

## Iron Girls

**Fourth-year medical students add run-bike-swim to their list of accomplishments as triathlon finishers.**

Last summer, Lauren Knecht '10 was in the midst of her acting internship in anesthesiology, routinely working 10-hour days. Instead of going home to relax with a hot bath or a glass of wine after work, Knecht would suck it up for her second shift—two hours of intense exercise: running, biking, swimming, or lifting weights.

Knecht was training for her fifth triathlon, her second as a medical student. A San Diego native, Knecht has been a competitive runner since she was 11. She's run several half-marathons, a full marathon, and was on a triathlon team in college, competing in one sprint and two Olympic-distance races. But she hadn't competed in a triathlon in four years when she took on the Cazenovia Triathlon in the summer of 2008.

At Cazenovia, she was the first woman finisher in her age group and seventh woman overall. "It was so much fun I immediately wanted to do another," Knecht recalls.

It was classmate Katie Dougher '10 who planted the seed for the Iron Girl Triathlon in summer 2009.

Iron Girl is a series of 10 events sponsored across the country, established to empower women to a healthy lifestyle and a competitive platform. For the first time, an Iron girl triathlon would be held in Syracuse in 2009, consisting of an 800-meter swim, an 18.6 mile bike race, and a 5k run.

The event attracted four students from the Upstate College of Medicine Class of 2010: triathlon veteran Knecht, and Dougher, Rachna Kenia, and Heather Foreman, who were all competing for the first time.

Regardless of experience level, training for three sports requires commitment from any competitor, a particular challenge when those competitors are busy medical students.

"There were certain weeks during which it was more challenging to make time to work



Nearly 500 women competed in the first Syracuse Iron Girl triathlon, including four members of the Class of 2010.

out than others," says Kenia. "But I tried to be flexible. During really busy weeks, I would sneak in a run during my lunch breaks."

"I had to be really regimented and plan out each day," says Knecht, who did a pediatric rotation in April and May and the anesthesia internship in June and July. "I work out regularly anyway to stay in shape—usually run twice a week and bike once. But training for a triathlon, I had to make sure I was doing a sport every single day. Ideally, you'd do two sports a day, but I never had the time to do that."

She used days off for long bike rides, from her apartment in the University area out to Cazenovia Lake and back (42 miles) or around Skaneateles Lake (40 miles). "Syracuse has amazing biking all around the outskirts of town," Knecht says. "But it's really hilly, so it's tough."

While Knecht was training for a com-

petitive finish in the race, her classmates just wanted to be able to finish. For Kenia, it was the first competitive sporting event she'd ever participated in.

She started out running 30 minutes in a session, building to 60 minutes, and at the end, up to 90 minutes.

Having friends to train with made it easier, she said. "Running is a lot less painful when one of your best friends is next to you filling you in on her life. It's also a lot easier to make dietary changes necessary when training like that when your lunch mate is training for the same race."

She had never ridden a bike for exercise and didn't even have a bike until a few weeks before the race.

Similarly, Dougher borrowed an old bike from her boyfriend. "It needed a little fixing up," she says.

Dougher had been running for exercise

for some time, and although she had toyed with the idea of tackling a marathon, didn't feel it was achievable at this point in life. The triathlon sounded like the perfect fit.

"I was looking to challenge myself and change things up," she said.

According to Knecht, that's generally the appeal for triathletes. "A triathlon is great cross training so you don't burn out your body," she says. "That's what drew me and what most triathletes like about it. You also don't get bored with the training. One day you're in the pool, the next you're on a bike. By comparison, when you're training for a marathon it gets a little monotonous."

All of the students utilized the swimming pool in the CAB for training. In addition, Dougher practiced swimming in open water



Katie Dougher gears up before her swim.

twice—she swam across Canandaigua Lake with her boyfriend paddling along side in a rowboat, and took advantage of a practice swim sponsored by Iron Girl at the actual race site.

They all say they were motivated by the need for balance in the craziness that is medical school and the desire for a healthy lifestyle.

"As physicians, I think it's important to practice what you preach," says Dougher. "If we're going to tell patients to exercise and lead an active lifestyle, we need to be able to find the time ourselves."

When race day came, they all found the satisfaction they were looking for. "It was such an adrenaline rush," says Dougher. "There were all these people cheering and encouraging you. They really get you going."

"It showed me that you don't have to be competitive to participate in events like this. It's really all about pushing your own personal limits and having a good time," adds Kenia.

Knecht was happy with her finish as well, placing second in her age division and sixth place overall out of 461 competitors. "I felt strong and flew through the day," she says.

Despite their varied goals, each of the Upstate competitors came away having achieved the Iron Girl mission—empowerment.

Kenia and Dougher both competed in a second triathlon in September (Kenia did the Skinnyman Triathlon in Skaneateles; Dougher did the Canandaigua Triathlon), and Knecht ran the Corning Red Baron Half Marathon in November.

"That's my thing—setting a goal and staying active in the busy, hectic life that med school is by doing something that you love to do," says Knecht. "It feels so good when you're done."



Heather Foreman and Rachna Kenia, after completing their first triathlon.