Chapter 4 – Iron Will
Who's The Fittest One Of All?

THE MEDIA, WHICH WERE SO IMPORTANT to the rise of Ironman popularity, have taken a great deal of license with Ironman history, and not many people within the sport have seen fit to contradict the story that gradually emerged. The scene that was set was too good: a drunken, barroom confrontation in Honolulu; chisel-jawed, crew-cut men tossing back beer after beer, shouting and pounding on a table lit by a single, fly-specked bulb; the stakes of a ridiculous challenge rising higher and higher until the sunburned, steely-eyed Commander Collins, weaving a bit but still fierce, finally stood and roared his Ironman challenge.

It made for wonderful copy. Over the years, even the publicists for the Ironman itself got caught up in the creativity, moderating the scene somewhat but staying in a beery forest of half-drunken machismo that had little to do with reality.

Commander John Collins himself, frustrated over trying to tell the real story to a procession of eager journalists more in search of color than accuracy, began to ask his interviewers which version they preferred.

"Whenever I get interviewed," Collins said, "which is normally around the August, September celebrity time – you know, background color for the race – people who do the interviewing normally have some particular viewpoint that they bring to it, and they want to see that viewpoint backed up. A lot of them don't do any review of history at all, other than just reading the last thing that was written, so you can track through the years where some of these things came from."

More than a decade after his Ironman brainstorm, Collins is a tall, balding man in his mid-fifties. Retired from the Navy, he's also retired from obsessive physical behavior. At six-foot three, he weighs in at a less-than-solid 230 pounds.

"The television people in particular want an outrageous quotation," he said. "So far I haven't given them the appropriate one, so their interview with me always gets cut. Two years ago the gal who was doing it for ABC television said: 'Now let me understand how this started. A bunch of you sailors were drunk in a bar in Honolulu….'"

Collins stopped the woman and said that wasn't how it had been.

"But there was a lot of beer, wasn't there?" she persisted.

"Yeah," said Collins, "It was from a beer manufacturer."

"Then there was a lot of beer."

"Yeah," Collins said.

“So then you were all drunk,” the woman said.

“No,” Collins said sorrowfully, “we weren’t.”

The woman, nonplussed, paused for a moment. Then she tossed her head, made a nice comment about the shirt Collins was wearing, and walked away.

The single, basic fact of the event’s birth usually did make it through the interviews however: The original Ironman was a one-day combination of the three most popular endurance events in Hawaii – the 2.4-mile Waikiki Rough Water Swim, the Around-the-Island (Oahu) Bike Ride, and the Honolulu Marathon. Collins, at the time a commander in the Navy stationed in Hawaii, was not initially aware that the bike ride had always been a two-day affair. Nor were most of the men who expressed interest in the proposed event. One man who did know was 27-year-old Gordon Haller, a successful military pentathlete and former Navy officer, and more recently a Honolulu taxi driver who had participated in the around-Oahu race himself in 1973. Haller elected not to inform the group of the oversight at the first organizational meeting at Collins’s house in late 1977. Confident on the bike but a mediocre swimmer at best, Haller thought it best not to press his luck by splitting hairs on a procedural matter involving something so insignificant as a single day.

“We just kind of put it together,” Haller said. “I don’t know why I didn’t mention that the bike race took two days. Maybe nobody cared. I was just glad the swim was as short as it was, so I didn’t say anything about the bike ride. I knew I could do *that*. I used to do bike camping trips where I’d do as many as 140 miles in a day with full packs and everything.”

Collins was a recreational runner, swimmer, and cyclist when the Ironman idea came to him. He was not especially talented in any of the three sports; his involvement was at least as social as it was physical. Like many runners at the time, he and his wife Judy were devoted to the doctrine of long, slow distance. Patience and camaraderie were the stuff of their athletic world, not fierce, one-on-one competition.

Collins was never under any illusion that his Ironman brainstorm was an original idea. The specific combination of the three events was his, but not the concept. That came from San Diego.

“The San Diego Track Club,” he said, “Nobody ever wants to *write* it, but I always say that. Mission Bay San Diego Track Club Triathlon. First time ever heard about it I went and did it.”

