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Chosen one

Solana Beach triathlete will try to become first above-the-knee female amputee to complete Ironman world championship

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ENCINITAS – Kick ball, dodge ball, steal the bacon. No matter what the game, Sarah Reinertsen was always the last kid picked during her elementary school gym classes.

"They were always like, 'Oh, OK, I'll take Sarah,' " Reinertsen recalled.

Reinertsen, a native of Long Island, N.Y., was born with a tissue disorder that caused her left leg to be shorter than her right.

When she was 7, it was necessary that the leg be amputated above her knee. She's worn a prosthetic limb ever since.

Reinertsen can still recall her first prosthetic, which was made of wood and had a rubber foot.

"It was clunky and made a huge noise when I walked," Reinertsen said. "I couldn't really run. I had to do this hop, skip thing."

Reinertsen remembers being taunted by classmates.

"They would say, 'Yo mama got you a leg at the grocery store,' " Reinertsen said.

"I used to get teased a lot, but kids are that way. They pick on the most obvious weakness."

If only those same kids in her elementary school gym class could see her now.

Reinertsen, 29, a Solana Beach resident, will be competing in the Ironman Triathlon World Championship in Hawaii on Oct. 16. The race consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run.

Reinertsen, a former sports reporter for NBC television in New York who now works for the Challenged Athletes Foundation in Del Mar, will attempt to become the first above-the-knee female amputee to finish the race.

"The only guy I know who had the same amputation I had finished it in like 16 hours and 40 minutes," Reinertsen said. "I'm shooting for 16:05. We'll see. I'd love to beat (16:40), but at the end of the day I just want to finish within 17 hours because that's the cutoff."

Competitors start the race at 7 in the morning and must finish by midnight.

"If you don't finish by midnight it's a do-not-finish," Reinertsen said. "You could continue, but the finish line is closed down and the timing people are gone, and it doesn't count. There's that in my head – a sub-17."

Reinertsen's personal trainer, Kim Koch, believes Reinertsen should be able to accomplish the feat.

"I'm totally blown away by how tenacious she is," Koch said. "She doesn't give up. Anything I throw at her she goes at it 110 percent."

"She pretty much dominates everything with her right leg, so we've been working on strengthening her left leg and integrating that with her movements."

Reinertsen, who has competed in seven marathons, first began thinking about doing a triathlon after a chance meeting with amputee legend Jim MacLaren in New York City more than 12 years ago.

However, she was never a big swimmer and hadn't ridden a bike since she was 11.

Reinertsen put the idea on the back burner for a while until spontaneously purchasing an old mountain bike at a garage sale in 2001. She turned it into a stationary bike and began practicing in her Brooklyn apartment during a cold winter.

She then began swimming at a local pool.

Reinertsen says she was happy with her television career in New York, but when the job opened up with the Challenged Athletes Foundation she jumped at it.

It was a cause she strongly believed in, and the job would allow her to live and work in the country's triathlon hotbed.

"It seemed much more feasible than learning in Brooklyn and having to take your bike on the subway to get to Central Park," Reinertsen said with a chuckle.

Reinertsen says living in Solana Beach has been an enormous advantage.

"I don't think I could do this if I didn't have the supportive athletes and friends who are doing the same sort of thing that I am," she said.

Reinertsen's first triathlon was the Carlsbad Triathlon (sprint distance) in May 2003. It was the first time she participated in an ocean swim.

"I was just happy to finish it," she said, laughing. "I think it took me two and half hours."

Since then, Reinertsen has increased her training. The 5-foot, 97-pounder is up to 90-mile bike rides and 1 1/2-hour ocean swims.


"It's amazing to look back and see how far I've come in the last year and a half," Reinertsen said.

And since gym class.

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