

**STATUS SYMBOLS IN TRIATHLETE CULTURE**

by

Adam Slotnick

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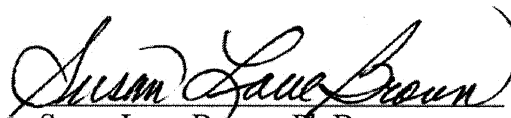
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Susan Love Brown, Department of Anthropology, and has been approved by the members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the Faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

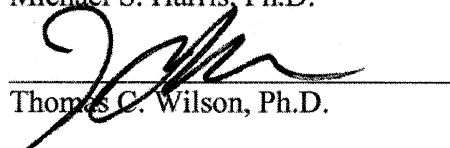
### SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:



Susan Love Brown, Ph.D.  
Thesis Advisor



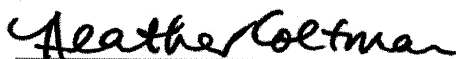
Michael S. Harris, Ph.D.



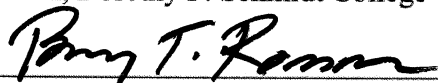
Thomas C. Wilson, Ph.D.



Michael S. Harris, Ph.D.  
Chair, Department of Anthropology



Heather Coltman, DMA  
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters



Barry T. Rosson, Ph.D.  
Dean, Graduate College

November 19, 2012  
Date

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## **ABSTRACT**

Author: Adam L. Slotnick  
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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Susan Love Brown  
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Triathlon status symbols allow community members to gain prestige. The accrual of paraphernalia, such as race apparel and bumper stickers, provide individuals with a means to display their accomplishments for non-participants, too. Ethnographic fieldwork, questionnaires and interviews provided insight into a variety of experiences. The individual nature of the sport is reflected by a participant's decision to display status markers. Car signs (e.g., bumper stickers and license plate frames) are displayed by a quarter of race participants. They come in a variety of forms allowing the car's driver to communicate with triathletes and non-triathletes while driving on the road. The most prestigious triathlon race is the Ironman. The M Dot Ironman logo appears as a decal on vehicles and as a mark of permanence on the body. Tattoos act as a formal communication system in a similar manner to car signs. Triathletes display status symbols to garner respect from their peers and separate themselves from the larger society.

To my mom, Debra, for her unending love and support.

## STATUS SYMBOLS IN TRIATHLETE CULTURE

List of Tables.....	viii
List of Figures.....	x
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Research Investigation.....	1
Triathlon Hierarchy by Race Type.....	2
Distances and Formats.....	4
USA Triathlon.....	6
Ironman Brand.....	8
Ironman Paraphernalia.....	10
Triathlon Communities.....	10
Giving Back.....	11
Internet Community.....	12
Chapter Two: Prestige and Triathlons.....	16
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	21
Ethnographic Fieldwork.....	22
Online Ethnography.....	23
Autoethnography.....	24
Questionnaires.....	24
Interviews.....	25
Car Signs.....	26
Studying Up.....	28
Participant Characteristics.....	29
Economic Status and Triathlon.....	30
Chapter Four: Paraphernalia and Status Accumulation.....	32
Race Prestige.....	32
The Finish Line.....	37
Ironman or Ironwoman? .....	40
Finisher's Medals.....	41
The Podium.....	44
Triathlon Apparel.....	46
Motivation.....	48

Motivation: Medals.....	52
Motivation: Facebook.....	53
Chapter Five: Car Signs.....	56
Signs and Culture.....	56
Macro Level Analysis: Endurance Sport Car Signs.....	60
Micro Level Analysis: M Dot.....	77
Car signs as an indicator of net worth.....	81
Conclusion.....	84
Chapter Six: Tattoos.....	86
Tattoos in Society.....	87
Analysis: Ironman M Dot Tattoo as a Body Sign.....	89
Conclusion.....	100
Chapter Seven: Conclusion.....	101
My Social Standing within ATC.....	103
So You're an Ironman. What's Next?.....	104
Future Research.....	107
Obesity and Body Image.....	107
Gender.....	108
Age.....	109
Additional Topics.....	110
Appendix: Car Sign Statistical Data.....	113
References Cited.....	116



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Triathlon Race Distances.....	5
Table 2: USA Triathlon Participation.....	7
Table 3: Social Media Actively Used.....	14
Table 4: Car Signs at Triathlon Races.....	27
Table 5: Car Signs at a Half Marathon Race.....	27
Table 6: Triathlon Years of Experience.....	30
Table 7: Replacement Cost of Triathlon Equipment.....	31
Table 8: Rating of Triathlon Race Production Companies.....	34
Table 9: Facebook Usage.....	55
Table 10: Triathlete Rating of Ultra Endurance Races.....	106
Table 11: Triathlon Decal Types.....	113
Table 12: Running Decal Types.....	113
Table 13: Cycling Decal Types.....	114
Table 14: Swimming Decal Types.....	114
Table 15: License Plate Frames by Sport.....	114
Table 16: Trailer Hitch Covers by Sport.....	114
Table 17: Share the Road Tag Types.....	114

Table 18: Customized Tags by Sport.....	115
Table 19: Most Popular Vehicle Models Displaying a Car Sign.....	115

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Triathlon Race Formats.....	7
Figure 2: 2575 Triathlon Miami Finish Line.....	37
Figure 3: Finisher’s Medal.....	42
Figure 4: 2575 Triathlon Miami Awards.....	44
Figure 5: Florida International University Triathlon Trophies.....	45
Figure 6: Florida Atlantic University Triathlon Paraphernalia.....	47
Figure 7: Cycling Trailer Hitch Cover .....	62
Figure 8: Triathlete License Plate Frame.....	62
Figure 9: Florida Share the Road Tag.....	62
Figure 10: Florida Custom License Tag.....	62
Figure 11: 140.6 Ironman Car Sign.....	64
Figure 12: Ironman Florida Car Sign.....	64
Figure 13: Half Ironman Car Sign.....	64
Figure 14: Feminine Half Marathon Car Sign.....	66
Figure 15: USA Triathlon Car Sign.....	67
Figure 16: Humorous Running Car Sign.....	68
Figure 17: Motivational Car Sign.....	69
Figure 18: Cervelo Bicycles Car Sign.....	71

Figure 19: Freestyle Swimming Car Sign.....	71
Figure 20: M Dot Magnetic Car Decal.....	79
Figure 21: M Dot Adhesive Car Sticker.....	79
Figure 22: M Dot Metallic Car Sign.....	79
Figure 23: M Dot Shield car Sign.....	80
Figure 24: M Dot Trailer Hitch Cover.....	80
Figure 25: M Dot Kona Car Sign.....	80
Figure 26: Non-Standard Iron M Dot Tattoo.....	91
Figure 27: Non-Standard Three Dimensional M Dot Tattoo.....	92
Figure 28: Ironman Arizona M Dot Tattoo.....	94
Figure 29: Ironman Lake Placid M Dot Tattoo.....	94
Figure 30: Kona Volcano M Dot Tattoo.....	95
Figure 31: Kona Love M Dot Tattoo.....	95

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Status symbols are markers of both identity and prestige. Triathletes wear and display paraphernalia as an integral part of personal and communal identity. These markers of the triathlete lifestyle represent social status among triathletes and work to separate this group from their non-athletic peers. Triathlon paraphernalia embodies the hierarchy among triathletes and the boundaries between triathletes and non-triathletes.

Paraphernalia embody triathlete accomplishments. They come in various forms. Paraphernalia is often worn on the body, either permanently or temporarily. Tattoos offer permanent reminders of historic personal achievements, such as finishing an Ironman triathlon race. Tattoos also indicate the individual's choice of the triathlete lifestyle. Tee shirts and hats are everyday temporary items. They allow people to identify an individual as a triathlete. Magnetic car decals are also prominently displayed on the back end of automobiles. Medals and race photographs are displayed in homes and on the internet. There is little mention of the importance of paraphernalia within previous triathlon ethnographies. Triathlete identity, status and prestige are reflected by the display of paraphernalia.

### *Research Investigation*

In this thesis, I present the results of my investigation into the importance of triathlete status and prestige by examining triathlon paraphernalia in all its forms. I

examine the meanings these objects provide to their owners and how particular items are used to project their status. While it is important to recognize the different objects triathletes use to acquire prestige, this is only one research component. Each triathlete is free to choose how to establish his or her identity. Female Ironman triathletes prefer to be labeled an Ironman than an Ironwoman. This reflects a desire to enhance their position within the triathlon subculture, rather than to create a separate identity. The Ironman is the most prestigious triathlon race. Thus, it deserves extra attention. Facebook needs to be taken into consideration as a potential tool used by triathletes to enhance their status. Facebook posts and pictures will be examined to see how people reflect on triathlete accomplishments.

### *Triathlon Hierarchy by Race Type*

All triathletes must complete the same triathlon course. No matter what physical characteristics one possesses, including skin color, gender, height and weight, one will be judged solely on their finishing time. However, individuals are often categorized for the sake of awards and championship race qualification. This is done in order to achieve a “fair” balance of representation among athletes. Besides being categorized by gender and age, the pro/elite, Clydesdale/Athena (for heavy athletes) and physically challenged categories are standard for all races.

Triathletes acquire status based on the type of triathlon race completed. The first triathlons originated in Southern California in the late 1970s. A standard triathlon race consists of swim, bike and run legs completed consecutively. Between each leg is a

transition period, in which individuals are able to change equipment necessary to complete the next discipline. Each race location is unique, presenting its own challenges.

The swim component of virtually every commercial race is held in an open body of water. This includes oceans, rivers and lakes. Participants may have to swim with or against currents. The water can also be murky with limited visibility. Wetsuits are allowed under certain temperature conditions. There are rules governing them. Certain materials are banned and the wetsuit must meet required dimensions. These aids not only prevent hypothermia in cold water temperatures, but also provide buoyancy.

The cycling leg usually occurs on open roads with police supervising all intersecting roads in order to insure rider safety. Sometimes roads are closed to vehicular traffic. This is usually the case when short distance races are held within the confines of a park. The terrain for cycling is much more varied than swimming. Bridges, hills or mountains all provide vertical challenges. Cycling is the most expensive discipline. Bicycle frames, wheels and gear components can easily rise above \$10,000. Many competitive triathletes will pursue every advantage at a large financial cost to improve their finishing time by seconds.

Running courses are similar to cycling courses. Racers may be separated from vehicular traffic by cones or run through closed areas. Vertical rises may be present. Running shoes come in various forms and colors. The shoes of competitive triathletes weigh less than 10 ounces each and are laced with pre-tied elastic shoe laces. The latter allows the athlete to slip their feet into their shoes in the transition area quickly.

The South Florida triathlon racing season begins in late March and ends in November. However, races continue to be added to the winter months. For many

individuals the triathlon off season matches the local marathon season. Each triathlon race's geographical location brings a variety of weather patterns. South Florida races are marked by their sweltering heat and unpredictable rain showers in the summer months. The warm waters translate into an absence of wetsuits. South Florida is the only region in the country where a triathlete can race during the season without a wetsuit. While Florida features hot temperatures, the terrain is flat. Many racers will travel to destination races to complete more challenging courses. The temperatures and humidity levels may not be as high, but there will almost certainly be elevation changes and greater wind speeds. Competing and completing a more difficult course carries greater prestige.