John and Judy Collins had heard about the race from a friend, who had seen an announcement in the San Diego Track Club’s newsletter in August 1974. Two members of the club, Don Shanahan, a local lawyer who had taken to biking while recovering from his running injuries, and Jack Johnstone, a past club president and former competitive swimmer, had decided to hold a “triathlon” at Mission Bay. They expanded by a third the basic, multisport concept of the David Pain Birthday Biathlon, a run/swim combination that Pain, a San Diego lawyer, had started in 1972 in honor of his own fiftieth birthday. Pain was something of a legend in San Diego running circles for both his irascible temperament and his patronage of running. He almost single-handedly founded the Masters (over 40) competitive track and

field movement in this country during the 1960s, and so had his fingers in the germ plasma of two fairly significant athletic evolutions. At the time, however, neither his biathlon nor Johnstone and Shanahan's triathlon were seen as the first ripples of a new wave of fitness; they were intended merely as a lightly competitive alternative to the day-in, day-out grind of distance running.

The first track club triathlon was held on Fiesta Island, a nondescript, inaptly named and evil-smelling splotch of sand that sits at the east end of San Diego's Mission Bay. The island, parts of which were used to dry sludge from a nearby sewage treatment plant, was used frequently for local running and cycling races, although it was best known for the annual Mission Bay Over-the-Line Tournament, a raunchy three-day celebration of the best and worst of Southern California beach life, just barely disguised (and less than barely clothed) as an athletic contest. As a kind of free-fire zone of outdoor entertainment within the otherwise strictly controlled San Diego park system, Fiesta Island was an ideal location for the triathlon. The track club members were familiar with the area, and it was unlikely the local police, who usually had their hands full with drunken picnickers, would object. No one expected much of a crowd, anyway; the first race attracted about forty people.

The original order of events was complicated. Almost everyone who competed remembers if differently, most of them recalling simply that they seemed to be either swimming or running constantly, with the bike ride stuck in the middle someplace. Johnstone recalls that the course consisted of a 2.8-mile run to the Sea World amusement park and back, a 5-mile, double-loop bike ride around Fiesta Island, then a series of short swims and runs north along the beach and back again. No one actually trained for the event; a fast runner with a swimming background was at a great advantage, and no one had much more than a ride-to-the-beach background on a bike. Still, it was a start. Collins, competing in what has since come to be widely acknowledged as the first swim/bike/run triathlon ever held, finished far down in the field, but since he'd never run more than three miles at a stretch, he was pleased. A man whom Collins would see again in a few years – a man who would play a big role in the explosion of triathlon popularity worldwide – finished second. His name was Tom Warren.

It wasn't until 1986 that the triathlon world began to look back to its beginnings and the early Fiesta Island triathlons were rediscovered. Warren had long been acknowledged as a pioneer, but where his first steps in the sport were taken had never really been explored. The public history said the sport began in Hawaii, with the Ironman, and like the tale about Collins's drunken challenge, it spread and became accepted reality. Hawaii was certainly a far more dramatic location than a remote swamp in a forgotten corner of San Diego.

The retrieval of the real history was long overdue, although it is ironic that the almost obsessively conservative San Diego Track Club was given credit for launching so uninhibited a sport. Indeed, there was a good deal of resistance to multisport competition within the club when triathlons began to gain a mass-participation foothold in the early 1980s. In the track club's eyes, triathletes were seen as less than bona fide athletes, flashy show-offs who had never succeeded as pure runners.

In fact, Johnstone himself, who served for a long time on the club's board of directors, was one of its more conservative members, a strong opponent of growth and (competitive) diversity. Neither he nor

Shanahan became seriously involved in triathlons as the sport grew. The track club continued to see the activity as little more than a diversion, and doggedly resisted its incursion into the serious business of running.

Others, however, were less dogmatic, specifically Collins, who took the triathlon concept with him to Hawaii in June 1976. He proposed the Ironman six months later.

