

Trying the Tri

A first-timer's experience at the NYC Triathlon

By Margie Goldsmith

It's barely dawn when I jump into the cold, dark murky water of the Hudson River. I hang onto the rope like my life depends on it, which it does, because the current is so strong that if I let go I'll be swept downriver. Women are jumping in all around me and I'm being squashed against the rope. Someone wraps a leg around my thigh, a hand pushes down my shoulders, someone clings to my arm. We're bunched so close together that I can't move.

It's the 6:24 a.m. swim start at the New York City Triathlon for women 45+ and I'm terrified. Earlier, the officials tossed a bag of Cheetos into the water to test the current and the result was 24 minutes for the bag to float the mile. Suddenly the whistle blows and we're off. Hundreds of dayglo pink caps bob past me. I can't breathe so I flip over and do backstroke. That's better. The current is helping me downriver and with my head out of the water I have no trouble breathing. This is much more comfortable than struggling with freestyle, so for the entire mile, in spite of the months I spent in swim class learning how to swim fast freestyle, I go with backstroke. I'm out of the water at 24:33. The Cheetos bag only beat me by 33 seconds.

I race a half-mile down the promenade to the transition. Robert Pennino, head coach of my triathlon team, TerrierTri, is there snapping pictures. "Go Margie!" he calls out. I'm pumped, but now comes the tough part: I used bodyglide and PAM to help me slide out of the wetsuit, but no one showed me how to pull off this slippery body glove and it takes me 9:27 to wiggle out of it, snap on my race belt, don my bike gear, pull my bike off the rail and run to the exit. I mount my bike, pedal up a short steep hill, make a turn and start the 25-mile out-and-back route on the Henry Hudson Parkway.

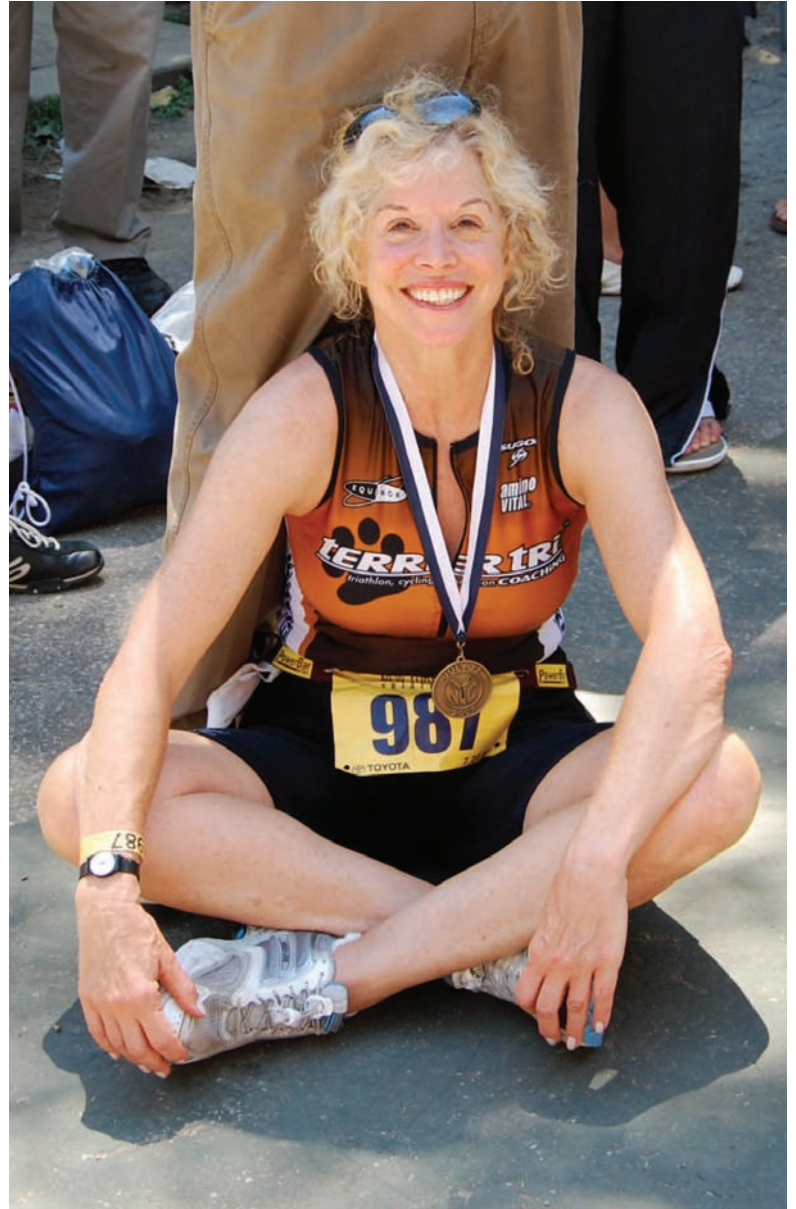
I slurp down an energy gel, chase it with Gatorade, and pray to the cycling gods for no flat tire. Up ahead, a guy falls off his bike. "Are you OK?" I yell. He nods. I keep going, relieved it wasn't me. "Go Margie!" A woman with a TerrierTri shirt passes me. "Go TerrierTri!" I yell. I pedal. It feels as though I've gone 12 miles, but my computer says 2.90. Is it broken? Laura, another team member, passes me. "Go Margie!" she yells.

"We've only gone 2.90 miles!" I moan.

"And soon it will be 6 miles," she grins and pedals away.

I struggle up an endless hill. This is exhausting. I tell myself, I will *never* do another triathlon. I think of all the mornings I've gotten up at the crack of dawn to bike or run; of all the nights I've spent swimming in a pool; of all the weekends I've eaten up with long rides and runs. Finally, it's mile 25. I race my bike back to its place, ditch my bike gear, pull on my running shoes, grab my hat, and head up the steep hill towards 72nd Street. I'm exhausted. How am I going to run 6 miles? I *hate* this. "Go Margie!" Spencer and Josh, the two TerrierTri running coaches are yelling from the edge of the road. They high-five me.

I'm in Central Park where I know every hill—or so I thought. When did



this one get so long? I'm sucking for air, my legs are like tree stumps and the hill won't end. "Come on! You're almost at the top!" shouts an eccentric fan wearing a wild outfit. I whisper "thank you" because I don't have enough wind to speak. Gravity pulls me down Harlem Hill and I start up on the big hill opposite Harlem Meer.

At last—Cat Hill. In front of the Boathouse I see Spencer again. "Come on Margie!" he yells, and sprints with me for about a minute, which helps me so much. I'm almost done. Stay strong. I race around Cherry Hill, sprint through the chute, and hear the cheers as I cross the finish line in 3:27:08.

I did it! And I'm thrilled to get my medal, but I know I will never do this again. Training is just too hard and gobbles up too much time. Yet, two days later, in spite of myself, I'm out of bed long before the alarm goes off and running at Central Park before sunrise. It feels so great. I make a mental note to check the upcoming triathlon events—surely it must be time to register.