#### *Distances and Formats*

Race distance is one of the first markers used to establish triathlete credentials. The four most common triathlon distances are sprint, Olympic, half iron and full iron triathlons (see Table 1 for a comparison of race distances). A formal sprint distance race features a .45 mile swim, a 12.4 mile bike and a 3.1 mile run leg. However, sprint races are often altered slightly to match the local courses that host them. The most common South Florida sprint distance is a .25 mile swim, a 10 mile bike and a 3.1 mile run leg. This is the most basic distance used to introduce beginners to the sport.

The Olympic distance acquired its name from the triathlon format used at the Summer Olympic Games. The race distance is double that of the sprint: a .9 mile swim, a 24.8 mile bike and a 6.2 mile run leg. The Olympic distance is also sometimes altered slightly to match local course demands.



<b>Type</b>	<b>Swim</b>	<b>Bike</b>	<b>Run</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Sprint</b>	.45	12.4	3.1	15.95
<b>Olympic</b>	.9	24.8	6.2	31.9
<b>Half-Iron</b>	1.2	56	13.1	70.3
<b>Full Iron</b>	2.4	112	26.2	140.6
<b>Double Iron</b>	4.8	224	52.4	281.2

**Table 1: Triathlon Race Distances.** These are the standard distances (in miles) for five triathlons of varying distances.

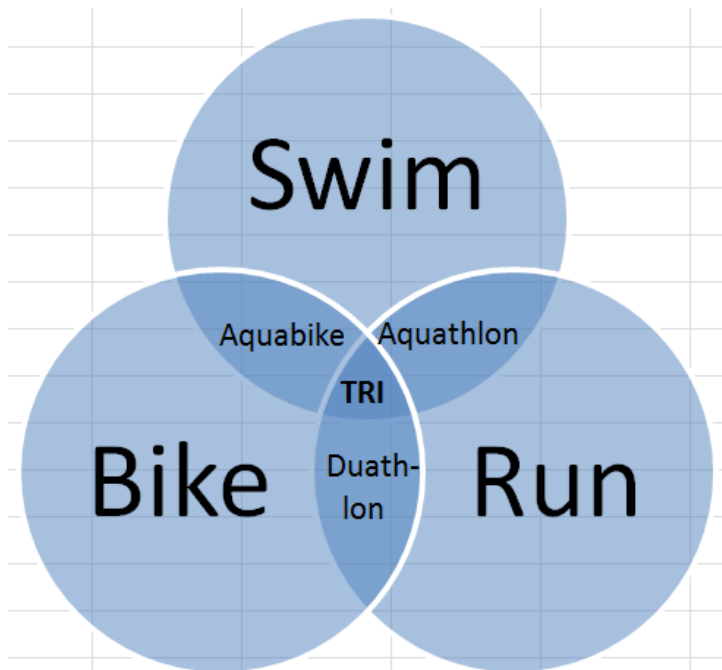
The half iron and full iron distances are fixed. A full iron race is a 2.4 mile swim, a 112 mile bike and a 26.2 mile run (a marathon). The sum of the legs is 140.6 miles. This number holds great significance in triathlon culture, and will be detailed further below. The half iron distance is 70.3 miles, with each leg cut in half. This distance, the so called middle distance, was introduced in order to provide an intermediary step for individuals who wanted to prepare for the Ironman distance without making a direct jump from the much shorter Olympic distance.

There are also races beyond the iron distance. There are double and triple iron triathlons. Just like the shorter distances, all of the swimming mileage must be completed before beginning the cycling leg, and finally the running leg. A different format of races ranging from a double to double-deca (twenty) iron distance races are completed one a day for the prescribed number of days. Thus, a quintuple (five) iron race has the participant complete one full iron race a day for five consecutive days.

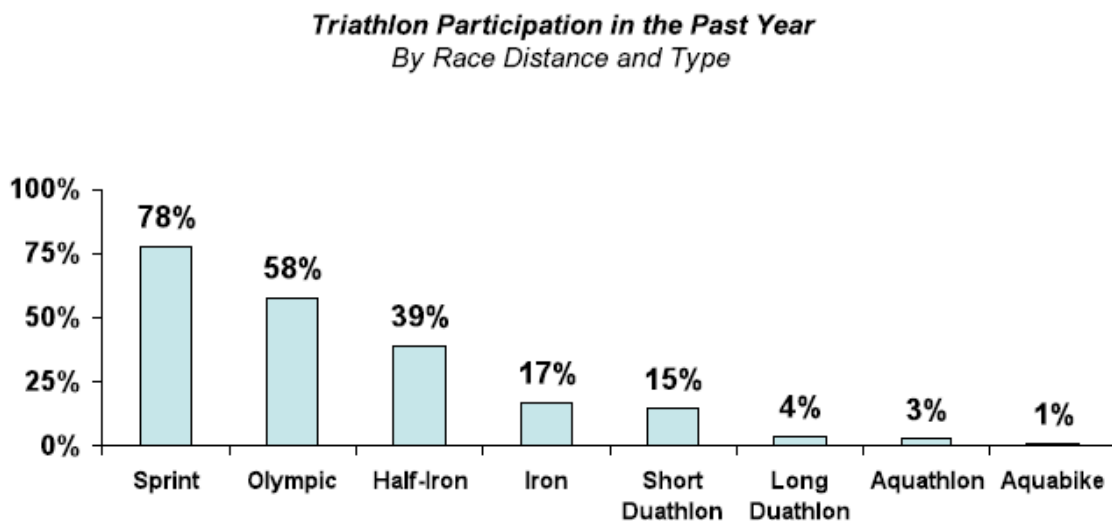
A triathlete's status positioning is also based upon their decision to perform in different race types. The growth of triathlon has led to the conception of non-standard formats, such as duathlons, aquathlons and aquabikes. These are multisport races in which one of the traditional legs has been dropped (see Figure 1). These variations have emerged largely to allow individuals who are lacking proficiency in one of the three disciplines or who have an injury the opportunity to complete a triathlon. The winter triathlon has emerged as a unique sport. It consists of run, mountain bike and cross-country skiing legs all competed on snow. The International Triathlon Union holds World Championship races, since 1997. The X-Terra off-road triathlon race series adds a trail element to the bike and run legs. Another variation is a reverse triathlon which is completed as the name describes. More recently, The Newton 24 Hours of Triathlon has competitors complete as many laps of a .24 mile swim, 11.2 mile bike and 2.6 mile run course as possible within the given time (all of these distances are equal to one tenth of a full iron race). Table 2 shows the popularity of specific triathlon types. Standard form triathlons and short course races are the most popular (Tribe Group 2009a:2). Each different race provides unique challenges and the potential for a varied triathlete resume.

### *USA Triathlon*

American triathletes are members of USA Triathlon (USAT), the national governing body for the United States. Triathletes have the option of purchasing a one year membership for \$45 or paying a one day race day fee of \$12 at every race. USAT is primarily responsible for encouraging growth of the sport and providing universal



**Figure 1: Triathlon Race Formats.** This Venn Diagram shows the different sports which form from the combination of swimming, biking or running: aquabike, aquathlon, duathlon and triathlon.



**Table 2: USA Triathlon Participation.** This chart shows the popularity of shorter triathlon distance races among USA Triathlon members. Non-standard race formats are less popular (Source: Tribe Group 2009a:2).

standards for triathlons in the United States. Race organizers promote the special seal of approval, the USAT logo, which accompanies any sanctioned race. The USAT considers all formats to be triathlons even if they do not conform to the traditional swim-bike-run format. All of these examples show that there is a great amount of variation within triathlon. Variation contributes to distinction.

### *Ironman Brand*

The Ironman brand is the most well-known global triathlon series. It is important to understand the history of this race series in order to understand the unique status a triathlete receives after completing this commercially branded race. A debate over athletic fitness launched the event which has come to be called the *Ironman*. *Sports Illustrated* labeled Belgian cyclist Eddy Merckx, a Tour de France champion, the “world’s fittest athlete” (Moore 2003). This sparked conversation among competitors after a Hawaiian running race. A debate ensued over who were the fittest athletes: swimmers, cyclists or runners.

Separate swimming, cycling and running events already existed in Hawaii before 1978. There was the 2.4 mile Waikiki Roughwater swim, the 115 mile Around-Oahu Bike race (which took place over two days) and the Honolulu Marathon. The courses were combined to create the Ironman triathlon. The bike distance was shortened to 112 miles, the distance between the finish of the open water swim and the start of the marathon. The cycling course was reversed from its customary direction in order for the bike leg to begin after the swim. And of course, these three events were to be completed consecutively. One of those present for the first Ironman race was US Navy Commander

John Collins. He coined two phrases that continue to exhibit great importance today. He informed the race's first participants: "Swim 2.4 miles! Bike 112 miles! Run 26.2 miles! Brag for the rest of your life!" (Schneider 2008:19). He also coined the Ironman term when he said, "Whoever finishes first, we'll call him the Ironman" (Buibal 2003). Today, all Ironman finishers hear the race announcer say, "And John Doe, you are an Ironman!" when they cross the finish line.

The first race occurred on February 18, 1978, in Oahu, Hawaii. Gordon Haller became the world's first Ironman. A few key changes occurred over time. The race course was moved from Oahu to the less congested Big Island of Hawaii in 1981. In 1982, the race's original date changed to October. Two races were held that year. The World Triathlon Corporation (WTC) acquired ownership rights in 1990. Every year qualified athletes travel to Kona to complete what is now termed the Ironman World Championship. Athletes qualify for this event by competing in other Ironman races of the same distance that are held in twenty-eight other cities as of 2012. Thousands of people have competed in Ironman races from many countries in the intervening years. While each Ironman course is unique, all participants must complete the full 140.6 prescribed miles in order to earn the coveted Ironman title.

The original Ironman race has spawned many variants. It is important to note that the WTC instituted a new race series, the Ironman 70.3, or Half Ironman, in 2005. This distance has since generated fifty-seven official races for 2012 (up from thirty-eight in 2011), including a championship race in Las Vegas. All of the individual components are exactly half of the full Ironman distances. Regardless of the distance completed, the Ironman brand remains the most recognizable and prestigious brand in triathlon today.

### *Ironman Paraphernalia*

Ironman triathletes publicly display Ironman symbols. (The WTC considers the Ironman name to be a unisex term.) These symbols reinforce their group identity. When an Ironman completes a race, he or she immediately receives particular items affirming Ironman status. Instant gratification is achieved in the form of the finisher's race medal and tee shirt. Each item is unique to the race and the date. Most importantly, they are only given to participants who complete the entire race within the given seventeen-hour time limit. Triathletes are then free to display their status publicly, while also promoting the Ironman brand.

### *Triathlon Communities*

Triathlon socialization fosters solidarity and allows for the portrayal of individual and community distinctions. Triathlons are largely completed by individuals. While there are opportunities to race as part of a relay team, individual prestige derives from the solo act of completing the swim, bike and run components while competing against the clock and other individuals: "The emphasis on individual athletic achievement is complemented by an almost equal emphasis on the social benefits of participation, such as the camaraderie that one shares with a like-minded group of individuals" (Granskog 1993:6). Individuals often join triathlon clubs and seek to give back to the triathlon community.

Triathlon clubs offer more than just an opportunity to train with like-minded people. Clubs, such as ATC, have uniforms for sale. The uniform allows individuals to showcase their camaraderie. The club earns distinction when members stand on the

podium to receive their award. Repeated awards, shows of friendliness and volunteerism at races encourage other triathletes to join triathlon clubs. Communal affiliations enhance social solidarity within triathlon.