It happened in January 1977, at the outdoor awards ceremony for the Oahu Perimeter Relay Run, which had been held a week earlier. The run was an annual team competition that started near Pearl City on a moonlit Saturday night several weeks after the Honolulu Marathon and continued through Sunday. Each team was composed of seven runners, who alternated with each other in three, four or five-mile increments in a counter-clockwise direction completely around the island – a distance of about 140 miles. The teams were supported by vans, cars, or pickup trucks, which transported team members from point to point, carrying food and water and acting as mobile cheering sections, encouraging or insulting whichever team member happened to be on the road at the time. Held annually for many years until insurance problems closed it down in 1986, the run started at night to minimize problems with both traffic and the heat. It took the fastest teams some 12-1/2 hours to complete the entire route.

The awards ceremony for the relay that year was held at Primo Gardens (for Primo Beer, the company that sponsored the event) in Pearl City, and it was there that Collins posed the challenge. Almost a hundred teams had entered so there was a big crowd.

The discussion that turned the wheels in Collins's head centered on the question of which athletes – runners, cyclists, or swimmers – were the most fit. Most of the people with Collins were runners, so there was a bias in that direction. Many were swimmers as well, however, and pressed the merits of marathon swimming. Run/swim biathlons were common in Hawaii at the time; there was an ongoing rivalry between the Waikiki Swim Club and the Mid-Pacific Roadrunners. An annual biathlon was held to decide the issue, with a trophy – a running shoe hanging from the inside of a life ring – passing back and forth between the clubs.

"I had read quite a bit about bicycling," recalled Collins. "The exercise physiology books at that time said that bicyclists had the highest oxygen uptake, that Eddy Merckx [five-time winner of the Tour de France] was the fittest person in the world. The runners always felt that they were at such a disadvantage in the water, and the swimmers always felt that the swim wasn't long enough and that they were better runners than the runners were swimmers, so there always was that sort of argument going on. I was expounding about the fact that bicyclists really *were* the most fit, and I was just sitting there thinking about it: the Waikiki Rough Water Swim started down at the Outrigger Canoe Club, then went outside the breakers and ended up at Fort Derussey. If you did that and then got on a bike and went counterclockwise around the island up over Wahiawa….

"So we got out a road map and it looked like about three miles from Aloha Tower to Fort Derussey. I said if you take the 115-mile race and you cut three miles off, it'd be 112 miles and you end up at Aloha

Tower, and you just run the Honolulu Marathon course. I said that we could put all three of those things together. Whoever won that could call himself the premier endurance athlete in Hawaii."

Encouraged by the response of the handful of people around him, Collins climbed up on the stage, took the microphone, and explained his idea. "Whoever finishes it first," he announced, "we'll call the Iron Man. Anyone who thinks they can handle it, see me."

"I got a big laugh," Collins said.

But he was serious, and while almost everyone thought the idea was ridiculous, several people who heard the announcement remembered it. Over a period of some weeks they contacted Collins and asked him if he was going to go through with the plan. He was indeed; he'd been talking the proposal up at every opportunity. Finally, Tom Knoll, one of Collins's Navy friends who had expressed a strong interest in the race, received orders for Okinawa. He was due to be transferred in the early spring.

"If we were going to do it," Collins said, 'We had to do it before Tom left, so the time was fixed to be as soon after the Perimeter Relay the next year as possible."

Collins, who had always been an enthusiastic organizer, began piecing together an assortment of official permits and private, unofficial cooperation. Then he typed up several pages of instructions and suggestions, photocopied them along with several pages of maps, and began distributing the package to those who had talked to him about the race. On the cover was a hand-drawn map of Oahu with the route indicated by a dotted line. Hand-printed at the top of the page was the name of the race: "First Annual Hawaiian Iron Man Triathlon." Below the map Collins had printed:

Swim 2.4 miles!
Run 26.2 miles!
Bike 112 miles!
Brag the rest of your Life!

The race was held on February 18, 1978. Eighteen men signed up, fifteen started, twelve finished. There was Collins, of course, and Haller and Knoll, who finished sixth. John Dunbar, a former Navy SEAL, was second. Dave Orlowski was third; Sterling Lewis, a physician, and Ian Emberson, a hotel bar manager, tied for fourth. In seventh place was Henry Forrest, a crew-cut, active-duty Marine; in eighth was Frank Day. Collins was ninth. The last to finish were Archie Hapai, a student at the University of Hawaii; Dan Hendrickson; and Harold Irving, also a student at UH. It took Irving more than 22 hours to complete the course.

