

Fairmont's Triathlon

The triathlon came to Minnesota in the early 1980's, and Fairmont was one of the first small towns in the state to hold such an event.

So, just exactly what is a "triathlon?" A triathlon, by definition, is a multisport event consisting of swimming, bicycling, and running. The triathlon events vary and include the Sprint, Olympic, Tinman, and Ironman categories. The "Sprint" is the shortest distanced event, usually involving a one-fourth to one-half mile swim, eight to thirteen miles bicycling, and a two to four mile run. The Olympic includes a .93 mile swim, 24.8 mile bicycling, and a 6.2 mile running event. The longest event is the "Ironman" which involves a 2.4 mile swim, 112 miles bicycling, and a 26 mile running event. The history of the triathlon can be traced back to the 1920s near Paris, France, where it was said to have originated. The first triathlon in the United States was held at Mission Bay, California, in 1974. However, it did not become an Olympic event until 2000.

Fairmont has a strong running/track and field community, many avid cyclists, and was once home to an Olympic sized swimming pool. This alone speaks volumes about the commitment many in this area have towards physical fitness in general, and specifically the event known as a "Triathlon."

Locally, the Fairmont Triathlon, initiated by the late Liz Gomez, made its debut in 1983 in conjunction with King Korn Days. It was traditionally held over Labor Day starting at Gomsrud Park. It continued locally until 1989, and was started up again in June of 2007. Although Liz Gomez passed on the directorship of the event to others, she continued to be actively involved. She worked tirelessly to recruit people to participate, assisted with preparations for the event, as well as being available on the day of the event. She served as an enthusiastic cheerleader for others and an active member of her community.

Despite its short season, the state of Minnesota has one of the largest triathlete communities per capita in the country. There are more than fifty triathlons and approximately 30,000 participants that are either consistently or moderately active in the sport in the state.

In the 1983 Fairmont Triathlon there were thirty-three participants, twenty-six being from Fairmont. The event peaked in Fairmont with 270 participants in 1986. The local emphasis is on "regular" participants, and not "super athletes." "The triathlon," stated Bob Bonk who serves as the Fairmont High School Track and Cross Country coach, "is an excellent motivator for teenagers to get involved in aerobic activities that they can carry on into adulthood."

In looking back over the history of local triathlons, the 1983 "King Korn Days Triathlon" was won by Doug Scott, 19, of Fairmont. Scott completed the three events in 2 hours, 11 minutes, and 5 seconds to beat runner-up Tim Lambert of Fairmont. The participants had to endure 40 mph winds and choppy waters.

The next year, 1984, saw the event grow to 150 participants with Richard Idstrom of New Hope winning the men's division which featured a 1,200 meter swim in Hall Lake, 18.6 miles of bicycling, and 6.2 miles of running. Tricia Nye of Wayzata won the women's division. Also featured was a mini event that was exactly ½ the distances of the main event won by Idstrom.

The 1985 "Fairmont Ronald McDonald House Triathlon" was mistakenly advertised in Triathlon magazine as being held in Michigan. Although there were 249 participants that year, with additional participants coming from Ohio and Michigan, the magazine ad also served to limit participation from Minnesota and the surrounding area. Kent Fry of Cedar Falls, Iowa, won the Men's Division. The Women's Division was again won by Tricia Nye of Wayzata. Proceeds of that year's event went to the Ronald McDonald House.

In 1986 there were a record 270 participants in the Fairmont Ronald McDonald House Triathlon. Greg Brown of Des Moines, Iowa, won the Men's Division with a time of 2.07.03 and Tricia Nye of Wayzata won the Women's Division with a time of 2.35.08. Nye had previously set the course record in 1985. Wes Clerc, manager of the Fairmont McDonald's estimated that \$1,300.00 was raised for the Ronald McDonald House. Also, 1986 was the final year that Liz Gomez would serve as director of the event.

The 1987 "Fairmont Ronald McDonald House Triathlon" featured 185 participants with Mark Corley of Cedar Falls, Iowa, winning the Men's Division with a time of 2.09.06. The Women's Division was won by Susan Bienfang of LeSeuer, Minnesota, with a time of 2.40.11. That year, the course layout changed at the last minute due to sealcoating on several streets just prior to the event. The top Fairmont finisher was Brad Musser in the Men's Division with a time of 2.24.02 finishing 13th. There were no Fairmont entrants in the Women's Division.

The 1988 triathlon had 118 participants, down from the previous year. That year, the Men's Division was won by Greg Brown of Des Moines, Iowa, with a time of 2.07.30. Brown also won the event in 1986, but didn't participate in 1987. The Women's Division was won by Maureen Thielen of Brooklyn Center with a time of 2.28.15. Thielen stated that she was using the Fairmont Triathlon to "gear up" for the Long Course Nationals in San Antonio, Texas, where she hoped to compete. Thielen also participated in the Fairmont Triathlon prior to 1988. Local participants Dennis Katzer, Stephen Zishka, and Jon Jantzen took second in the open relay team division of the main event.

The sixth annual Ronald McDonald House Triathlon was held in 1989, and quoting a *Sentinel Open Forum* submission by Liz Gomez, "Except for a delay due to lightning and rain, the event went like clockwork." The overall winner in the Men's Division was Doug Mitchell of Hopkins and the overall winner in the Women's Division was Shannon Fielding of St. Paul, despite being two months pregnant. Kate Burns represented Fairmont by taking seventh overall in the women's short course event. An interesting aspect of that year's event is that the three winners, Mitchell, Fielding, and Burns, did not participate in high school athletics.

In June of 2007, after an 18 year hiatus, the revival of the Fairmont Triathlon was at Gomsrud Park drawing 150 participants, including many from the Twin Cities area and several states. Triathlon competition was divided into two competition classes, sprint and olympic. The sprint course was won by Beany Bode of Algona, Iowa, and the olympic course was won by David Holden of Hudson, Wisconsin. Local athletes competing included Daron Johnson, Paul Carlson, David Haegeman, Corey Welchlin, and Emily Rodgers, all of Fairmont. The renewal of the Fairmont Triathlon was the result of the efforts of many people dedicated to event and its positive impact on individuals and the community.

Fairmont hosted its first Fairmont Ronald McDonald House Triathlon in 1983, decades before the multisport event began to boom. In the early years, triathlons were considered such a novel event that Fairmont's Triathlon even gained attention in the first edition of Dr. Steven Jonas' book "*Triathloning for Ordinary Mortals.*" The Fairmont Triathlon went on to become a nationally sanctioned event with well over 200 participants before being discontinued in 1989. Its return in 2007 was praised by participants and the media for its location and the enthusiastic community support. According to Phil Hanson, "The Fairmont triathlon has had three participants that went on to qualify for the world Iron Man Championships." Obviously, Fairmont and its residents can be proud of this event, its sponsor, the many volunteers, and its numerous organizers. Over the years, it has provided positive attention for the community, it has brought visitors to the community, it has instilled the importance of physical fitness, and it has served to benefit the Ronald McDonald House. For information and pictures of the 2007 event, visit the website at www.fairmonttriathlon.com