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Breast Cancer Survivor Finds Strength in Triathlon

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Karen Newman to accept Most Inspirational Comeback Award and compete at Sprint Nationals in Milwaukee, Aug. 6-9

Karen Newman was taking her lunch break on the steps of a New York public library in 1989, when someone approached her, inquiring about the triathlon sport watch on her wrist.

She was a runner at the time, training for the New York City Marathon, but had never mastered a triathlon.

In a matter of minutes, Newman was persuaded to run the Montauk Sprint Triathlon, finding herself at the start line two weeks later. She had to borrow a wetsuit and a bike, both of which were too big for her, giving her extra force to work against in the 55-degree water and coercing her to stand the entire 25-mile bike ride.

But she finished.

“It was unbelievable and hysterical,” Newman said. “But I loved it. I just felt such a great accomplishment crossing that finish line, and I was hooked.”

Little did Newman know that triathlon would eventually become her lifesaver.



Newman before breaking the Huntsman World Senior Games Triathlon record in 2013.

Fast-forward to today, and Newman, a breast cancer survivor from South Burlington, Vermont, is gearing up to compete at the 2015 USA Triathlon Sprint National Championships on Aug. 9 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The race will take place along the shores of Lake Michigan for the third time, with the Milwaukee Art Museum and Discovery World serving as the main venue and finish area.

Newman, a 2012 world silver medalist and recipient of USA Triathlon’s 2014 Most Inspirational Comeback Award, is now 54, at the top of her age group. She has hopes of qualifying for the 2016 World Championships in Mexico — eight racers from each age group will qualify — but more importantly, she’s looking to share her story with those on the sidelines in Milwaukee.

‘I’m not going to die’

Shortly after that first triathlon, Newman, a registered dietitian, married and gave birth to her three sons. It wasn’t until 2001 that she received her own bike, a 40th birthday gift from her husband.

Despite fighting bronchitis at that time, she managed to take the last spot on the national squad at the Team USA trials that year in Lake Placid, New York.

But then, after several years of triathlons, things took a turn for the worse.

On March 18, 2008, after being misdiagnosed for a number of years, Newman was told she had breast cancer, and that it had already spread aggressively.

“I had three boys staring at me thinking, ‘Oh my gosh, is my mom going to die?’

“I said, ‘No I’m not going to die. I’m going to compete.’

“I refused to listen to the words that I could be dead.”



After being misdiagnosed for a number of years, Newman was told she had breast cancer on March 18, 2008.

Newman had already qualified for the World Championships in Vancouver that year, so she called her USA Triathlon coaches with the news. Tears rolled down her eyes when they insisted they’d be honored to still have her compete.

“Against all odds, I went on a plane after my chemo,” she said. “I felt awful. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my entire life. I couldn’t feel my fingers already because of chemo, and it was so cold that year that they actually canceled the swim right after our wave went off. But I made a promise to my boys and to everybody that I was not going to quit.”

Newman finished second to last; but she finished, and with a raucous international crowd cheering her on for the final 200 yards.

“That was the greatest accomplishment ever in my whole life,” Newman said.

“My children saw more than most children should ever have to experience. To watch them realize that they can fail and get up, that they can face great challenges and withstand them, has been one of the greatest things I’ve ever done.”

‘It’s OK to accept help’

After that race, Newman attended church more often and looked to those around her for support. It wasn’t the first time Newman battled a disease, but it was the first time she asked for help.



Newman donates her race medals to Medals4Mettle to pay it forward to others facing challenges.

“I suffered from eating disorders as a child and even into adulthood,” she said. “I lived in shame and had a lot of secrets. I just want everyone to know that there’s no secret too great to share. You’re lovable when you’re vulnerable.”

“It’s OK to accept help. When you allow others to help you, you open up the doors for them to be blessed.”

USA Triathlon embraced Newman, she said, bringing her to places she’s never dreamt of traveling to and introducing her to some of her closest friends.

In 2011, Newman qualified for the World Championships in Beijing, where she placed 11th.

The following year, she finished third at the National Championships before going on to take the silver medal at the World Championships in Auckland, New Zealand.

She won triathlon gold at the National Senior Games in Cleveland, Ohio, on July 21, 2013, wearing bib No. 21 on her son's 21st birthday.

NBC's "TODAY Show" has featured Newman's comeback story twice, and this fall, she will publish her own book, entitled "Just Three Words."

"It's about the power words have to shatter our world, or to empower us," she said. "Words can be really, really powerful. If somebody speaks positive words about you, that's great. But one negative word basically takes 99 positive words away.

"We hear words that aren't kind, and we take on those labels, and we don't have to. But it takes effort."

When Newman races the Milwaukee course next month, the best possible outcome for her would be to put her National Championship medal around the neck of another cancer patient.

"Our greatest trials in life can be our greatest opportunities to transform and to give back to the world in ways we never thought possible," she said.

"We don't realize how strong we are until we have to."

Over 5,000 athletes will compete for national titles in the 2015 USA Triathlon Age Group National Championships on the shores of Lake Michigan in Milwaukee. For more information on Sprint National Championships or to watch live coverage, visit usatriathlon.org/agnc15sprintcoverage.

Please join USA Triathlon in congratulating Karen Newman and fellow multisport athletes at the Athletes of the Year and Multisport Award Banquet on Aug. 6 in Milwaukee. Learn more and sign up to attend [here](#).