Not one of the competitors that first year knew going in that the Ironman was even possible. To their knowledge, nothing like it had ever been attempted. The damned thing seemed to sit right out there on the edge of what a human body was designed to do. There were some real fears that it might even be dangerous. All the men were marathoners or swimmers or both, but few had any cycling experience, and the lack of expertise in some cases was downright frightening.

Hendrickson, for instance, went to Sears the day before the race, bought a ten-speed Free Spirit bike, then showed up at Collins's house that night and asked him for help putting it together. "Can't," said Collins, "I'm still working on the damn trophies." And Knoll, who was an experienced ultra-marathon runner, was an absolute novice in the water. Like everyone else in the race he was required to have his own paddler on a surfboard alongside him during the swim. As it turned out, he needed a lot more.

"He could hardly swim at all," recalled Collins. "We had a boat that was assigned to follow along and play shepherd. When the lifeguard in the boat saw how bad a swimmer Tom was, he had the boat stay close. Tom ended up following that boat the whole way, with the lifeguard standing up and shouting instructions – telling him how to move his arms and breathe – as they went."

Collins, himself, who was 43 years old at the time, swam the 2.4 miles in 91 minutes. From then on he was in uncharted territory. He was so unsure of his ability to finish that he stopped every ten miles during the bike ride for a drink of water and a piece or two of toast slathered with honey. When he got really hungry over on the far side of the island, he stopped at a fast-food restaurant and ate a bowl of chili. Time was hardly a consideration; survival was the issue.

"Is this possible?" he kept asking himself, and there were times during the marathon when he thought the answer might be no, especially about a mile or so after he guzzled half a can of beer. Then, for some reason, the last few miles of the run felt even better than the first few, a phenomenon that many Ironman competitors have experienced since, and he crossed the finish line in ninth place, 17 hours after he had personally fired the starting gun to get the whole thing under way.

"My pulse rate was 165 when I finished," Collins said. "And it was down to 100 within four minutes. It took 44 hours for it to get below that. I'd be two hours awake, and I'd have to crash and go to sleep. I'd sleep for two hours and then I'd sit straight up in bed with my eyes open. It went on that way for a whole day."

The winner was Haller, who had been convinced when he first heard about the event that "I wasn't ever going to do something crazy like that." He'd had to run down Dunbar, the former SEAL, during the marathon.

It would be accurate to say that both Haller and Dunbar were fanatical about their level of physical conditioning. They didn't know each other, but their paths had run surprisingly parallel: military backgrounds, cast-about employment careers, a sort of mutual evolution that put them in Hawaii at a propitious moment, in a frame of mind that made the insanity of Collins's Ironman seem plausible. Dunbar was immediately enthusiastic, Haller needed to be convinced – but it didn't take much. Both men were good marathoners, although Haller had an edge in that department. Dunbar had a strong advantage in the water; Haller was a better, more experienced cyclist. When the Ironman that first year actually developed into a race, it was Haller, gaining during the bike ride, who made it happen. Dunbar fought him off as long as he could, but ended the day in second place, more than half an hour behind.

Dunbar, whole father was a career Naval officer, joined the Navy himself right out of high school, hoping to become a frogman. The recruiter he talked to steered him in an even more demanding direction

when he mentioned the SEALs. Half attempting to discourage the young man from a decision he would probably regret, the recruiter warned Dunbar that SEAL training was exceptionally difficult, that he'd be in the water day in and day out, that most of the candidates dropped out of the program, etc., etc. Dunbar thought it all sounded wonderful and signed on.

"I never was a person to sit around and do things that became boring, monotonous," he said.

