

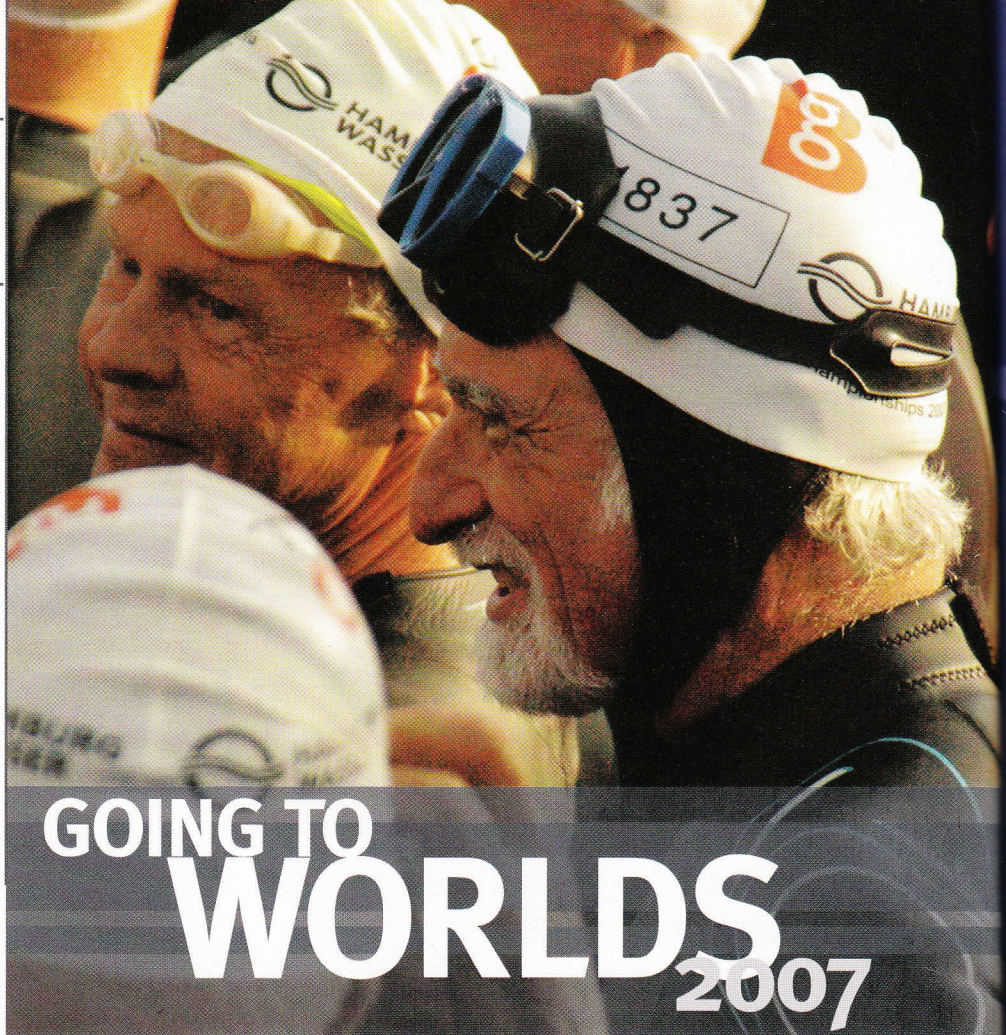
talking triathlon
with steve jonas

Back in September I returned from my third Age-Group Short Course Triathlon World Championships held at Hamburg, Germany. There were several differences between my trip this time and my previous ones to Madeira in 2004 and Lausanne in 2006. One was that my wife, Chezna, was not with me and I did miss her. A volunteer at the Cloisters Museum of medieval art in New York City, she was on a two-week tour of medieval Germany with her volunteers group. We did get to see each other however, having a dinner date one evening when she was in the historic city of Braunschweig with her tour group and I took a fast German train down to meet her. Quite romantic, I must say.

Another difference was that I did not automatically qualify this time around, as I had done on the two previous occasions I was at Nationals. There were fewer finishers in my age group than there were for the 16 available slots. At the 2007 Nationals at Hagg Lake, Ore., I did manage to cross the finish line 21st out of 22 in the Men's 70-74 age group. But I had figured/hoped that enough of the West Coasters in the race were there for a slot at Vancouver in 2008 that there would be room for me to go to Hamburg. And indeed there was, as only 12 of us made the journey.

That experience was instructive. Especially as you age up. Hey, you never know what your chances of making Team USA are going to be at a given Nationals. Of course, if you are slow like me it is easier to make it as you get older and the age cohorts still racing shrinks. Yet another difference between this race and my previous Worlds was that this one was held right in the middle of a big city as are the New York City and Chicago Triathlons. Hamburg rolled out the red carpet for us. It was a beautifully run event, right down to the last detail.

Most of this time around I was struck especially by what makes our sport so different from all of the other major Olympic sports. Here I was, doing a triathlon at the Olympic distance with amateur age-groupers from around the world, under the sponsorship of the International Triathlon Union, which also sponsors the Olympic side of our sport. Most of my fellow competitors were pretty fast. But not Olympics



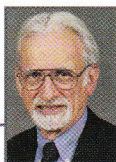
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fast. These were people from about 40 nations around the world who have jobs, spouses who may or may not race themselves, and kids; in other words, folks for the most part just like you and me. We all are people who have to fit in our training with a whole bunch of other stuff going on in our lives. And there we all were, at a World Championship event, a Weltmeisterschaft, as the Germans call it.

Furthermore, while there were plenty of fast folks, a goodly proportion were slow, like me. How slow am I? Well, while the winner of my 70-74 age group did the race in 2:38:19, it took me 4:23:19. But I had made Team USA in my age-group. The flat, fast course stood in marked contrast to both the one at Madeira (where I could not manage the hills having become somewhat hypothermic in the swim) and Lausanne where I did manage them, but very slowly (even for me). Once I got out of the rather cold swim (not getting hypothermic this time around - an insulated swim cap really does help!) I just went out and had a good time on both the bike and the run. Crossing the finish line to the cheers of an enthusiastic crowd of several thousand people in the

grandstands was a great climax to my 25th year in the sport, completing my 115th triathlon at a Worlds.

And that's what makes our sport different. For no other major Olympic sport does its international governing body, in our case the International Triathlon Union, run an annual series of world championships for amateurs, as well as manage our Olympic participation. And it is not as if many other Olympic sports don't have widespread amateur participation around the world. But it doesn't happen in track and field or skiing or swimming or cycling that the same body that runs the Olympic movement for the sport also provides for the amateur regional and world championships. That has been the ITU's mission since the beginning, to both guide our sport into the Olympics and keep it there, while at the same time celebrating the amateurs, slow as well as fast, who do the sport for fitness and fun. There has been periodic pressure brought to bear on the ITU to give up its role in providing the venue for amateurs. Let us hope they never succumb to that pressure. What a thrill they provide for us, the ordinary mortals of the sport. Thanks, ITU.



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