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For Ironman participant, it's the journey that counts

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CORRESPONDENT

With the cries of "Auld Lang Syne" still ringing in his ears, Gary Verhoorn, 64, of Neshanic Station, massage therapist, avid athlete and race director, already has his 2010 training and racing season planned out.

A former smoker who started walking 20 years ago when he quit the nicotine habit, Verhoorn found his progression from walker to casual runner to marathoner, biathlete, triathlete and finally Ironman (2.4-mile swim; 112-mile bike and 26.2-mile run) to be a natural one.

"One thing led to another," he said. After he heard about foot races open to "normal" people, he raced a 2-miler, then a 5-miler; he subscribed to two running magazines and "really got into it."

He began doing biathlons (biking and running races), "but since I could hardly swim, I didn't consider a triathlon."

Still in the learning stages about his athletic pursuits, Verhoorn trained for and completed the Philadelphia Distance Run.

"At the finish line someone told me it was a half marathon," he said. "'That's when I realized that maybe I could do a marathon."

His first was in December 1990 -- and since then he has run 39 more. But he was not ready to stop there.

"Having done a marathon, I decided I might like to do a triathlon," he said. "'I learned to survive in the water, did a few short triathlons and registered for a half Ironman distance."

He lost count in the pond where the swim was held and did an extra lap, "but I had fun, especially during the torrential rain on the run. I also realized an Ironman distance might be in my future."

It was. He's completed six Ironman distance triathlons, including three in Lake Placid, N.Y., where he's headed again on July 25.

Fitting it all in

At an age when no one would blame Verhoorn for paring down his exercise and racing schedule, Verhoorn finds the reason he keeps going in the old adage: "It's the journey, not the destination."

The journey has led to a change of career. He became a national and state certified massage

therapist with Hillsborough Massage Therapy LLC and four partners after having his first massage following his 2000 Lake Placid Ironman.

"Training for races leads to an incredibly healthy lifestyle and brings a person in touch with what's going on in your body," he said. "You realize you can accomplish almost anything you set your mind to, and this lesson is one that stays with you for life. You also realize that although you can do anything, you cannot do everything and you need to manage your life and your time very carefully."

All the training that goes into competing takes a great deal of planning. Verhoorn began a 30-week training program for his Ironman on Dec. 28.

"I must therefore be very selective about my races this year," he said. "The new Rutgers Half Marathon fits in the schedule, but the River to Sea 92-mile relay doesn't, since it's six days after the Ironman. I'll miss it and many of the other races I do for fun.

"I've picked out an Olympic distance triathlon in May and my schedule will permit a 10K on Super Bowl Sunday and a half marathon in Lake Placid in June, but that's about all the racing I can do. I will squeeze in a two-day fundraiser bike ride for MS in May."

Learning process

Along the way, Verhoorn has learned a lot about his own body and about the athlete's body in general. He's suffered his share of injuries, including an Achilles problem, stress fractures and a broken wrist, during an unsuccessful attempt at learning cross-country skiing four years ago.

"Massage helps prevent injuries and helps heal them when they do occur," he said. "I'm fortunate that I have a good background in how to prevent and how to recover from sports-related injuries. I still get injured and have been known to over-train, but I'm also careful not to think of myself as invincible."

Working full-time and training for difficult events such as an Ironman can strain relationships, Verhoorn said.

"Athletes sometimes rush through the day and take for granted those closest to us," he said. "My wife is my support, my helper, my inspiration, and without her I couldn't do an Ironman."

She also supports him in his role as race director of several popular area road races, including the New Year's Day Resolution Run in Hillsborough. Many people have proclaimed to Verhoorn what their resolutions are for 2010.

"I always have a zillion details to plan for the race but I make time to read the resolutions people submit," he said. "I have the last two years' resolutions and read them for inspiration.

"Some are very specific: 'Qualify for Boston,' 'Run a 5K in 34 minutes,' while others are more general: 'Be the best I can be,' 'Get in the college of my choice.' Some are very lofty: 'Gain the respect of my peers.' I like to read a few choice ones at the race awards ceremony and also put a copy of them all in everyone's race goody bag."

If nothing else, Verhoorn said, they are a great reminder that success demands resolution, and planning ahead.

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