

Swim, Bike, Run and Spend

How Ironman pumps up the local economy

BY NICOLE RESNICK

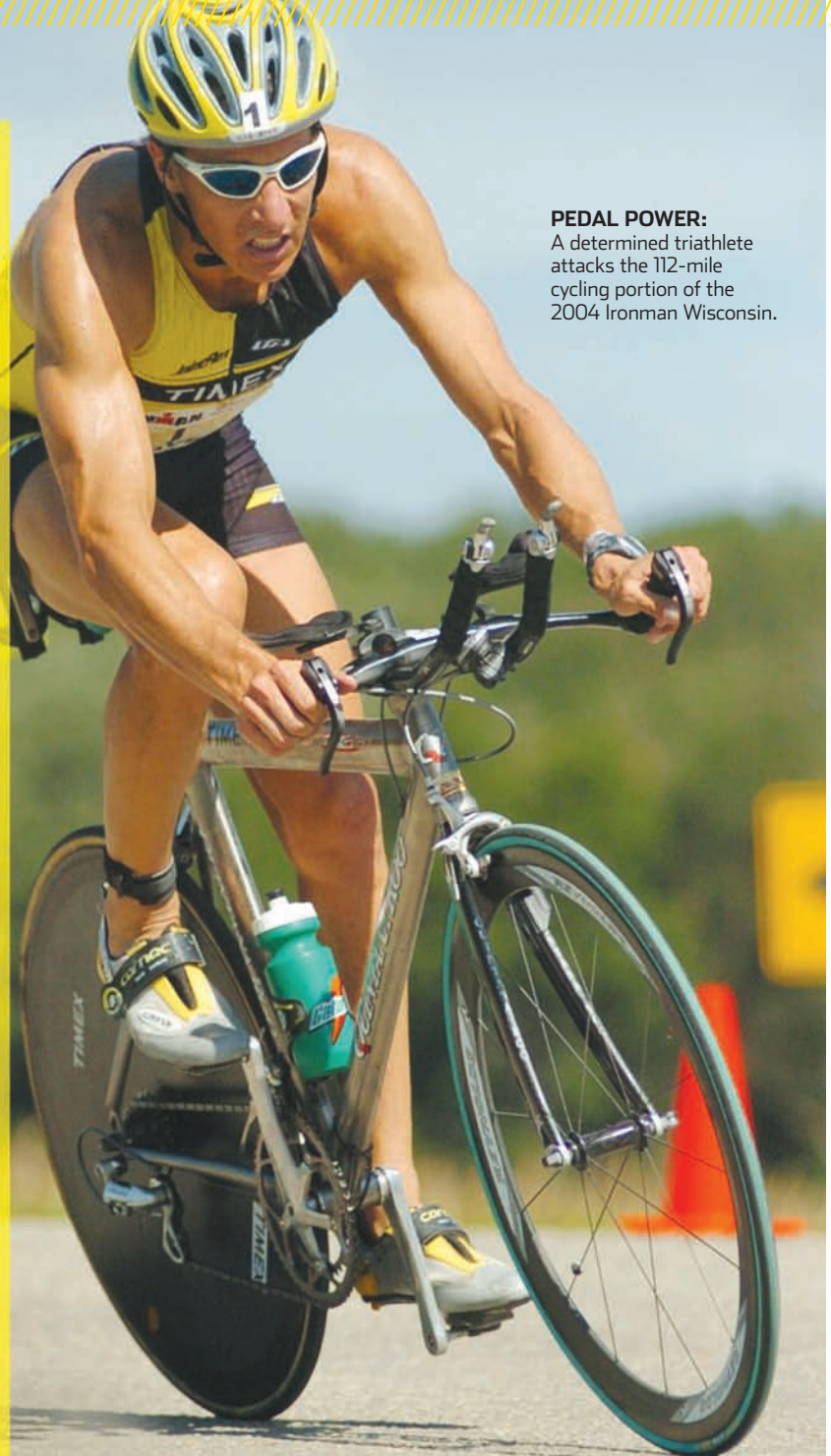
YOU MIGHT THINK THAT WHEN Rocco and Heidi Armonda of Silver Spring, Maryland, signed up for the 2005 Ironman Wisconsin, the financial impact to our city was the equivalent of two visitors here for a weekend. You would be wrong. Once the couple registered and each paid their \$350 race entry fee, the Ironman turned into a major family affair: a traveling caravan of relatives and supporters from around the country.

