

WEXFORD'S WANNABE IRONWOMAN

SEXAGENARIAN TRIATHLETE MARIE CASEY-BREEN TELLS CELINA MURPHY
WHY HEALTH AND FITNESS NEEDN'T COME WITH AN AGE LIMIT

If there's one good excuse for putting your fitness regime on hold, says 61-year-old triathlete Marie Casey-Breen, it's having five small children and a farm to tend to. Only this Wexford nurse, who spent her 20s cycling and running marathons, didn't pause her training; she gave it up completely.

"My bicycle was hung up in the shed down on the farm," she says. "I presumed that that stage of my life was over.

"But I brought my children everywhere swimming, all five of them in the pool squealing, and your man would say: 'Oh Jesus, not today Mrs!' I brought them religiously, week in, week out!"

Then, as Marie approached 50, something changed. She recalls the moment she decided to return to sport: "I went up to a particular field, a 30-acre field, to my husband with his lunch, but he wasn't ready to eat it. For some reason, I took off my shoes and socks and I ran around the field. I thought: 'My God, I haven't lost it. I still can run.' I never looked back."

Marie's next step was to find an event to train for. "I was dying to do a triathlon," she remembers. "I had no idea what a triathlon was but it just sounded like a great thing to do. Triathlons had just started in Wexford and it took me six months to get the courage to ask somebody, 'what is a triathlon?'"

Determined to make her sporting return in her native Co Clare, Marie signed herself up for the Kilkee Hell of the West triathlon.

"I shouldn't have been there really, because I couldn't properly swim," she points out. "Swimming in the Atlantic and the swell of the waves; I had no idea what I was facing. I had taught myself to swim up and down the pool and I got into the Atlantic Ocean to swim a mile of it with my head up. But I managed it."

With only a ropey breast stroke to see her through, Marie completed the race, and happily moved on to the next. "I kept giving myself a bigger challenge every year," she says.

Soon, she found herself signing up for an Ironman — an intense long-distance challenge for the supremely fit, comprising a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile cycle and a 26.2-mile run.

"Believe it or not, the physical training is the

easiest part of it," she says. "It's the mental training that's hard. When you set yourself a goal that you're going to do a particular race and then you write it down and then you make the commitment and you put it in place. And all the time, you have to physically imagine yourself at the start line."

Then in 2011, Marie's sporting endeavours were drawn to an abrupt halt once again when she was diagnosed with bowel cancer.

"Initially my reaction to my consultant was: 'It'll be very interesting now to know how this challenge will compare to Ironman training,' and I'd say he didn't have a clue what I was talking about!"

The road to recovery wasn't easy, but mustering up the strength to return to sport was another matter entirely.

"I had chemo three days a week every second week for six months and that totally brought me down to zero, mentally and physically," she says. "I struggled away with it, but for someone who was used to being very fit, it was definitely an awful change."

Now 18 months in the clear, Marie is back

training and she's set herself a new challenge: an Ironman in Austria on June 30. If she completes it, it will be her first official Ironman, and she knows how she's going to celebrate — she'll get the Ironman symbol tattooed on her leg.

"I really actually don't like tattoos — I'd kill the lads if they got one — but this is different. If you manage the Ironman, you're entitled to one."

"The fact that I'm 61 means absolutely nothing,"

she shrugs, when I ask her about training into her 60s. "The only thing that upsets me about it is if I do a triathlon and they don't recognise you as a winner in your age group if they have a cut-off point, say at 50.

"It's not ever the monetary value of the prize, it's the acknowledgment. Why suddenly at 61 would anyone ever say to you, you don't count, just because you're over 50? You put in the same work as everybody else."

If getting older doesn't seem to hamper Marie's progress, it might just be because she plans her training meticulously.

"It really takes a lot of the worry out of it," she says, "and a lot of wasted time, thinking: 'Well, what'll I do today?' If you have a schedule and you do it, you can say to yourself: 'If I do everything on this schedule, I am ready.' You always speak in the positive and now. 'I am ready. I will do it. I will finish.'"

The Wexford Triathlon Club hosts the Rosslare Pikeman Triathlon on July 6. Sign up at www.triathlonireland.com



(Clockwise from above) Marie's certificate from the 2007 World Championships; competing in a three-day Ironman in Northern Ireland in 2004; and at the 2004 European Championships



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