The SEALs, certainly, were not boring. Formed during the Kennedy Administration as an elite offshoot of the already elite Underwater Demolition Teams, the SEALs are the Navy's version of the Army's Green Berets. Just to begin with, SEAL candidates must endure a nightmarish eighteen-week basic-training program that is designed to make them crumble. For four-and-a-half months they are almost continually wet and muddy, constantly harassed by instructors ("Take a Marine drill instructor and multiply it by ten," said a former SEAL officer), run day and night, push-upped almost to death, and when they aren't being pounded by something else, they are being pounded by the cold California surf. The attrition rate among SEAL trainees is something close to ninety percent – despite the fact that dropping out of the program is made to be as emotionally devastating as possible. The defeated candidate must walk to the front of a formation of men who were just a moment before his closest associates, remove his distinctive red helmet and place it humbly at the feet of the instructor. A more crushing admission of one's failure to measure up probably does not exist.

"We're looking for chinks and cracks," said one former SEAL team instructor. "There's no way you would want someone who wasn't qualified to slip through. But I'll tell you, everything after that training is a piece of cake. You can't hurt a guy like that. You can make him tired, but mentally he's unbeatable."

"In the SEALs," Dunbar said softly, "if you quit you lose. And you lose a great deal. The thing no trainee wanted was to quit."

Dunbar left the Navy in 1976 and he enrolled at Chaminade University in Honolulu almost immediately. He'd saved a chunk of money while on active duty, and he was getting a monthly stipend as part of his G.I. Bill entitlement, so he didn't have to work. And he spent little; he lived in a van so he didn't have to pay rent, and he bicycled almost everywhere he went. Or he ran. He competed regularly in running and swimming races in the Honolulu area, ran his first marathon in 1977, and stayed in generally terrific shape.

Not surprisingly, he was one of the first people to tell Collins that his Iron Man suggestion sounded like a good idea. When Collins called him a couple of weeks later and told him that several more people had signed on, Dunbar said immediately, "Great, there'll be some competition!"

"I wasn't about to let anyone beat me in an event that incorporated a number of different activities," Dunbar said.

Had you asked, Haller would have given you a similar evaluation of his own abilities. Mild-mannered but highly competitive, he'd been an athlete all his life, and since his return to Hawaii in January 1976,

shortly after his discharge from the Navy, he'd been running, cycling, and lifting weights almost constantly. In fact, he'd flown to Oahu specifically to compete with a team in the Perimeter Relay. Unfortunately, a big storm caused a two-week postponement of the relay that year. Haller, seeing the situation as an opportunity rather than an inconvenience, cashed in his ticket for the return flight home and stayed.

Of course he didn't have a job in Honolulu. Not that he was all that particular – nor were his needs all that complicated. Anything that would keep his belly full so that he could train would do. And almost everything did. He collected a little unemployment, did some gardening, sold a weight-loss program door to door, and even did some surf reports for a local radio station. He joined the Navy Reserve and spent a year driving a cab. "I got pretty good at that," he said, shrugging off a less-than ambitious period of his life. "I was just enjoying everything," he said. "I was single, had absolutely no responsibilities."

Mostly, he was running, morning and evening both, putting in up to 120 miles a week, competing whenever he could. It was the lifestyle of many good but never-to-be-great marathoners at the time who understood their limitations but stayed with the program nonetheless; full-time athletes whose source of income, partial or otherwise, would never been running. One of the highlights of Haller's career came that winter, in December, when he ran a 2:29 at the Honolulu Marathon and placed tenth.

In November, 1977, Haller thumbed a ride on a military hop out of Honolulu and flew off to Washington, D.C. to race in the Marine Corps Marathon. He was in the best running shape of his life, and he ran what still is his best time – a 2:27. He was back in Oahu in late December, just two days before the Honolulu Marathon. He planned to run that, but he needed first to find a job. Among the places where he went looking was a Nautilus fitness center on King Street in Honolulu where the owner, Hand Grundman, told Haller that he couldn't hire him, but that he'd let him work out for free in exchange for a few hours of work each week.

"I thought that sounded like a pretty good deal," said Haller. "I would have just turned around and spent the money to join a place like that anyway."

Grundman's offer put the last of the Ironman pieces in place. Haller was back in Hawaii and not in any immediate danger of starving. Dunbar was well-fed, too, living in his van and spending most of his time either studying, working out, or arguing with various police officers who kept insisting that his sleeping arrangements were illegal. Collins and his wife were training for the next Perimeter Relay, to be held in less than a month. It was Grundman, through his three fitness centers, who would sponsor Haller's participation in the first Iron Man. He would, in fact, sponsor the race itself in 1979 and '80, while upstairs in his King Street facility his wife at the time, Valerie Grundman (formerly Silk), who did the books, grumbled about the incredible amount of money the clubs were throwing down the drain of a "crazy-ass" sport.