Accompanying the Armondas last September were their three young daughters. Inspired by Rocco and Heidi, Heidi's two brothers – one from Boston, the other from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania – signed up for the race. The Gettysburg brother brought his wife and three young sons, and to help watch all the grandkids, as well as volunteer along the course, Heidi's parents also made the trip from Gettysburg. Rocco's mother from Santa Monica, California, flew in, and his sister drove over from Milwaukee. Even Heidi's friend from home got into the spirit and signed up to volunteer.

Once the group arrived, they settled in for the better part of a week. Four competitors accounted for a total of sixteen consumers who rented five hotel rooms over the course of six nights. For their many meals they either ate out or brought food in. They snacked, shopped, and sampled all that Madison had to offer.

No Still Waters Here

This is how Ironman Wisconsin generates so much revenue for Madison. The five-year-old event creates a ripple effect of income that extends well beyond the basic costs – the entry fee, the triathlon gear, and food and lodging if you're not a » **CONTINUED ON PAGE 76**



PEDAL POWER:
A determined triathlete attacks the 112-mile cycling portion of the 2004 Ironman Wisconsin.

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local. When all is said and done, the ripple is more like a major wave of flowing cash – right into the registers of area businesses.

Dirk Shelley of Highland Park, Illinois, says spending related to the extreme athletic endeavors spreads beyond the tangible by those who support the event. “I was injured two weeks prior to the 2002 race and couldn’t participate,” he says. “But I still attended the race to cheer friends, went to all of the race week activities, and spent money. People don’t necessarily need to be competing to be part of the race experience in Madison.”

There’s no denying the giant adrenaline rush created by the competitors, which seems to envelop everyone within miles of the race course. More than that, the event casts a positive glow on everything Madison has to offer.

“We loved it here,” says Heidi Armonda. “We did the Ironman in Florida a few years ago, and it just can’t compare. The support out on the course was amazing – it was just packed with so many people. It was truly an event, and the whole city came out, screaming and cheering.”

Cha-Ching! Dollars for Downtown

Deb Archer, president and CEO of the Greater

Madison Convention and Visitors Bureau, reports that the direct spending impact of Ironman Wisconsin – the bottom line number that tells us how much money is brought into the Madison community during the course of the event – is \$2.2 million. “Quite simply, this event carries a tremendous economic impact.”

Financially speaking, Ironman is one of the biggest events for our city (which is why Archer and other city officials were cheering when the contract was renewed for another five years). Consider the hotel industry alone. Anyone can tell you that on Ironman weekend, the city is booked. In each of the past two years, the total number of nightly stays for the Ironman clocked in between 3,500 and 4,000 – and that’s only the ones reserved through the CVB.

Hotel managers have nothing but positive things to say about what the Ironman means to their businesses and to the Madison area. And they clearly get into the spirit of the unique event by providing extra amenities and embracing the athletes’ special needs. From welcome bags packed with Power Bars, fruit and water, to extra towels, rags and special maintenance areas set up just outside the hotels to allow the athletes to administer some TLC to their precious triathlon bikes, hotel staff are happy to oblige.

Steve Zanoni, general manager of the Madison Concourse Hotel, cannot praise Ironman Wisconsin’s impact enough. “I think it’s great for our hotel and for the city – it’s just a tremendous event.” He acknowledges that the athletes who stay in his hotel dedicate so much time to training for the event that he feels compelled to provide them with excellent service, as well as some extras.

“We try to think of their particular dietary needs, for example,” says Zanoni. “We offer carbo-loading meals for them, and on the morning of the race we open up extra early so they can eat something before the start.”

The grueling nature of the Ironman means that most out-of-town athletes and their entourage come to Madison several days before the actual event and stay at least through the next day. George Wiesner, general manager of the Best Western Inn on the Park on the Capitol Square, says they typically book several rooms per party.

“Some athletes also come during the summer to train and scout out the course,” he adds, “and once they get lodging here, they tend to come back and stay with us for the actual race in September.”

While hotels near the start and finish lines near Monona Terrace reach capacity first, those that may not offer the same proximity fill up with Ironman athletes all the same. Patty Chang, general manager of the Best Western Inn Towner, enjoys the energy that the athletes bring to the hotel each September.