### *Giving Back*

There are many opportunities for individual triathletes to become absorbed within the larger community. Triathlon clubs, volunteering and charitable causes allow triathletes to elevate their position within the triathlon community. Triathletes have the option of joining USAT certified local clubs. Triathlon clubs allow for individuals who share common interests to organize into a collective group. Group membership is another symbol of status: “the individual perceives membership in the group or category as prestigious in itself, and therefore follows a tactic of ostentatiously communicating his (claimed) membership” (Barkow 1975:556). There are social gatherings and special clinics that allow for general socialization and the acquisition of knowledge. Social networks act as a mediating force (Greene 2008:132). Thus, triathletes can meet others with similar goals and train together in an otherwise solitary sport. Additionally, team members can be identified at races by their club uniform. Triathlon clubs allow team members to communicate knowledge to newcomers and foster the sport’s growth within a local community.

Volunteering is an integral component in triathlon races. Race volunteers can be viewed as free labor, but they also allow for race organizers to keep race costs down. There are many functions filled by volunteers on race day, including body number marking, aid station (hydration and nutrition) assistance, bicycle maintenance and

medical support. Volunteer triathletes are important for helping to maintain social bonds and perpetuating the continuation of triathlon races.

Triathletes may opt to raise money for a charitable cause. There are several charities which cooperate with endurance athletes. The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's *Team in Training* (TNT) is one notable cause. Triathletes and marathoners donning their trademark purple uniforms are required to meet fundraising goals in return for free race entries and coaching services. Some individuals prefer to support their own causes while racing. They choose to solicit funds chiefly from family, friends and colleagues. Charity fundraising is an opportunity to enhance one's position within the triathlon family.

### *Internet Community*

Triathlete status has been transformed by the internet. Message boards and social networking websites allow triathletes to share race memories with their audience.

Triathletes are a real-world community enhanced by their interconnectedness on the internet. The internet increases temporal and spatial relationships. The audience may be private or public. Websites, message boards and social networking sites allow triathletes to create stronger bonds among themselves and inspire others through the sharing of their progress and stories. The internet enhances the ability of triathletes to project status into their social space.

Triathlon clubs allow an opportunity for socialization on the internet too. My triathlon club, Atlantic Triathlon Club (ATC), has message boards which serve a variety of functions. This includes allowing individuals to ask each other questions and schedule

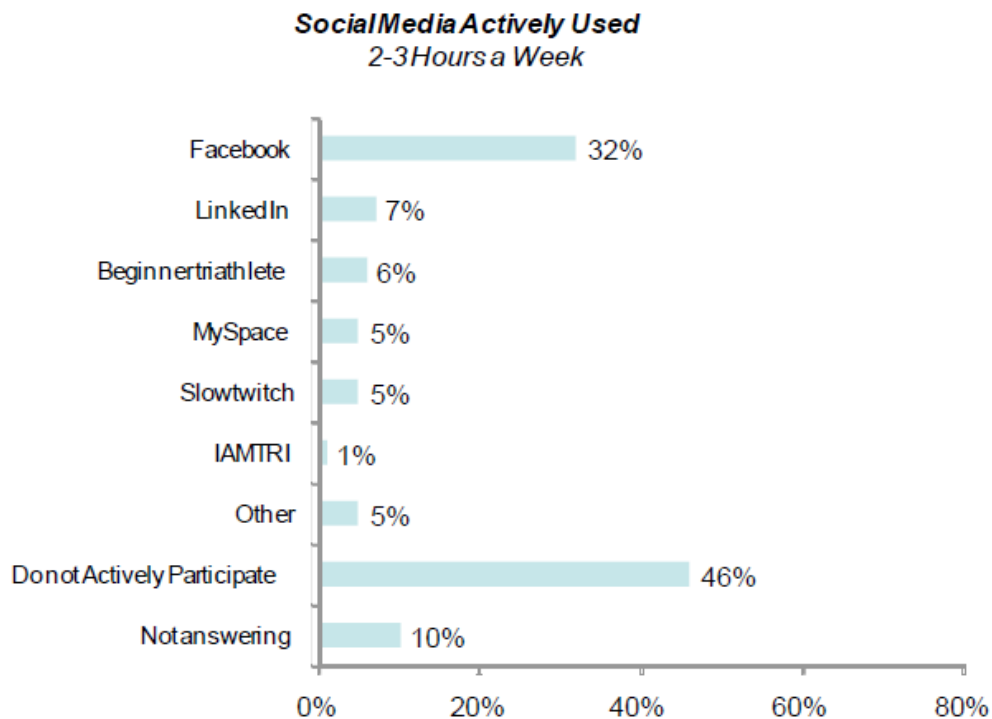


joint training sessions. Prestige is conferred in the “Race Results AND reports” section. I am currently responsible for posting all of our members’ race results. I, like my predecessors, rank all finishers from fastest to slowest. I also acknowledge anyone who received an award.

Some members choose to post race reports. A race report is essentially an autoethnographic account of a race. This allows members to experience a race through the participant’s eyes. While it may not be the most detailed ethnographic account, there is a difference in length and description depending on the type of race completed. Triathlon club websites deepen communal interactions and offer many opportunities by which individuals can distinguish themselves and enhance their prestige.

*Facebook* is a social networking site utilized by triathletes to share experiences with family, friends and members of the triathlete community. Facebook has grown tremendously from its roots as a social networking site for university students. The Facebook status update literally allows triathletes the opportunity to broadcast their triathlete status to the world. Clubs, including my own, have group pages to complement their own websites. This page often sees more activity than the group website. The popularity of Facebook among triathlete users is depicted in Table 3. One third of triathletes are active users. This number is far ahead of other social media sites, both traditional types and triathlon specific sites (Tribe Group 2009b:14). There are two types of communication on Facebook that allow users to share their status: written and photographic. Written communication, in the form of the previously mentioned status updates and comments, is used by triathletes to ask questions, describe training sessions, list race results and provide inspirational quotes. Photographic communication features

the publishing of digital photographs. Photos are stored in each user's albums section of their profile. Triathletes often use one of these pictures as their profile picture. Race photos are also shared on group pages. ATC offers a promotion in order to get club members to race in their team uniform. A picture of yourself posted and tagged on the group page results in an entry in a year end raffle of triathlon gear. Participants who finish in a podium position are granted 50% off the club uniform? for the following year. Facebook is the primary website used by triathletes to showcase their prestige. Triathletes use Facebook to enhance their community ties.



**Table 3: Social Media Actively Used.** Facebook is clearly the most used commercial website by USA triathlon members (Source: Tribe Group 2009b:14).

*Athlinks* is a social networking site and race results aggregator. The latter characteristic is its most important function. Non-members can view race results

belonging to members and non-members alike. The site contains individualized race results from a variety of endurance sports, including triathlon. The website also allows like-minded individuals the opportunity to socialize on the internet. The Athlinks website allows an individual to view a triathlete's resume. I, along with other ATC members, have used the site to scout out competitors for future races. The site allows us to check the status of fellow triathletes. This website provides a fairly accurate portrayal of a triathlete's rank and prestige level within the sport.

## CHAPTER TWO: PRESTIGE AND TRIATHLONS

Sport provides a vehicle for examining cultures and their attitudes toward status and prestige. In Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Cheska's book *The Anthropology of Sport* (1985), the authors describe each sport as more than the field it is played on: "As a rule, sport always reflects the basic values of the cultural setting within which it is actually performed and thus functions as ritual or as a 'transmitter of culture'" (Blanchard and Cheska 1985:55). Status symbols are deployed by triathletes in a similar manner to the way individuals within any society display status symbols. For example, watches display social stratification based on their make, components and value. Sports watches, triathlon tee shirts and medals similarly display social stratification based on characteristics such as race distance.

Bill Maurer's "The Anthropology of Money" in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2006) analyzes the importance of monetary units as items of rank within a society. The "standard of value" characteristic of such money is "grounded in social relations of rank and prestige" (Maurer 2006:20, 19). Wealth accumulation leads to a higher status and more prestige. Triathlete prestige is dependent on the status symbols used as part of an individual's sports identity. Race medals are similar to special-purpose money.

Anthropologist Jerome Barkow offers insight into the development of prestige within social systems in "Prestige and Culture: A Biosocial Interpretation" (1975).

Competition and status drive individuals to acquire prestige. Barkow says anthropologists make a basic assumption when examining social stratification: “[People] seek prestige and status, deference and respect” (Barkow 1975:553). People employ three different prestige strategies. Two are based on the individual, while the third is group-oriented. Group-oriented prestige allows an individual to acquire status through group membership (Barkow 1975:556). This is relevant to triathlon because individuals are able to join triathlon clubs. The clubs are capable of gaining prestige based on the performance of individuals and group events. Additionally, a status hierarchy exists within groups. Barkow defines “prestige power” as the ability of high ranking prestigious individuals to influence the behavior of lower ranked individuals (Barkow 1975:561). This is significant in analyzing prestige among triathletes. For example, advice is often sought from individuals with more experience.

Elvin Hatch’s “Theories of Social Honor” (1989) explores the importance of motivation for status accumulation. Hatch distinguishes between two non-materialist theories of prestige. The “calculating prestige seeker” requires competition in order to gear their actions towards “acquiring more prestige than others” (Hatch 1989:348). Calculating prestige seekers are driven by external motivation. Their interest is in how others perceive their performance. Conversely, self-identity theory is predicated upon internal motivation. Internal motivators seek out individual achievement (Hatch 1989:348-9). These theories are relevant for determining the motivation behind triathlete competitors.

Dan Hilliard completed the first triathlon ethnography, “Finishers, Competitors, and Pros: A Description and Speculative Interpretation of the Triathlon Scene,” in 1988.

The article is mainly a summation of this emerging sport. He begins by discussing each of triathlon's constituent parts and the importance of triathlon technology. Then, Hilliard describes triathlon professionals as heroes, the Ironman championship race as a shrine and San Diego, the birthplace of triathlon, as Mecca (Hilliard 1988:303). He invokes the concept of Thorstein Veblen's conspicuous consumption to represent conspicuous leisure in triathlon (Hilliard 1988:310). This pioneering triathlon ethnography does note the presence and importance of paraphernalia as "important status symbols" (Hilliard 1988:307). However, the author tucks this information into a footnote. He divides paraphernalia into three categories: clothing, awards and photographs. These status symbols are given as the basis of prestige accumulation.

Jane Granskog investigates the Ironman World Championship as a ritual event in her 1993 participant observation, "In Search of the Ultimate: Ritual Aspects of the Hawaiian Ironman Triathlon." Different triathlon races carry varying amounts of prestige. No race distance is more prestigious than the Ironman distance, and no race at this distance is more prestigious than the Ironman Hawaii World Championship. She terms the Hawaiian Ironman the "signal mark of identity as a real triathlete" (Granskog 1993:7). The completion of an Ironman race for the first time is a rite of passage, while the annual completion of a race at this distance for veterans is a rite of intensification: "One's identity as an 'Ironman' or 'Ironwoman' is now established for first-timers and reaffirmed for those who have completed it before" (Granskog 1993:17). One's Ironman status is often displayed by a variety of symbols including tee-shirts, medals and car signs. Granskog noted how triathletes wore their finisher's shirts at the awards ceremony to "indicate their changed status" (Granskog 1993:17). She also addressed motivation,

citing psychological reasons as the primary motivator. Her conclusion is that the Ironman race is a form of escapism. Granskog stresses the need for future research to tackle the display of triathlon paraphernalia:

“consider how other’s perceptions of one’s accomplishments affect participants’ sense of identity, including both those who are insiders (fellow members of the triathlon community) and those outside or external to the sport community. It is in this latter sense that the social, structural factors that affect identity construction and one’s position within the triathlon culture are relevant.” [Granskog 1993:18]

The importance of prestige exists not only among triathlon participants, but between triathletes and non-participants. Important non-actors include family, friends and spectators.

