

Lyle Roberts

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Roberts set for his ninth
Ironman Worlds race.

By JOE SPENCER

jspencer@thehawkeye.com

An ABC "Wide World of Sports" broadcast of the Ironman **Triathlon** from the hellish lava fields of Kona, Hawaii, in February, 1982, indelibly imprinted a story of courage and determination on millions of viewers.

But few were inspired as profoundly as Lyle Roberts.

The 74-year-old Burlington retiree has competed in 12 Ironman **Triathlons**, posting place-winning times in his age group on five occasions. Roberts, a three-time, 70-74 age-group national champion, will make his ninth appearance at the Ironman **Triathlon** World Championships on Saturday in Hawaii. But his journey started one afternoon on the couch.

"I watched that race where Julie Moss had to crawl across the finish line. It was one of the most memorable things I've ever seen," Roberts said of the 1982 race which earned a college student from San Diego an unforgettable piece of sports history and Emmy awards for the TV network. Moss, who drifted from sport to sport in high school without much success and became an undistinguished triathlete, began training and entered the event on the encouragement of her boyfriend, Reed Gregerson, a veteran Ironman competitor. The couple broke up a month before the race, leaving Moss to fend for herself with her training.

The freckle-faced redhead then stunned the field, pulling out to an eight-minute lead on pre-race favorite Kathleen McCartney after the 2.4-mile swim and 112-mile bike ride. Moss became excited because she was unaccustomed to winning, and forgot to eat and drink enough throughout the race.

Moss eventually succumbed to fatigue after 90-degree temperatures and sweltering humidity sapped her strength. Wobbly-legged and dehydrated, she fell to her knees and was reduced to crawling the final 25 yards of the 26.2-mile marathon run as McCartney dashed by for a 29-second victory. Moss' perseverance instantly bred the Ironman creed that finishing the race was in itself a victory.

"Back in 1981, I lived in Davenport at the time, and they had a short, sprint triathlon. It was a 400-yard swim, a six-mile bike and 5K run, and I just kind of got hooked," said Roberts, who will look to finish an Ironman race for the ninth time.

"Then, I watched (Moss) on the TV. That's what inspired me. I watched what she went through and I figured it would be neat to see if I could do that, see if I could finish there. I just told myself, 'I want to work towards that goal.' But you just don't say, 'Well, I'm going to do it,' and go out and do one. You've got to put in a lot of training and a lot of time. It took me about 10 years before I felt like I was ready to do an Ironman."

Roberts, a former Burlington High School wrestler who only took up road racing as a 40-something with his wife, Betty, initiated the most ambitious training of his life soon after Moss' inspirational race.

Roberts has trained 14-20 hours per week, swimming seven miles, trekking 200 miles on a bike and running nearly 35 miles each week, for most of the past 23 years. That distance is the equivalent of a one-way trip from Burlington to Chicago.

"Three times a week I ride 40 or 50 miles, swim a mile and a half, and lift weights," said Roberts, whose frail frame is stronger than most would think at first glance. "On Wednesdays I do what I call a brick. That's biking 30 miles and then running a 10K. I bike to Muscatine for 100 miles on Saturdays, and I usually run 13-15 miles on Sundays."

Roberts qualified for Saturday's world championships by winning his 70-74 age group at the Ironman National Championships in July at Lake Placid, N.Y. He says each year the training, the race, and his competitors get tougher to master.

"There's a lot of younger guys in my age group now who are really strong runners," Roberts said. "It makes it tough for a guy like me who is in the older part of the age group.

"Next year, I will move up an age group, and then I'll have that advantage. But I have definitely cut back my training before races the past few years because my body doesn't recover like it used to. Something like the Ironman takes a month to six weeks to recover from, too. I won't start training again until January."

Roberts says the hobby gets more expensive with each passing year, as well. The Northwestern Bell retiree, who is on a fixed monthly income, estimates his trip to Hawaii will cost him about \$5,000, nearly two to three times the expense from his first Ironman race on the island. But he says the experience is well worth the cost.

