*