“It’s interesting to watch them – it’s like



FAMILY FINISH: An exhausted but elated couple celebrates a triumphant finish by crossing the Madison finish line with their baby in the 2005 Ironman Wisconsin.

they're all part of one big family," she says. "We see them gathering and talking in the lobby throughout the weekend, and they seem to establish some close bonds." Hotel management fosters these interactions and welcomes all Ironman participants by posting their names on the walls of the lobby. "We simply have a great time with them," says Chang. "And it's turned out to be one of the annual events that we can always count on for filling the hotel."

Brisky Business

Downtown shops and businesses along the racecourse, where spectators line up and wait for hours to cheer their athletes, also benefit from the influx of visitors and pedestrian traffic. John Stakel of Milwaukee, an Ironman competitor for the past two years, brings along his parents and brother to see the event. Last summer, a group of ten friends from Milwaukee visited Madison to offer their support.

"During the race, my parents and my brother, along with my friends, hung out and ate in Verona (along the bike route) and then all up and down State Street," he says. With an event that can last well beyond twelve hours (think a 2.4 mile swim, 112 miles on a bike, and a 26.2 mile run), there is ample time for spectators to enjoy several rounds of eating, drinking and shopping.

Madison area bike shops, most of which now carry a range of triathlon gear, are particularly bustling around the time of the Ironman. And for such businesses, the ripple effect is especially evident. Many purchases are sparked by spectators who find inspiration in the athletes they cheer along the grueling course.

"There's no question, the Ironman means a lot to our business," says Eric Lyngaas, sales floor manager and buyer at Williamson Bicycle Works. "There are a ton of people who become very interested in doing triathlons, who might not have been exposed to them prior to the Ironman in Madison."

Then there are the purchases by the athletes, like Helen Prichett of Madison, who completed her first-ever Ironman last year. Like many an Ironman, Prichett trained year-round, buying gear and gadgets on a regular basis. For help in converting her older-model road bike into a machine that could stay the course of fellow triathletes, the Yellow Jersey on State Street was a great resource. For a wetsuit, Prichett turned to Williamson Bicycle Works; for a triathlon suit, she preferred Middleton Cycle & Fitness. Morgan's Shoes was her pick for the countless pairs of running shoes she needed over the course of her training, and for bike shoes, as well as the

specialized insoles an injury forced her to use, REI was her retailer of choice.

Lyngaas of Williamson Bicycle Works finds that a fair share of the business he does during the week of the Ironman is with out-of-town athletes who discover – once they arrive here – that they've left something crucial behind. They have no choice but to stop in and pick up a bike helmet, or a pair of swim goggles, at the last minute. Another significant revenue stream for bike shops comes from shipping and reassembling services. The high cost of airline insurance coupled with the unreliability of baggage handling has competitors mailing expensive bikes rather » **CONTINUED ON PAGE 78**

Ironman Wisconsin by the Numbers

Total athletes competing: ~2,200

No. from Wisconsin: ~500

No. outside U.S.: ~100

Spectators: estimates range from 35,000–60,000

Volunteers: ~3,000

Aid stations: 12

No. of oranges: 6,210

Lbs. of cookies: 200

No. of bottles of water (20-oz size): 22,200

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than flying them out. Shops like Cronometro on Willy Street advertise the services. Then, in the weeks and days prior to Ironman, boxes of expensive cycles arrive in pieces, where experienced bike mechanics put the cycles back together – for a price.

Cronometro owner Colin O'Brien says Ironman Wisconsin has served to replace the once typical "August lull." And in the months following the event, more people than ever are buying. "Either these customers have seen the event and are signing up for the first time, or they need a better bike," says O'Brien. "During

the months of October and November, we really see a high percentage of sales from Ironman competitors."

"The Ironman event is like icing on the cake," adds Lyngaas. "It gives us the ability to stock some of the cool, high-end products that people want to see, and due to the popularity of triathlons in general, it definitely increases sales for us."

From Gatorade to Guinness

With thousands of people mobbing the downtown area during Ironman weekend, it's easy to see why local cafes, coffee shops and bars benefit. Athletes need their calories and fluids, and the spectators need little excuse to guzzle some sympathy sustenance.

The Great Dane brewpub on King Street is an Ironman hot spot. "For us, the event has always been a very positive thing," says director of operations Ted Peterson. "The Ironman folks have an appreciation for carbo-loading, so they'll often come in for a beer or two when they first get into town," he says. "Then after the race they'll come back in as well."