"I'll never forget my first world championship in Hawaii," Roberts said of the birthplace of the Ironman race. Navy commander John Collins combined three previous races into one in an

attempt to determine the ultimate endurance athlete on the island of Oahu in 1978. The event was moved to the lava fields of Kona in 1981 to add a man-versus-nature element to the race. "Those lava fields are the most humid place I've ever been," Roberts said. "You wouldn't think so, especially being from the Midwest. Swimming in the (Pacific) ocean is also a lot different than the YMCA swimming pool with its lanes marked off. I don't look forward to the swims at all because I've been kicked, hit and run into out there, and a lot of people get seasick.

"But it's also one of the most beautiful places I've ever been. I've seen some wonderful places through racing. Lake Placid, Chicago, Texas and others. And I usually get to go with my family. My wife, Betty, my daughter, Laura, my son-in-law, Kevin Brehm, and my two granddaughters are there watching me. It's a great thrill."

And much like the freckle-faced redhead who inspired him with her determination to finish, Roberts says he'll never be beaten by Father Time, Mother Nature or any other foes.

"I am going to do Ironmans until I can't finish anymore," he said. "But, even after that, I will do some sort of racing forever. I don't think I'll ever quit, I'll just do shorter races."

Roberts happy with Ironman finish

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Burlington man finishes fifth in age group at world championships.

By JOE SPENCER

jspencer@thehawkeye.com

Nearing the finish line, Lyle Roberts received some unexpected help in capping his ninth Ironman **Triathlon** World Championships race in Kona, Hawaii.

"It was so wonderful because my wife, Betty, my daughter, Laura, my son-in-law, Kevin Brehm, and my two granddaughters ran across the finish line with me," Roberts said of his fifth-place finish in his age group at the Ironman Worlds on Oct. 15. He finished in the 70-74 age group in 15 hours, 25.47 minutes.

"It was an incredible atmosphere. I had my family running with me, music was playing, a huge crowd was hollering out my name, and then they announced my name (on the public address speaker) and the crowd roared for me. It was a wonderful feeling I'll never forget."

Roberts placed for the seventh time in nine world championships.

The race was the 13th Ironman appearance for the Burlington retiree, who began competing in **triathlons** in the early 1980s. He qualified for the world championships by winning his 70-74 age group at the national championships in July at Lake Placid, N.Y.

"It was a good race for me considering I am at the top end of my age group," said the 74-year old, who has placed as high as second in the Ironman Worlds. "The lava gods were good to us because there wasn't much wind. It was very hot (90-degree temperatures) and humid, but the wind is what really saps you going uphill.

"I did have a few little mechanical problems with my bike. I kept trying to shift and it would jump on me, and I would have to get off my bike and fix it. I wasn't too happy with that. The surf was really up in the Pacific Ocean, too. That threw me off course a bit on the swim. I was only out there a couple days, so I didn't get to train much in the ocean to get used to it."

Roberts completed the 2.4-mile swim in 1:58.10, clocked a mark of 7:09.40 in the 112-mile bike ride and finished the 26.2-mile marathon run in 6:03.33.

"I was surprised because in years past I've had problems moving around for a couple days after the Ironman, but I took some salt supplements this year and I have felt pretty good," Roberts said. "I also had a few recovery Budweisers, and those went down pretty good, too."

Encouraged by his fitness and strength, Roberts says he's ready for next year's Ironman season. He's registered to run the Ironman National Championship race next July in Lake Placid, N.Y.

"I get to move up to the 75-year-old age bracket, so I think I have a pretty good shot to win it," Roberts said. "There are a lot of good athletes these days, but I will have the advantage of being one of the younger guys in that age group. If I win my age group there, I qualify to go back to next year's world championships in Hawaii.

"I always tell my wife before each of the Ironmans that I'm apprehensive because I know the type of pain I have to go through to finish. But by the end, I have such a wonderful time completing the challenge, and enjoying the wonderful places I run with my family. I told her our whole family is having too good a time for me to quit now."