The battle between Haller and Dunbar that first year was dramatic. It had never occurred to Collins that someone might want to *race* his event; many of his friends were telling him that not a single one of the entrants was even going to *finish*. But to Dunbar it was a race right from the beginning. For weeks he'd been telling himself that he could win, and so on race day he hid his second thoughts ("Maybe they're

right; maybe this can't be done. Am I going to collapse and die?") behind that grim SEAL face of his and charged through the swim. It took him almost exactly an hour; he came out in second place, three minutes back, but he was in first within a few miles on the bike and pulling away from the field.

The big lead didn't surprise Dunbar at all. Nor was he surprised when he came off the bike in first place, with no one else in sight – although he was a bit concerned, because the ride had been harder than he'd anticipated.

When he started to stagger during the marathon, when the stomach cramps set in and his legs started to go numb, and most of all when he got word that Haller was behind him, gaining fast, and looking pretty strong…well, *that* surprised him. The only way to handle the situation – he was a SEAL, for God's sake – was to go harder.

"The bike ride was pure agony," Dunbar said. While he had been riding his bike steadily before the race, he hadn't really been training on it at all, not for the Iron Man anyway. His longest ride was something like twenty miles, which he thought was probably enough because he was in great shape, although of course it wasn't near what he needed. He had learned what thousands of Ironman competitors who would follow him would learn by equally bitter experience: cycling was the key to the event; it either set you up or set you down for the marathon.

"I thought I'd just be able to cruise through 112 miles, that there wouldn't be too much competition, that I'd go at an easy pace and save myself for the marathon," Dunbar said. "But like every event I've been in where there are other people, I've gotten that competitive spirit in me that's caused me to drive through every moment of the competition."

But Haller kept coming. At the end of the bike ride at the Aloha Tower he'd been some 13 minutes behind, which is either a lot of time or not, depending on how the guy in front of you is feeling. In this case, it wasn't much, and Haller knew it.

He picked up ground on Dunbar quickly, lopping ten minutes off the lead by the time he had crested Diamond Head. But downhills are rough on tired legs, and Haller was forced to stop at 17 miles and have his cramps massaged. He too was learning an Ironman lesson: running a marathon after riding hard for five or six or seven hours or more is a bitch, no matter how much you've trained. Dunbar's lead increased again – to eight minutes. But the race was in Haller's hands now. Dunbar was through, barely holding on, and it took Haller just three miles to get close once more. Then he stopped again, this time to urinate. Finally, at mile 21 he went by for good, unnoticed by Dunbar, who was at that point well past caring about first place at all – or second or third for that matter. He had trimmed his goals to one bare essential.

"When you quit, you lose," Dunbar the SEAL had said.

To hell with Haller.

The winning time was 11:46:58. Dunbar was 35 minutes behind. He'd almost passed out, and had been hallucinating, which scared his one-man support crew, Ron Figueroa. Figueroa wondered whether he

shouldn't just pull his man off the road and head for the nearest hospital. As if Dunbar's exhaustion and lack of proper training on the bike weren't enough, he'd downed a couple of beers when Figueroa had run out of anything else to drink.

"I guzzled one can and thought that would do it," Dunbar said with a grin. "It tasted so good. I thought it was doing the job, and of course I was tough, I thought I could handle it, so I guzzled another can. It started affecting me within half an hour. I was delirious within thirty, forty-five minutes. I wasn't sure I'd make it."

The next day the *Honolulu Advertiser* carried a report of the event on the front page of the sports section. There was a picture of Haller taken during the run. He was smiling, so it must have been between cramps. Although twelve men finished, the last five (including Collins) crossed the line too late to be included in the story, which referred to the event as a "gut-buster." No one had died; no one had been seriously injured. No citizen of Honolulu had complained about being inconvenienced by the event. Under the terms of Collins's written instructions, that officially qualified the race as a success.