Ron McCarville’s “From a Fall in the Mall to a Run in the Sun: One Journey to Ironman Triathlon” (2007) contributes to the understanding of Ironman races. McCarville investigates why triathletes compete at this particular distance. McCarville reiterates the lack of information on triathlete prestige fourteen years after Granskog’s ethnography. He suggests future research should investigate the reasons why triathletes display paraphernalia and how others react to them. He says that “status striving” by displaying triathlon paraphernalia is “an exercise in establishing their triathlon pedigree” (McCarville 2007:170-171). He infers greater credibility may be attained not just through completing longer distance races but through more difficult races determined by travelling to destination races or incurring high levels of suffering.

Previous triathlon ethnographies only peripherally address the importance of paraphernalia. Since Hilliard’s pioneering ethnography, researchers are yet to fully investigate the importance of triathlon paraphernalia. Ethnographers stress the need for

future research to tackle the display of triathlon paraphernalia. Hilliard, Granskog and McCarville all note the presence of triathlon paraphernalia but do not conduct an investigation of the importance behind these symbols. Nor do they explain the prestige associated with triathlons.



### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Research participants were selected utilizing convenience and snowball sampling methods. When necessary, the age of a survey or interview participant will be given as an age range. For example, 25-29 instead of 28. The reasoning is two-fold: triathletes compete in age groups and this range provides an extra level of security in protecting the identities of the participants. My participation in ATC allowed for the easy facilitation of interviews and surveys. One participant at an early season clinic described my position as the Race Results committee chair as “a thankless job.” It is probable that my position and inherent involvement in the club provided me with some leverage for finding willing participants. In an e-mail to the aforementioned individual, I told him: “You know that thankless job you mentioned? Here is your opportunity to repay me.” However, I only used this line once, and did not pressure any individuals into completing any research component. I did not have authorization from the club to observe members without their consent. I utilized autoethnography to describe events and conversations between myself and other club members during the time period. I provide descriptions of these accounts identifying the individual only by gender and age. Triathletes unassociated with the club are also included. I attempted to draw a representative sample.

### *Ethnographic Fieldwork*

The ethnographic fieldwork took place at training and race sites. My triathlon club has weekly group swims on certain mornings and evenings. Many members seek training partners on long bike rides and running jaunts during the weekend through posts on the club website or Facebook. I participated at races in one of the following roles: as a race participant, volunteer, spectator or a combination of these. This allowed me to interact with triathletes in different capacities. I used a field journal for taking notes and a codebook for tracking aliases. I had ample time to reflect and write down my field experiences after events occurred since races and most training sessions are conducted during the morning hours.

I typically woke up between 3 and 4 am on race mornings, depending on the location and my objectives for each race. Upon my arrival, I would first survey the race site surrounding the transition area. I often greeted club participants and wished them the best during the race. Then, if the race had a centralized parking lot I would spend 60-90 minutes jotting down information on the decals, frames and tags of the cars in the parking lot. Afterward, I headed to the finish line and transition area to watch the participants and onlookers. Later, the award ceremonies took place. This is the approach I used for seven races. I also attended one race solely as a spectator and another race as a volunteer. These latter experiences offered me a different perspective. I did not participate in any races during the research period due to various injuries.

### *Online Ethnography*

Online ethnography is an emerging tool for cultural analysis. One of the most important online communities is Facebook. The internet in general and Facebook in particular “have become integral in the formation of identities based on cultural tastes” (Ryan 2008:189). Triathlete status is displayed on Facebook in a manner similar to the ‘real world’: “Facebook encourages sociability by representing existing social connections in a virtual space” (Keenan and Shiri 2009:443). Jennifer Anne Ryan researches several social networking sites. She describes becoming a regular attendee and developing relationships at psytrance parties. These relationships replicate on Facebook when Ryan and the partygoers engage in friending each other to solidify their community (Ryan 2008:104). Facebook also allows for the “calculated projection of symbolic markers of identity” (Ryan 2008:104). Users are free to decide how to project their triathlete status. A 2001 Pew Research survey shows twenty-six percent of internet users utilize internet communities to become more involved in local communities, including sports (Horrigan 2001:3). The internet allows individuals the opportunity to represent their identity online.

The triathlon internet community is a fertile ground for study. Many triathletes, including myself, post training and race updates on Facebook. My triathlon club has a website, but our Facebook page is more active. Many of the members I am in contact with use their status updates to relay information to their friends or ask questions of fellow triathletes. The frequency and number of updates as a percentage of total posts varies among each individual. I actively posted training information in my own status update as well as participating in discussions on the ATC Facebook page. My

participation on the group page is also a result of my position within the club.

Consequently, I am responsible for posting race results for all members on the ATC website. My position has afforded me access to the membership list, which is updated in an Excel file and e-mailed to myself and the other Executive Board members by the Secretary following the addition of new members. (The membership list contains each individual's e-mail address and date of birth. I did not use any of this information to further my research. I only used the file when I needed to verify someone's membership status. Aside from this, I acted as though the list did not exist.)

### *Autoethnography*

Both Granskog and McCarville used autoethnographic methods to complement their research with fellow triathletes. McCarville's autoethnographic account stems from his Ironman triathlon training, and Granskog's account is from the Ironman World Championship. I will use my autoethnographic accounts to complement the other research methods and enhance my data acquisition of paraphernalia display, especially on Facebook. Additionally, I drew on autoethnographic accounts from past races. Racers, myself included, often write race reports describing our experiences. I will also draw upon my experiences on Facebook and the ATC website during the research period.

### *Questionnaires*

Questionnaires allowed me to canvas a greater number of participants on important research topics. The survey (questionnaire and survey are used interchangeably) I developed was for triathletes. It contained several questions directly

related to the research questions on paraphernalia. The surveys were primarily distributed at race sites and club clinic locations. Each participant was given a sheet explaining the survey's content and goals. The participants were considered to be giving consent by completing and returning the survey. Additionally, the surveys were distributed electronically. I located potential participants from my triathlon club by examining my list of Facebook friends. Then, I contacted them via the e-mail provided on their profile. If they agreed to participate, I sent instructions, the consent form and the survey as an Excel file (the printed survey was designed using Excel). When I received their e-mails containing the survey, I downloaded the file to my flash drive and printed it out. Then, I deleted the file from my flash drive and deleted all sent and received e-mails from participants. I also sent participants a confirmation e-mail telling them that I had deleted all files, and then deleted the sent e-mail.

### *Interviews*

Informal interviews functioned as a method to gather more detailed information on triathlon paraphernalia and motivation than is afforded by the surveys. I used information from each individual's 'resume' from the Athlinks website to tailor questions. However, the site proved to be incomplete. The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee, and were held at their location of choice. Often, this was a local Starbucks. Each subject needed to decide whether or not they agreed to be audiotaped, and signed the consent form. The interviews were digitally recorded using a Sony ICD-P520. The recordings were then uploaded to my personal laptop as a duplicate file and transcribed on my workstation computer. Later, the transcriptions were coded for

information and analyzed. The first round of interviews covered a range of subjects, and usually lasted thirty to forty five minutes. I conducted a second round of more focused interviews following the analysis of my research data. These interviews focused on Ironman finishers, and lasted no more than fifteen minutes. I interviewed a grand total of fifteen people.

### *Car Signs*

The final component of my research methodology entailed an analysis of automobile car signs at race sites. There are five different types of car signs: decals, trail hitch covers, license plate frames, “Share the Road” tags and customized tags. The purpose was to document the presence of any of these car signs from the sport of triathlon and any of its constituent sports (swimming, cycling and running). I also counted the number of cars which had bicycle racks on them. All of these items are part and parcel of a triathlete’s identity. I examined vehicles at seven triathlons ranging from Boca Raton to Miami. I also attended a half marathon race for comparison purposes. Tables six and seven give a general overview of some basic data. The total number of automobiles gives a sense of the size of the race. The next number is the total number of vehicles in the parking lot which have at least one car sign of any type present, followed by a per car average. The final column shows how prominent triathlon signs are amongst all of the signs present (Table 4), with the running signs as a percentage of all signs in Table 5. Data on the other forms of vehicular prestige will be detailed later.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Distance(s)</b>	<b>Total Cars</b>	<b>Cars with Signs</b>	<b>Average Number of Signs per Car</b>	<b>Triathlon Signs as a Percentage of Total Signs</b>
3/11	2575	Miami	Sprint	235	55	1.78	70.41
3/18	FIU	Miami	Sprint	237	74	1.91	51.06
4/7	Egg Hunt	Pembroke Pines	Sprint	396	102	1.94	56.57
4/15	FAU	Boca Raton	Sprint	534	198	2.08	64.86
4/21	Spring Training	Coconut Creek	Sprint	143	50	2.24	47.32
5/20	Tri Miami	Miami	Sprint & Olympic	642	169	1.91	51.24
6/17	Trilogy #1	Miami	Sprint & International	767	223	1.93	58.14
			<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>2840</b>	<b>815</b>	<b>1.96</b>	<b>57.17</b>

**Table 4: Car Signs at Triathlon Races.** This table displays the date, location and type of races visited to examine vehicle signs. Also included are basic data on the total number of cars surveyed in the parking lot, the number of which have signs on them, the average number per car and the percentage of triathlon signs out of all of the signs present.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Distance</b>	<b>Total Cars</b>	<b>Cars with Signs</b>	<b>Average Number of Signs per Car</b>	<b>Running Decals as a Percentage of Total Signs</b>
4/29	Multirace Key Biscayne	Miami	Half Marathon	779	199	1.93	67.01

**Table 5: Car Signs at a Half Marathon Race.** This table displays the date, location and type of races visited to examine vehicle signs. Also included are basic data on the total number of cars surveyed in the parking lot, the number of which have signs on them, the average number per car and the percentage of running signs out of all of the signs present.

### *Studying Up*

The study of triathlon is, in a sense, what Laura Nader referred to as “studying up.” Studying a group of equal or higher status presents challenges for the ethnographer. Nader described, in “Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up” (1972), the need to study the middle and upper classes in the United States.

Anthropological theory would be incomplete without a broad investigation of all classes. The anthropological tradition has been to study the other: usually non-Western, lower class or minorities (Nader 1972). This results in the anthropologist studying down.

Anthropologists tend to ignore “the privileged or powerful because we do not imagine they have anything interesting to say; they are outside our purview because they simply are not ‘exotic’ enough” (Anderson-Levy 2010:182). There may be some trepidation of interacting with individuals who inhabit the upper rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

Yet, every ethnographic study poses its own set of challenges, and rewards.

