The Remarkable Journey of an Ironman

The Ironman triathlon is one of the toughest athletic competitions in the world. As the first person with Down syndrome to conquer it, Chris Nikic offers a lesson in perseverance and hope.

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

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The Florida sky had grown dark, and Chris Nikic *(NIK-itch)* felt ready to quit. He had been pushing through the grueling competition for more than 13 hours.

It suddenly became too much. He struggled to breathe in the hot, humid air. His feet burned as they pounded the pavement while he ran. His legs felt like concrete. And it seemed as if the muscles in his back had been put through a shredder.

Nikic, 21, had started the day with determination. If he could finish this race—and do so within the 17-hour time limit—he would be the first competitor with Down syndrome to complete an Ironman triathlon. That long-distance race—a 2.4-mile swim followed by a 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run—is considered one of the most difficult athletic challenges in the world.

Such a feat would not just put Nikic in the record books. It would also prove to him and to those around him that he could, in fact, do big things. And if he could do big things, then maybe one day he would be able to fulfill his ultimate dream: to live independently and have a

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wife and a family of his own.

Having completed the swimming and cycling portions, all Nikic had left to conquer was the run. Would he make it? The finish line was 16 miles away, and he was breaking down. It was then that Nikic summoned the strength to persevere, by reminding himself of the simple vision he had set for himself: *One step forward, two steps. One step. Two steps. Three . . .*

"Isolated, Left Out, Excluded"

To understand the challenges Nikic faced during the race—held this past November in Panama City Beach, Florida—you have to go back to his childhood.

Nikic has Down syndrome, a genetic condition that occurs when a person is born with an extra chromosome (see "Understanding Down Syndrome," below). Chromosomes are tiny structures inside cells that determine how a baby's body forms and how it functions as it grows. The extra chromosome affects the way a child's body and brain develop, leading to certain physical and intellectual differences and an increased risk for some medical issues.

About 1 in 700 babies in the U.S. are born with Down syndrome each year.

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At 5 months old, Nikic had to have heart surgery. He was so weak and had such poor balance that he didn't walk on his own until he was 4. To keep him from choking, his family fed him baby food until he was 6. When he learned to run, it took months for him to discover how to swing his arms at his side instead of holding them straight above his head. Learning to tie his shoes took him years.

UNDERSTANDING
Down Syndrome

Down syndrome is a genetic condition that people are born with. Typically, humans have 46 chromosomes in each of their cells. People with Down syndrome, however, have 47. That extra chromosome can cause certain physical and intellectual differences and health issues, including low muscle tone, short stature, and vision and hearing problems. About 6,000 babies in the United States are born with Down syndrome each year—about 1 in 700.

People with Down syndrome are often active participants in their communities. They go to school, work, play sports, and vote. Still, they sometimes face discrimination in school, the workplace, and other areas.

Many organizations—including the National Down Syndrome Society—are working to ensure equal rights for people with Down syndrome and to educate the public about the condition. To learn more, visit ndss.org.

His parents struggled to get him proper care and attention. They moved him to seven different elementary schools, searching for the right fit. At every turn, experts often spoke of Nikic in terms of limits instead of possibilities.

"I always felt isolated, left out, excluded," Nikic says, describing the emotions he experienced growing up.

He found comfort in sports. By his early teens, he was running sprints, swimming, and playing basketball in the Special Olympics, a series of athletic competitions for people as young as 8 who have intellectual disabilities.

When Nikic was about 15, his parents took him to a parking lot near their home and taught him how to ride a bike. It took six months for him to go 100 feet. But once he got the hang of it, there was no turning back.

The Ultimate Test

After undergoing a series of ear surgeries that left him weak and unable to leave his home, Nikic became determined to do more than he ever had before.

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In October 2019, with the help of an endurance training group and Dan Grieb, a volunteer coach, Nikic set his sights on the Ironman.

The race was the ultimate test. Nikic felt that if he could conquer it, he could do anything.

He and Grieb began meeting early in the morning, focusing on making small improvements each day. Grieb helped Nikic learn how to shift gears and balance on his bike. How to ride with the wind instead of against it. How to relax while swimming in the ocean, even around jellyfish.

Soon, Nikic added muscle to his 5-foot-10-inch frame. Everyone around him noticed that as he grew more fit, he seemed mentally sharper, more confident. The race neared.

"Based on all of his training, I was certain he would finish" in under 17 hours, says Nikic's father, Nik. "Unless something went wrong. Something can always go wrong."

Pushing Boundaries

Here are just a few of the many American athletes with disabilities who have thrived in sports.

TOM DEMPSEY

Born without fingers on his right hand and without toes on his right foot, Dempsey was a kicker for several teams in the National Football League (NFL) from 1969 to 1979. For decades, he held the record for the longest field goal in NFL history—63 yards.

TRISCHA ZORN

Blind from birth, Zorn is the most celebrated athlete in the history of the Paralympic Games, a series of international sporting events similar to the Olympics that are for elite athletes with disabilities. She won 55 medals as a swimmer and was inducted into the Paralympic Hall of Fame in 2012.

KYLE MAYNARD

Maynard was born with arms that end at his elbows and legs that end near his knees. He competed in wrestling and other sports. In recent years, he bear-crawled to the top of two of the world's highest mountains—Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania (19,341 feet) and Mount Aconcagua in Argentina (22,841 feet).

WILMA RUDOLPH

Rudolph contracted a disease called polio as a child and for years had to wear a heavy leg brace to help her walk. She then went on to break world records in track and field. In 1960, she became the first American woman to win three gold medals at a single Olympics.

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Trouble Ahead

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Early in the morning on race day, a strong wind swept across the Gulf of Mexico. The first portion of the race was the 2.4-mile swim. Grieb was in the water as a guide, joined to Nikic by a bungee cord. For safety reasons, Florida race officials required Nikic and Grieb to be physically connected while they were in the ocean. Swimming together, they emerged from the choppy sea in just under two hours.

The 112-mile bike ride came next. Grieb helped Nikic onto his bike and got his feet onto the pedals.

There would be trouble ahead. Because Nikic could not balance well enough to sip water while riding, he had to stop and climb off his bike to take a drink. When he did that on the 22nd mile, he had not noticed that he was standing atop a large mound of red ants. They swarmed his ankles and bit his skin, causing his legs to swell.

Nikic managed to get going again, only to accidentally crash his bike a few miles later while speeding down a hill. Again, he kept on.

"There Are No Limits"

Then came the marathon portion, a 26.2-mile run. It began well enough. Nikic looped through the streets of Panama City Beach in the nighttime darkness, connected to Grieb so he could keep from falling and stay on course. He passed a group of family and friends who cheered in support.

Chris Nikic told himself that if he conquered the Ironman, he could do anything he set his mind to.

But at mile 10, everything changed. Nikic slowed so much that it seemed as if he was barely moving at all. He began complaining about the pain. "He looked like a zombie," says his sister, Jacky. "Like he was just absolutely done."

Nikic's supporters huddled close, hoping to lift his spirits. His father clutched him and whispered in his ear: "Are you going to let your pain win or let your dreams win?"

Nikic knew this wasn't only about finishing an Ironman but also about showing himself what he could achieve in the future. His own home. Independence.

"My dreams are going to win," he told his father.

He began to jog again. *One step forward. Two. Three. One step. Two. Three.*

He found his rhythm. Nothing could stop him. He crossed the finish line with his arms held high in celebration—and a little time to spare. He completed the race in 16 hours, 46 minutes, and 9 seconds.

"I learned that there are no limits," Nikic said days after finishing the Ironman. "Do not put a lid on me."

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