For the income it generates, Peterson ranks the Ironman weekend as one of the restaurant's annual top ten. An added bonus is the character of the patrons, which he describes as especially mature and generous. "They're just really, really good folks."

Even the local convenience stores, markets and pharmacies enjoy increased business the weekend of the event. When it comes to spectator necessities like sunscreen, hats, snacks, and supplies for banners to wave on the sidelines, some stores struggle to stay stocked. It's especially true in the normally quiet towns and neighborhoods that dot the course's long, hilly bike route south and west of Madison – they become popular locations for people hoping to catch a glimpse of the athletes as they whiz by on their bikes.

Kathryn Grassl of Madison recalls the many training rides she and her friends endured last summer as they prepared for the 2005 race.

"If nothing else, the Kwik Trip stores along the Ironman bike course in Mt. Horeb and Cross Plains can thank the athletes for purchasing mass amounts of Gatorade as they passed through on their training rides," she says. "They even had signs posted on the coolers in the stores alerting us when there was a nationwide shortage of certain flavors."

Gatorade, an official Ironman North America sponsor, is the reason why Mickey Rzymek travels to Madison from Stow, Ohio, every September. A sales distributor for the beverage company, Rzymek has witnessed countless triathlons in cities across North America. None of them, he says, can compare to Madison.

"I've been involved with the Ironman event in Madison since the start, and I love coming

here,” says Rzymek. “The city has such a positive image, and registration for the next Ironman Wisconsin sells out the very next day because people just want to come back.”

When he's not working the event, Rzymek looks forward to eating at his favorite Madison establishments, sampling cheese curds and brats, and checking out the local bike shops.

“The Madison community just gets it. They get it,” he says. “And despite the success of the event each year, the organizers meet up afterwards and figure out how to make it even better the following year.”

There's somethin' happenin' here

There's something more abstract happening to our local economy as a direct result of Ironman – an ongoing generation of revenue that cannot be measured in the days and weeks before and after the big race. By hosting an Ironman each year, the city is continually opening the eyes of many who might have never given so much as a passing glance to Dane County, U.S.A. The Armonda clan, for example – congregating here from Maryland, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and California – has a whole new view of our corner of the world.

Andy Keyser, a brother of Ironman Heidi Armonda, has a job that has taken him to most major cities in the U.S. “Going into Madison, I would never have thought it would have made such a positive impression on me,” says Keyser. “Of all the cities I have been to, it definitely ranks up there at the very top.

“Madison combines a beautiful layout from the Capitol to the lakes, with a warm, inviting, friendly atmosphere of people that is simply hard to find.” How these impressions translate into future business is the abstract part. But Ironman Dirk Shelley explains just where this can lead. His experiences in Madison, between the numerous visits he made while training and the actual event itself, have whetted his appetite.

“I am now more aware of other sporting events in the area – events like the Horribly Hilly Hundred bike ride, the Madison Marathon, and other races,” Shelley says. “My wife and I also now look at the non-sporting events calendar in Madison, as we do for Milwaukee and Chicago, and we attend many of them year-round.”

Shelley also has a four-year-old daughter, so he hasn't thought much about her college education – yet, but says, “I know in fifteen years she'll have some say in the choice, and due to the Ironman, I now know more about UW-Madison and would be proud to support her choice to attend.”

So, what is the best business practice related to Ironman? Quite simply, the quality of the event that we host. The way the CVB and Wisconsin Sports Development Corp. coordinate and run the competition while showcasing our gem of a city brings

competitors and fans back for more. This success stems from the community's support, as well as most Madisonians' innate understanding and appreciation for healthy living, outdoor activity and the thrill of competition.

We need to do little else but continue to feel this way to ensure that Ironman remains a thriving business for Madison and the region.

“Before I started training for the Ironman, Madison was only a college town to me,” says Shelley. “Now I know it is a rich, diverse cultural and vacation mecca that is only a few hours away.”

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Web Exclusives: Special Interviews

Iron Woman: Deb Archer, president & CEO of the Greater Madison Convention & Visitors Bureau, on how Ironman came to Wisconsin

A Marketing Dream: Wisconsin Sports Development Corporation's Tim Allen on signature events and what they mean for Madison