Studying up in the realm of sports also has a scant history. Specifically applied to triathlon, “Ethnography can be used to provide voices within the academy for those who have not had them in the past and to explain the prevailing systems of domination and oppression within contemporary (sporting) cultures” (Silk 2005:70). My challenges in studying up applied not only to the wealth level but also to the experience level. While many triathletes inhabit the middle and upper classes, many athletes I came into contact with also have more experience within the sport itself. This experience is not only measured in years but in longer race distances completed and through qualifying for national championships. So while I tend to have an emic view within triathlon, I have an



outsider's perspective when dealing with Ironman competitors. Studying up is no less a valuable tool in the anthropologist's toolkit than studying down.

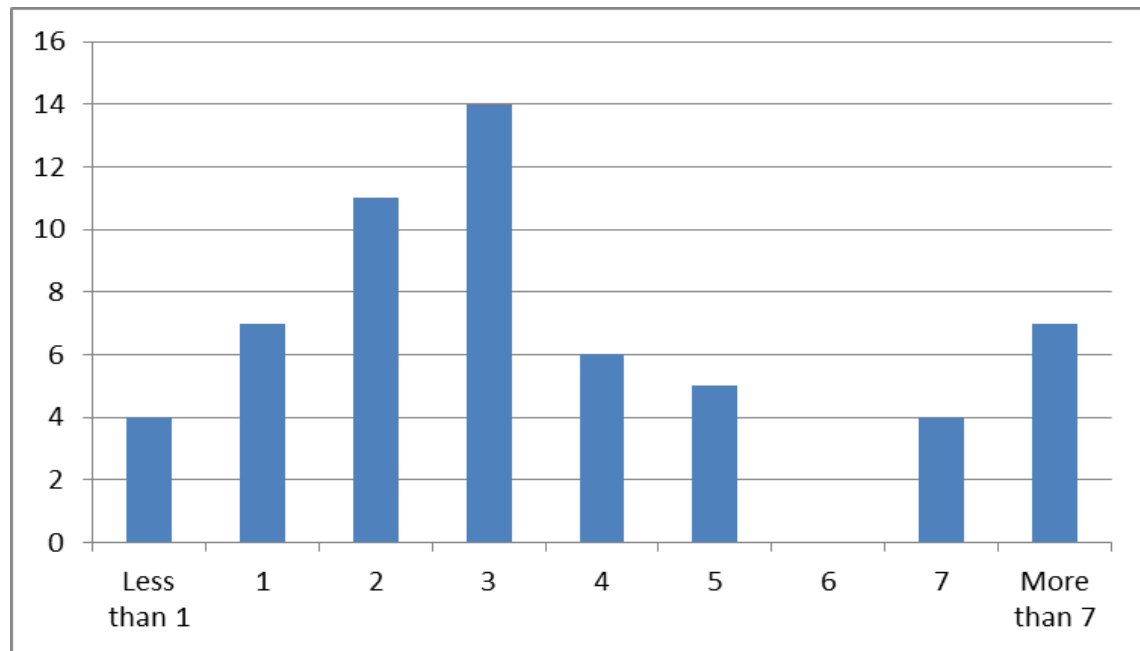
### *Participant Characteristics*

The interview and survey began with demographic questions before moving on to questions about the individual's triathlete identity and display of paraphernalia. The demographic data shows that 33 (56.9%) of respondents are male while 25 (45.1%) are female ( $n=58$ ). The average age is 40.3 ( $n=57$ ). A large majority of those surveyed have obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher (84.5%).

Nearly all participate in races in the regular age group categories, with two competing as Athenas, one as a Clydesdale and one as an elite triathlete. At the Memorial Day group swim, I spoke with an individual, a young male, who described his goal for the coming year: join the professional ranks for a year, so that he can tell his future offspring that he was once at the most elite level in triathlon. He is pursuing his dreams while he completes medical school. A plurality of respondents has competed in triathlon for three years. Table 4 shows how the sport has gained many followers recently. Only 19 percent have been competing in triathlon for seven years or longer.

Virtually every triathlete has completed a sprint race (96.6%). This number decreases as the race distance increases. Eighty-four and a half percent have completed an Olympic or International distance race. A 67.5 percent majority have completed a half iron race, with an average of 3.4 races per person ( $n=39$ ). However, there is a precipitous drop off at the full iron distance with just 32.8 percent of participants having completed a full iron race, with an average of 1.3 races per person ( $n=19$ ). All of these numbers are

quite higher, especially at the longer distances, than the USAT survey. However, that survey looked at triathlon participation in the past year, while I asked about race distances completed during their entire triathlon career.

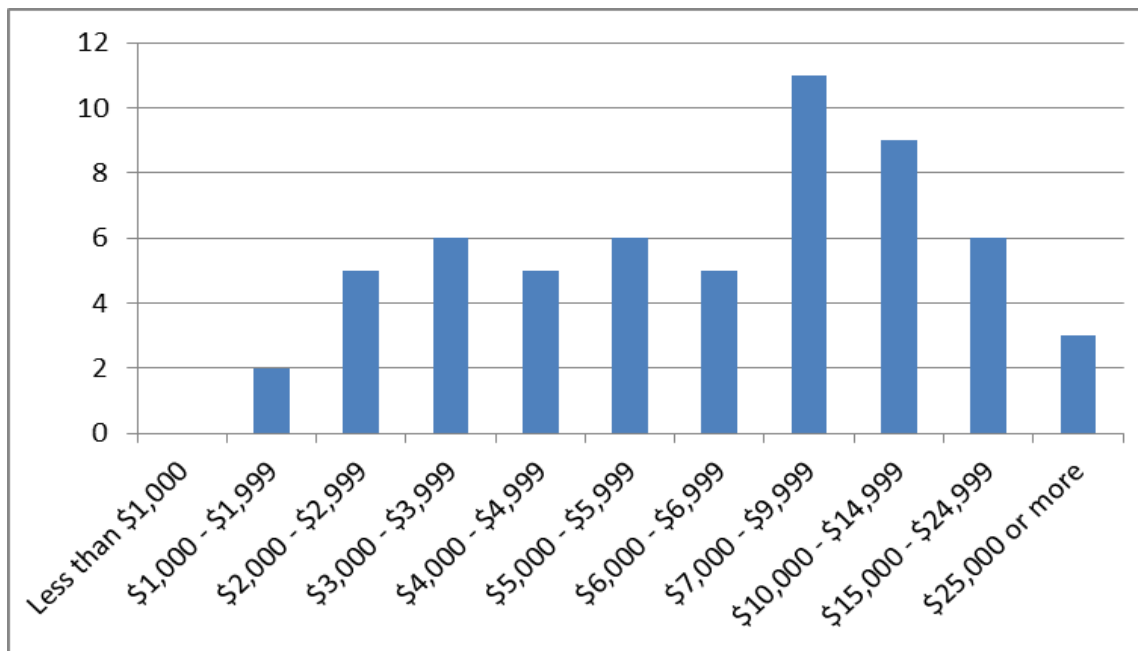


**Table 6: Triathlon Years of Experience.** This column charts displays the number of years each respondent has participated in the sport of triathlon. The grouping of “More than 7” years includes the following data points: 9, 9, 10, 12, 12, 16 and 22. ( $n=58$ ).

### *Economic Status & Triathlon*

Triathletes are a wealthy, well-educated community. It is necessary to understand the economic capital required for triathlon participation before analyzing the importance of triathlon paraphernalia in producing cultural capital. I adapted a survey question from a *Triathlete* magazine internet survey. The adapted question asks subjects to select from a range of monetary amounts how much it would cost them to replace all of their triathlon equipment. A full fifty percent would need to spend \$7,000 or more to replace all of their equipment, as depicted in Table 7. The high cost of triathlon equipment and races

requires a high financial commitment. The additional time requirement needed to train puts triathlon out of the reach of all but the middle and upper classes. Many researchers have shown a link between social class and sport participation. Sports often reproduce social stratification (Wilson 2002, Besnier and Brownell 2012). The economic and education questionnaire results confirm Carl Stempel's conclusion that there is an association between sport and social class, and sport and education (Stempel 2005:416). Well-to-do Americans are pursuing their interests in an expensive sport. The data presented here shows the reproduction of social class hierarchies within sport.



**Table 7: Replacement Cost of Triathlon Equipment.** This column chart displays the estimated amount of money that each survey respondent would need to spend to replace all of their triathlon related equipment ( $n=58$ ).

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PARAPHERNALIA AND STATUS ACCUMULATION**

Prestige is displayed through status symbols. The most fundamental form is paraphernalia. Many triathletes exhibit these symbols conspicuously. Apparel is the most commonly seen marker. Medals tend to be kept at home, away from the purview of other triathletes and non-actors. Facebook is an important tool used by triathletes to enhance their position within the triathlon community. A triathlon picture posted on Facebook is itself a marker. The photo can be enhanced by the inclusion of race shirts and medals. Members literally use their status updates to inform their friends of their ongoing status within the sport of triathlon. Triathletes are more often motivated by their self-identity rather than the seeking of prestige for prestige's sake. A triathlon race's finish line is actually the starting point for the projection of triathlon status.

### *Race Prestige*

Races categorized as more important confer a greater level of prestige as do the objects associated with them. Every triathlon race has its own prestige. Its prestige is built upon a number of factors including race distance, age of the event, event quality and amenities provided. This spring saw numerous races face difficult challenges that endangered the credibility of their race directors and production companies. Local races compete against each other for a slice of the triathlon money pie and rely on investments in human capital. The latter is usually composed of legions of volunteers. All of the race

components contribute to the overall quality of a race and its impact on participants.

Ultimately, it is the participants' experiences which determine the prestige of races.

**Personal account:** I traveled home with my triathlon neighbors in their SUV. We were on our way back from a ATC mock brick (a brick is a practice triathlon). They provided me with a ride in exchange for my services as the bike and shoe sitter at a beachside park. I was also compensated monetarily. We discussed a once prestigious race while we are forced to take a detour through a residential area.

I told them that I would be attending this weekend's 2575 Triathlon Miami. They said they were not familiar with it. I responded that I thought it is what remains of the MIT (Miami International Triathlon). The wife talked about how this race used to draw the biggest names in triathlon for a season opening Olympic distance race held in March. However, last year it became the first stop in the WTC's new 5i50 race series (so named for the 51.5 kilometers in the race, and an i to represent the ironman brand name). As my female companion noted, the rebranding resulted in "jacked up prices," which in turn caused a low turnout. The race did not sell out and ultimately was not included in the 2012 schedule. The franchised race was operated by Paramount Productions, the same race organizer responsible for the inaugural Miami Ironman 70.3 debacle. (Many aspects of the race were mismanaged.) It amazed the three of us that what is left of this once proud event is the 2575 Triathlon, a sprint race produced by the rebranded Miami Tri Events.

This description details the importance of race prestige. A once prestigious local Olympic distance race featuring several prominent triathlon professionals has been relegated to a low attendance sprint race by a struggling race production company. Our conversation proved accurate when I witnessed the following at the race:

**Personal account:** I approached the chute created to ferry competitors from the transition area out onto the bike course. I saw two men from the race production company, including the race director, both sporting Ironman 70.3 Miami hats. This confirmed for me that Miami Tri Events LLC is the new guise for Paramount Productions, the company responsible for the horrendous nightmare that was the inaugural 2010 Ironman 70.3 Miami.

Race production companies are battling amongst themselves to provide the best experience as they fight for triathletes' pockets. Triathlon fees can range from about \$60

for a local sprint race to more than \$600 for a full blown Ironman production. The difference in race distances is not the only consideration for selecting a race. Brand names act to encourage or discourage participation. Table 8 shows how local triathletes view companies which organize and operate races locally.

<b>Race Production Company</b>	<b>Average Score (0-10 scale)</b>	<b>Sample Size (<i>n</i>)</b>
Club Med	7.80	5
Miami Tri Events	5.93	27
Michael Epstein Productions	8.84	32
Multirace	8.02	46
World Triathlon Corporation	8.50	34

**Table 8: Rating of Triathlon Race Production Companies.** This table presents the average score, based on the selection of whole numbers ranging from 0 to 10, for five production companies that operate triathlons mainly in South Florida. The results are based on a survey of 58 individuals. A sample size of less than 58 reveals that not all participants were familiar with a given company.

It is clear from this table that Miami Tri Events has suffered damage to its image based on its past performances. This is especially true in regards to the Miami Ironman 70.3 race. The WTC, however, has not been as greatly affected by the negative publicity surrounding this local race. The local upstart Multirace produced 15 triathlons and one half-marathon during the 2012 calendar year. Many triathletes have told me that they believe this company is excellent, and is their first choice for sprint and Olympic distance races. The care with which these companies treat their customers cannot be understated.

South Florida weather can be quite fickle. While the Miami Marlins professional baseball team finally has a stadium with a retractable roof, there is nothing to save triathletes from the elements. Unpredictable ocean currents, untimely train crossings and

flooded run courses all present challenges for race directors. Each triathlete signs a waiver during the registration process. It includes a note of the possibility, for example, that a hurricane may force the cancellation of an event. This may seem like a reasonable decision, but the participant is told that there may not be a rescheduled race and a refund may not be given. While the hurricane season has been relatively quiet the past few years, stormy weather this spring presented plenty of challenges for south Florida race directors. Their decision to change and shorten races has had a considerable impact on their status in the triathlon community.

**Personal account:** Florida Atlantic University Triathlon at Spanish River Park Sunday April 15, 2012: ATC members discussed the anticipated poor weather conditions on Facebook in the run up to the event: 5-6 foot waves, strong wind. The expectations bore out. For the first time in the 21 year history of this event, the swim was cancelled. It was replaced with a 1 mile beach run, resulting in a duathlon rather than a triathlon. A few ATC members informed me that the rough conditions of two years prior had been worse. One man told me, on the way to his car, the cancellation was due to rip tides. This did not surprise me. A blurb in the South Florida Sun Sentinel newspaper said to expect strong winds out of the east for the weekend. My first thought was 'rip tides.' The very next sentence said just that: expect rip tides for the duration of the weekend. The reaction to the race change was mixed. After the race, a male ATC member was livid that the swim had been cancelled. Let people take a DNS [Did Not Start] if they don't want to swim, he said. Another male ATC member said there had been a race where people were given the choice of completing the swim or walking along the beach. However, he noted, this causes a problem with the results. Others noted the importance of the race director taking into account the number of first timers and fledgling triathletes who participate in this local race. Yet some of these participants were themselves upset that they did not have the opportunity to complete their first 'triathlon.' Other participants who would like to have taken advantage of their training experience in rough waters also noted, as one male said best, that they paid for a triathlon not a duathlon!

Multirace Spring Training Triathlon at Tradewinds Park Saturday April 21, 2012: It was raining at a pretty steady state from the time I left home to when I arrived at about 6:20 am. The rain let up a bit about 10 minutes before the race start. The rain stopped altogether at about 7:10 am, or approximately 10 minutes into the race. Transition was notably empty. A few racks stacked with bicycles, other racks had bikes scattered. A low turnout today. About 220 registered. A little

more than half raced. Some first timers did not show. Some people on Facebook and others at the race site thought the company took a risk in allowing the swim to go forward. One older woman spectator said there was lightning in the background even as the swimmers were awaiting the start. I noticed the racers finishing quickly. I later learned, while talking to this woman at the run turn around/finish area, that the bike was shortened to one lap. This surprised me since it is a closed course.

I would learn later in the day on Facebook that the Club Med sprint race, which also took place on April 21<sup>st</sup>, had been shortened to a 5K run. Apparently, due to the raging backlash of participants, the race director was forced to offer free race vouchers for a future event.

The Ironman 70.3 Muncie (Indiana) was held on July 7<sup>th</sup>. Seeing a note on the event put out by the Ironman on Facebook, I posted the following comment on the ATC Facebook page:

**Personal account:** Get this: "Attention IRONMAN 70.3 Muncie [Indiana] athletes, due to the high temps forecasted the swim will be shortened to 1 mile, 30 mile bike, and 10k run starting at 6:30 AM." Ironman 37.2? Forecast is for temperatures rising from 78 at 7am to 101 at 3pm (heat index from 81 to 106). Thoughts on this decision?

In the course of six hours on a Friday evening, thirty comments were made in response to my post. The responses were largely negative. One triathlon veteran said the race should be called "aluminum foil man," with an Ironman calling the decision "justification." Alternatively, a veteran triathlete and a local race director both called the WTC decision prudent due to liability issues. The discussion ended three days later when another long time triathlon veteran called the decision "PATHETIC" and said that participants could choose not to race. The views presented here show the challenges race directors and their companies face. On the one hand there is liability and their financial livelihood, and on



the other is the prestige of their race and their financial livelihood. The decisions are challenging and have everlasting impacts on their brand and the experiences of racers.

Triathletes perceive specific race attributes as beneficial or detrimental to the participant experience. Benefits include value, promotions and . Such attributes increase the prestige of a race. Conversely, the handling of adverse weather, poor course conditions and ? can harm brands for years. The race itself is prestigious in its own right.

### *The Finish Line*

A mere decade ago race participants had to wait for race photographers to send proofs via mail. Today, electronic pictures are uploaded to the internet immediately following the conclusion of a race. Advanced technology allows for production companies to provide a results receipt (a compilation of each racer's personalized segment times) to competitors as they cross the finish line. Gigantic television screens



**Figure 2: 2575 Triathlon Miami Finish Line.** (Source: author.)

display age group results. Triathletes receive paraphernalia at the finish line: medals and tee shirts. All forms of paraphernalia contain their own meanings and are important for understanding triathlete status.

**Personal account:** The finish line drew closer. Sweat dripped from my body and salt stains appeared on my clothing. I suffered greatly. I had a terrible run, and a poor race.

I registered for the inaugural Miami Ironman 70.3 before I knew what I was getting into. A 1.2 mile swim, a 56 mile bike ride and a 13.1 mile run? No problem! Never mind that I had *never* raced nor even registered for a triathlon of any distance. I became inspired after watching a previous season's *Biggest Loser* contestant complete an Ironman race. (Coincidentally, I would see Rudy from the current season struggling behind me on the run course.) I sat at my computer that night while watching the broadcast, and looked up the nearest race. I waited a few days to ponder my decision and then took the plunge.

I had completed two sprints, one shortened Olympic and one full Olympic distance race in the interim. I had put in the hours of training and experimented with nutrition. However, I was forced to basically walk and jog the entire run due to severe dehydration at the beginning of the half marathon. I should have probably Done Nothing Foolish (Did Not Finish). But I intended to finish what I started, despite suffering spotty vision numerous times following the eight ascents of the bridge leading to the Port of Miami. The sweltering temperature pushed the heat index above 90 degrees on the second to last day of October. The only shade on the run course came from running behind the American Airlines Arena, where the Heat would be hosting a playoff game later that night.

Now, I approached the finish line. I heard the clapping and hollering from the crowd. My parents cheered me on from behind the barricades. The speakers blasted music. I tried to pick up my pace as I turned down the finisher's chute. A slow trot, but my fastest speed of the day. I saw the finish line photographer directly in front of me. I tried to smile as best I could as I crossed the finish line seven hours and ten minutes after I started. A female volunteer placed a medal around my neck. A male volunteer standing behind a table asked me for my t-shirt size. My parents had made their way around to greet me. I was utterly exhausted! But I had successfully completed my journey.

The medal from that race is on the top of my clothes dresser and the finisher's picture hangs as a canvas wrap print on my bedroom wall. I have a 70.3 magnetic decal on the rear of my vehicle. I routinely use my Miami Ironman 70.3 water bottle. The finisher's t-shirt I make seldom use of, saving it for important casual occasions. I try to draw inspiration from acknowledging my past

accomplishments.

The finish line marks more than an end to a race. The finish line itself is often ambiguous. There is no actual line drawn across the pavement. The participant's time stops when the chip strapped to the athlete's ankle crosses over a receiver near the finish line. The finish line is more than a finite line. It can have infinite meanings. It has the power to transform people. People become triathletes, triathletes become Ironmen. It is truly symbolic.

The finish line awards status. It is a ritual event. A first time finisher participates in a rite of passage. The individual has earned their status as a triathlete or been marked an Ironman. Rites of intensification are a continuing process. Identities are reaffirmed. The finish line is a powerful place which shapes the identity of people's lives.

"You are an Ironman!" Many triathletes aspire to hear Ironman announcer Mike Reilly shower these four words of praise upon them. The Ironman is a transformative experience. Each race has a 17 hour time limit. This limit has come under scrutiny since even a decently well trained person can ease through the swim, survive the bike and walk the run course in order to finish a day's work. All finishers are able to call themselves an Ironman even if they walk a six hour marathon. The time limit may be too high. Veteran triathlete and Ironman Mark framed the situation by comparing the increase in the Ironman's popularity to the tremendous growth of marathons over the previous few decades:

**Mark 45-49:** "The one thing that I'm a little fearful about is the (*pauses*) I hope they don't water down the sport too much. And by that I mean, and this is probably going to sound wrong, the sport of marathon has grown hugely up until now! And you know, for example the Chicago marathon, it's the biggest in the world, sold 45,000 spots in 10 days. And you know what happened is 20,000 of

those people are going to walk 6 hour marathons. [...] If you basically walk the 6 hour marathon, have you really done anything?”

The same line of thinking can be applied to the Ironman: Is the Ironman prestigious enough? I investigated this question. However, only 10.9 percent of survey respondents ( $n=55$ ) think the time limit should be reduced, while 7.3 percent think it should be raised and 12.7 percent say there should be no time limit at all. One respondent suggested a novel idea. She thinks the time limit should be based on each course's difficulty. The remaining 67.3 percent think 17 hours is adequate. Tellingly, all but one Ironman finisher ( $n=19$ ) believes the Ironman time limit is fine (F 40-44 is the sole dissenter, preferring 15 hours). Despite the relatively small sample size, this data suggests that triathletes, especially Ironman finishers, believe the current Ironman finishing time limit is sufficient. The number of Ironman finishers is growing but the prestige of the race remains intact.

### *Ironman or Ironwoman?*

The declaration of “You are an Ironman” applies to men and women alike. Triathlon is an egalitarian sport. Men and women compete on the same race courses under the same conditions. However, the WTC does not employ feminine terminology. There is no ‘Ironwoman’ moniker. The corporation considers Ironman to be a unisex term. Seven of the nineteen Ironman finishers surveyed are women. All of them are content with the Ironman term. Interviewees concurred:

**Me:** “Do you consider yourself an Ironman or an Ironwoman?”

**Alison 45-49:** “(quick response) Ironman. [...] Ironman. Ironwoman is weak” (laughs).

**Alexandra 25-29:** “Ironman (*laughs*). I think it’s a branded race, so just the brand of it just kind of sticks. Not an issue.”

**Carolyn 25-29:** “Ironman.”

**Me:** “So you don’t have a problem with the WTC’s position that it’s a universal term?”

**Carolyn:** “Yeah, no I consider it a universal term. I’m not an iron man. I’m an Ironman. It’s, you know it’s a different meaning. Just because it has m-a-n in it, it’s you know something with malice. You know, I don’t get caught up on things like that. No, I’m an Ironman. I just don’t care (*laughs*).”

The data reveals contentment among female Ironman finishers. Their laughter appears to reflect a seeming triviality attached to the question. The Ironman term could be considered a reflection of male hegemony. However, this is not the case. Granskog refers to “a new cultural reality, one that reflects the transformation of gender roles taking place within our society today” (Granskog 1992:90). I can confirm 20 years later satisfaction among women with their status. They do not feel denigrated by the inherently masculine term. The Ironman term establishes their status within an elite group of triathletes. They do not seek a feminine term which would separate them from their male counterparts. They have achieved an equal accomplishment worthy of inclusion. There is no need for gender separation among Ironman finishers.

### *Finisher’s Medals*

**Alexandra 25-29:** “So there’s a picture of me smiling, super happy with my [Ironman finisher’s] medal in a wheelchair, and I showed that picture to my mom, and I was like excited because I was like, it’s my finisher’s picture, I was really happy, and my mom looked at me at the wheelchair, and was like, ‘That’s not funny at all’ (*laughs*). She understands, but she also knows it’s a little bit excessive. But I get that a lot.”



**Figure 3: Finisher's Medal.** A participant receives his finisher's medal from a volunteer at Tri Miami. (Source: author.)

Gratification begins the moment the finisher steps across the finish line. Race medals, and a finisher's shirt at major races, await. The medal symbolizes the race accomplishments and provides a memento. The medals are often heavy in weight from the metal used in its construction and from the dedication required to earn it. Finisher's medals are savored by triathletes: 98.3 percent of respondents ( $n=58$ ) have some sort of medal collection. My medals and trophies are on my clothes bureau in front of my television. I also keep a scrapbook of all my races, which includes my finishing times, race numbers, photos and a written description. I found that many survey respondents have similar collections:

**M 40-44:** “Finishes Medals and Top 5 Age Group Medals. Currently in a drawer. Awaiting me to hang the display hooks I have purchased.”

**M 35-39:** “Medals on hangers on wall, race photos on Facebook.”

**F 40-44:** “Keep all medals! They are in a “Race Bling” display. I have kept most bibs & they are in my file cabinet. Photos are on Facebook in albums.”

**M no age given:** “I keep them all, but not in any organized manner. Except my Ironman medal, bib & photos, which are mounted.”

**F 40-44:** “Medals are grouped together. Pictures in a photo album and on disk. Working on a frame of 1<sup>st</sup> Ironman #/medal/photo.”

**F 30-34:** “I keep all medals and trophies in my exercise room- hanging on the wall.”

**M 25-29:** “I keep medals hung up on my wall, along with plaques/awards. Bibs are organized chronologically in a binder.”

**Mark 45-49:** “the only things I kept [are] my Ironman Kona medal [and important accolades]. They remind me of the validation of those really good efforts.”

Nearly every respondent has some form of collection. Most are home displays, with the others preferring their workplace environment. A few participants noted separate Ironman displays. They chose to have their medal, race number and finisher’s photo mounted on a wall display. This action reinforces the Ironman distinction.

The accumulation of medals is relatively easy today given the ease with which they can be acquired. Every race in south Florida awards a finisher’s medal to participants regardless of race distance. I finished nine duathlons and triathlons in 2011. Therefore, I received nine medals before even reaching my podium potential (seven of the medals were actually designed as dog tags for the 2011 season). Many consider the medals at the shorter distances a nuisance and a waste of their race fee payment. Only a slight majority of 56.1 percent favors finisher’s medals for sprint races ( $n=57$ ). This number skyrockets to 81.0 percent at Olympic distance races ( $n=58$ ). Nearly everyone agrees that half and full iron finishers deserve medals (93.1 percent and 94.8 percent,

respectively with  $n=58$ ). The finisher's medal embodies the triathlete's achievement.

### *The Podium*

Performance medals reward individual accomplishments. They are given to the top three overall, male and female, as well as either three or five deep in five year age ranges by gender. Performance medals are sometimes awarded to approximately half of participants in small local sprint races. I witnessed this occurrence at two races: 2575 Triathlon Miami and Florida International University Triathlon. The 2575 sprint race announcer began the awards ceremony by stating: "This is what makes us different from everybody else. We're giving trophies to the top five. Nobody else does that!" Trophies were awarded to the top overall competitors and age groupers (see Figure 4). The inaugural FIU sprint race also awarded trophies rather than the standard medals (see Figure 5). The awards ceremony dragged on for more than an hour until nearly every recipient had received an award. Instead of combining faculty, staff and alumni into one



**Figure 4: 2575 Triathlon Miami Awards.** (Source: author.)





**Figure 6: Florida International University Triathlon Trophies.** (Source: author.)

category like the FAU race, each was separate. There were also numerous relay categories, some of which it did not seem there were awards for. Nonetheless, the announcer read from the results sheet and everyone who remained took their turn scaling the podium.

I addressed the topic of age group medals, in addition to finisher's medals, in my survey. I presented four choices for the number of medals awarded per age group: 0 (1.7 percent), 1 (0.0 percent), 3 (75.9 percent) and 5 (22.4 percent). Triathletes clearly prefer the classical Olympic distinction of gold, silver and bronze medals. Races which award medals five deep give three bronze medals. The fourth and fifth place finishers stand awkwardly flanking the sides of the podium, which is built for the top three spots. This has never been an issue for the overall finishers. Their awards are always given to the top

three only. The proliferation of medals increases the sense of accomplishment among triathletes. Age group awards provide motivation to compete that would be lacking if awards were only given to the fastest overall finishers. The individual gains prestige when fellow competitors see him or her standing on the podium, or later when viewing the medal away from the race site. Medals and their role in motivation will be further addressed below.

A change away from traditional medals occurred at more established races this year. The trend began last year at the FAU race. The top three age group awards were white, blue or red (first, second or third) painted stainless steel water bottles. This year featured bags (Figure 6). I viewed photos on Facebook from a spring race in Clermont which awarded backpacks. Multirace even sent out an e-mail survey before this season started asking last year's award winners which type of award they would rather receive: medal, bag, hat, bottle or other. Each triathlon production company is looking for a way to distinguish their brand.

### *Triathlon Apparel*

**Personal account:** A female ATC member pulled up on her motor scooter while two dozen other members prepared for a morning bike ride. My downward gaze was immediately drawn to her white sandals, with a navy blue M Dot on each.

Triathlon apparel proliferates. However, not all products are earned. I have weighed myself on an Ironman branded scale for seven years, and sported Ironman branded sunglasses for eight. The scale resides under my bed, and the M Dots on the sunglasses are barely noticeable. I had no idea what the term meant until *The Biggest*

*Loser*. The name Ironman sounds tough and strong, but was not a factor in my previous purchases. This section focuses on earned apparel.



**Figure 6: Florida Atlantic University Triathlon Paraphernalia.** A finisher's medal drapes over an award given to an age group division winner at the FAU Triathlon. All three races are exclusively sprint distance races. (Source: Informant, used with their permission.)

The half and full iron race distances are considered superior. If you finish the race, you are rewarded with a finisher's shirt. On the other hand, shorter races provide shirts when a person picks up their information packet *before* the race. Hats, visors, sandals, necklaces, watches: all have been branded with the Ironman logo. All are a part of presenting the image, the image of a triathlete and of an Ironman. Finisher's shirts are worn by 87.7 percent ( $n=57$ ) of respondents and triathlon apparel by 86.0 percent ( $n=57$ ). They are primarily a form of casual wear. People described wearing their shirts while training, running errands or grocery shopping. However, some prefer not to wear their

triathlon apparel. A few participants noted their dislike for the tee shirts and offered an alternative approach to their status preservation:

**Carolyn 25-29:** “I don’t like the way tech t-shirts look and tend to fit. [...] I’ve got three drawers full of race t-shirts. I would like to make a quilt out of them. You know, the places that I’ve heard you can send away your shirts and that’s a much better investment, I think. And it’s something I intend to do.”

**Sarah 40-45:** “Very rarely, pretty much never. I’m actually going to take all of my race t-shirts and make them into a quilt.”

Ironman veteran Mark offers a completely different perspective. He does not cling to triathlon markers in general, although he does have an Ironman tattoo. His dissenting view on triathlon apparel:

**Mark 45-49:** “I have a lot of those shirts, of course, but no I don’t make sure that I wear a triathlon logo to go to pre-race stuff, and (*pauses*) it doesn’t mean I’m not proud to be a triathlete. I mean if I’m there for the race, people are going to know I’m a triathlete. I don’t need to wear my Ironman Florida finisher t-shirt to validate me.”

Apparel affords the triathlete the opportunity to express their status conspicuously. The finisher and performance medals are usually displayed in a more inconspicuous manner. Hilliard is correct in applying Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption to triathlon (Hilliard 1988:310). Their motivations vary, and will be addressed below. Triathletes are proud of their status and keep items that represent their accomplishments.

### *Motivation*

Triathletes have a variety of motives for becoming engaged in triathlon in the first place and continuing forward with the lifestyle. I utilized Hiroshi Matsumoto and Koji Takenaka’s motivational profiles in exercise behavior to develop a survey question.

Matsumoto and Takenaka split motivation into three broad types: amotivation, intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The last type can be further broken down into extrinsic regulation, introjected regulation and identified regulation (Matsumoto and Takenaka 2004:90). They linked each motivation type with an exercise behavior. I took a similar approach, and asked each respondent to rank the three statements which best described their reason for triathlon training from a list of five choices. This question is important in determining if triathletes are internally motivated or if they draw motivation from external sources.

Ironman finishers are intrinsically motivated while external motivation drives participants at shorter distances. The data reveals that for all participants there exists an even split on the primary motivating factor (first choice selection): having fun (intrinsic motivation) and living a healthy lifestyle (extrinsic regulation). However, there is a difference among race distances completed. Ironman finishers simply enjoy training to a greater degree, while living a healthy lifestyle was the primary driver among others. Carolyn is an exception. She is an Ironman and ultra-marathon finisher who is primarily motivated by her weight. She has struggled for many years with her food addiction, attempting to tame it with a healthy dose of ultra-endurance training:

**Me:** “What do you take your motivation from then, your inspiration?”

**Carolyn 25-29:** “Well, I take my motivation from the weight loss. That’s the biggest thing. I say, ‘Do I want to go back to the way I was? No. Get on it.’ I also race because of the goal setting. I am an incredibly lazy person. Without a goal to motivate me, why should I get up on Saturday morning early, ‘What are you talking about?’ I work long hard hours during the week, you know, go to bed. But it’s the experiences I have. It’s the desire to not do poorly.”

Internal motivation is key for Ironman finishers. Ironman racers tend to have a higher training load when compared to shorter distances. Given the amount of energy expended

in training, it surely helps to be a more internally motivated individual in order to meet their goals.

**Me:** So you don't get any motivation (**Bryan:** No.) from past accomplishments?

**Alison:** No.

**Bryan:** What motivates me is just, I. I really don't need any motivation. If I'm dragging or something, I'll get, I'll watch, I've got Ironman recorded, so I'll just flip it on, or motivational Ironman videos online. That's what, and I really don't need those that much. The only thing I really need motivation for, is long runs. So that's typical for me to do. As far as going out and biking [I don't need motivation].

**Alison:** We do not need coaching, we are self-motivated.

The third most selected response was feeling bad (introjected regulation) if one did not train, with having no reason at all for exercising (amotivation) being the least commonly selected answer. The selection falling between these two was the attention the triathletes receive from family and friends (extrinsic regulation). Many triathletes have familial support present at races for encouragement and may be motivated to do well in their presence.

Triathlon performance is gauged by time and rank. Individuals compare their finishing times at the same distance. A new low time is referred to as a PR (Personal Record). The alternative is to compare oneself to others within their age group, and also within their gender and overall. I asked survey respondents if their finishing time or peer rank was more important when examining their race results. The selection of finishing time is more indicative of an internally motivated individual rather than someone who is driven by their rank. Ranking is an imperfect measure of performance. It largely depends on who shows up to a given race. A triathlete may finish first out of ten age group competitors, fifth or tenth depending on the performance of the other racers. I think Mark

best describes the importance of triathletes placing an emphasis on their finishing times rather than their rank:

**Mark 45-49:** “I’m a banking executive, I’m working 60 hours a week, I have two older kids, I have a 12 month old, I’m [45-49] years old [...] There are guys who are [45-49] years old trust fund babies who don’t work a day in their life who train and have masseuses and dieticians and you know I can’t compare myself to that, I mean I pack in 15 hours of training per week.”

The performance of competitors is nearly completely beyond the control of the individual. A majority of respondents, 60.4 percent ( $n=57$ ), care more about their finishing times than their rank. This suggests a higher level of internal motivation among triathletes.

Motivation may also come from participation in groups. These groups include triathlon clubs and fundraising teams. The ATC triathlon club helped many individuals with their fear of swimming in general, and ocean swimming in particular. This motivation begins in training and ends with the successful completion of a triathlon featuring an open water ocean swim. Fundraising opportunities abound. Participants may compete in large groups, such as The Team in Training, or as individuals while supporting non-profit organizations. There is a focus in our society on the fundraising efforts of professional athletes but there is a deficiency in how amateurs are able to collect monies for their own causes, and the motivations behind them. Participant sport athletes are successfully using their sport as a fundraising tool. The group serves another function beyond raising funds. Training club members are able to motivate members within the club and encourage non-members outside of the group. Individuals believe they are part of a larger cause. This motivates them to be involved in fundraising and to compete in races. It is important to understand the motivations behind successful adult

athletes in order to engage those who are not currently meeting the recommended national exercise guidelines.

### *Motivation: Medals*

Medals work to motivate triathletes and non-triathletes alike. Respondents pointed to the importance of their collection to themselves and to motivating others:

**M 30-34:** “The medals are in my gym. Love looking at them to remind me of the pain and feeling.”

**M 30-34:** “I spend most of my life at work, so I pin up all my medals in my cubicle to create conversation, motivation, inspiration, and a sense of accomplishment for myself and others.”

**Sarah 40-44:** “[M]y kids actually enjoy seeing [my medals]. When they look at them, they say they are so proud of mommy, and they let them know that they can do anything that they can do if they set their mind to it.

I noticed **Alexandra 25-29** likes to post a picture of her marathon finisher’s medals on Facebook as her profile picture. She said she posts pictures of the ones she is happy with because they are motivational.

On the other hand, not all draw inspiration from their medals:

**Carolyn 25-29:** “I get very little [motivation] from seeing them. I’m not really attached to things. Like I see them, and it’s like, ‘Oh shiny things that look pretty.’ You know, I don’t go and sit in my hallway for inspiration.”

The medal reveals more than an accomplishment. It embodies multiple meanings.

It begins with the end: finishing a race. It extends to a personal reminder and an opportunity to influence others. Triathletes use their medals to inspire themselves, family, friends and coworkers. Participants routinely use their position as active individuals to influence others. Additionally, 96.6 percent ( $n=58$ ) have encouraged a non-triathlete to take up the sport. Their athletic pursuits affect the lives of other individuals.



### *Motivation: Facebook*

Facebook has become an epicenter for triathlon socialization. Only 5.2 percent of respondents are not Facebook users ( $n=58$ ). Facebook is a place to share triathlon accomplishments. Triathletes ( $n=55$ ) post training information (45.5 percent), motivational messages (45.5 percent), training photos (43.6 percent) and race photos (80.0 percent). Only 7.3 percent do not make any triathlon related posts. The following interviewees discuss how they use Facebook to motivate their friends:

**Sarah 40-45:** “[Fifty percent of] my status updates are like ‘off for a run today,’ or ‘going on a 12 miler,’ ‘going for a ride.’ [The other fifty percent are not triathlon related.] I think it does motivate some people, even though that is not my intent but I think it does motivate people.”

**Carolyn 25-29:** “I inspire people because I am just so stupid and pig headed that I truly believe anybody can do anything if you put your mind to it. Maybe not anything, but certainly anyone can do a sprint triathlon.”

The following is an interview with husband and wife Ironman duo Alison & Bryan, both 45-49. Alison is a Facebook user, while Bryan is not. She uses the site as a platform to promote healthy lifestyle choices among friends. (Note: This exchange features multiple interjections within responses.)

**Alison:** Being into the fitness thing, I like to put motivational (**Bryan:** Quotes up.) quotes up.

**Me:** That’s exactly what my next question was. Because I saw, for example, today: ‘The beauty makes you skin deep (**Alison:** Oh yeah.) but fit is to the bone.’ Right?

**Alison:** To me it’s like there’s no excuses. And I basically put that on there just to kind of get people out there. You know, it just kind of makes you think.

**Bryan:** Tell one of them, what was it? ‘If you have time to Facebook, you have time to exercise?’ (**Me:** Yeah; **Alison:** Yeah.) Something like that?

**Me:** Yeah, ‘Bullshit. If there’s (**Bryan & Alison** laugh) time to Facebook, there’s time to run. It’s not about having time, it’s about making time.’

**Alison:** Yeah, and there’s...

**Me:** And I’ve noticed you’ve been posting, lately (**Alison:** It’s been all about excuses.) it’s been Facebook along those lines.

**Bryan:** Well, there’s friends we have that are just not motivated, and...

**Alison:** Every excuse in the world.

**Bryan:** Every excuse (**Alison:** There's no excuse.) and Alison tries to help them. With their diet and everything, and they know what to do, they just don't do it.

**Alison:** So if I keep bringing in, popping these things out there, it's like 'Yeah, she's right, maybe I should go run.' Or... (laughs).

**Me:** Because I do notice that, at least for you, compared to other people (**Alison:** Yeah.), is that you devote a lot of time to posting motivational quotes (**Alison:** Right.). And pictures. (**Alison:** Yeah, yeah I don't really like to, you know.) So the purpose is mainly to (**Alison:** Yeah.) motivate people who, who aren't competing?

**Alison:** Yeah, just motivate people to get out there and exercise for health. It's just for health.

Facebook provides triathletes another outlet for status striving. It is a way to show their close friends and general acquaintances the importance of their triathlon lifestyle.

As Ryan detailed, Facebook allows for the "calculated projection of symbolic markers of identity" (Ryan 2008:104). The social networking site also affords the opportunity to reach a larger audience than what is possible in the offline world. Triathletes are utilizing this opportunity to engage non-actors. However, a chasm does exist. In person, 94.8 percent ( $n=58$ ) have encouraged their friends to become more physically fit, while only 45.5 percent ( $n=55$ ) have utilized Facebook to do the same. Facebook lacks the intimacy that can be achieved in a face to face conversation. Nonetheless, Facebook has become an integral component in shaping many triathletes' identities.

Percentage	Statement
5.17	I am not a Facebook member.
45.45	I post training information to my status update.
58.18	I post race results to my status update.
45.45	I post motivational messages to my status update.
41.82	I have used Facebook to encourage friends to be more physically fit.
43.64	I post training photos on Facebook.
80.00	I post race photos on Facebook.
7.27	I do not post any triathlon related content to my personal Facebook profile.

**Table 9: Facebook Usage:** This table shows the use of Facebook by survey respondents. The percentage reflects those who agree with the statement presented. *n* is 58 for the first statement, and 55 for the remaining.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CAR SIGNS

A new formal communication form has emerged at a time when many languages around the world are disappearing. It consists of symbols, numbers and letters. The communication occurs on American roadways. Swimmers, cyclists, runners and triathletes are spreading word of their accomplishments through car signs. The signs are embodiments of their athletic accomplishments. The language is mobile. As the vehicles move, so does the message:

**Personal account:** I drove to the Nautica South Beach Triathlon in Miami Beach early in the morning on Sunday April 1, 2012. I slipped out of my car in the parking garage on 13<sup>th</sup> street. I turned to see the back of a Ford Flex station wagon. The first sign that caught my eye was what appeared to be an ATC decal. The car was parked among many others in a row of vehicles across from mine. I walked a little closer to confirm the decal. The brake lights were on. Great! An ATC member I can walk with on the way to the event site. What great timing!

I drove to work on my usual route to campus. It was approximately 8:20 AM on Wednesday May 2. What made this morning different from others were the car signs I saw within seconds of each other. One van had a Purple Team in Training decal, a car sported a 26.2 decal in black writing on a white background while another vehicle also had a 26.2 decal but with the numbers in white on black. Immediately I wondered, ‘Who are these people? Are they only marathon runners? For how long? How many races have they completed? How fast do they run?’ No matter the answers, one point is clear: all three are endurance athletes.

### *Signs and Culture*

Signs have long been employed as cultural representations. The original signs appeared as cave art in prehistoric societies. Over time they have evolved both in form, subject and location. Signs now appear as buttons, stickers or magnets, employing words

and symbols. They appear in a variety of environments, such as on t-shirts and automobiles. All are forms of mobile art. Signs are often used both as an extension of the self and to show commitment to a particular group. Car signs allow triathletes to exhibit the individualism of their accomplishments while belonging to a group with common pursuits.

Paul McGlynn examines graffiti through the lens of popular culture in “Graffiti & Slogans: Flushing the Id” (1972). He considers the effects of the slogan industry on the individual’s psyche. McGlynn compares graffiti to the “wall scribblings” of ancient times (McGlynn 1972:351). However, graffiti has negative connotations today and is frowned upon. Perhaps this is due to its contribution as one of the four main components of the hip hop movement. McGlynn sees bumper stickers as “respectable graffiti – respectable because they are mass-produced and displayed in socially-approved fashion” (McGlynn 1972:354).

Car signs evolved from other forms. Herbert Smith’s “Badges, Buttons, T-Shirts and Bumperstickers: The Semiotics of Some Recursive Systems” explains that badges are the medium which later spawned buttons, t-shirts and bumper stickers (Smith 1988:141). He begins by tracing the origin of the badge from presidential buttons through I (Love) NY t-shirts. Smith’s *Popular Culture* publication focuses on literary theory. Specifically addressing the bumper sticker, he describes it as a “natural billboard” with most of the texts generated to fill it [having] no particular relationship to the context of the bumper” (Smith 1988:147).

Charles E. Case provided valuable data in “Bumper Stickers and Car Signs Ideology and Identity” (1992). He conducted the most extensive survey of vehicles. He

sought to “determine what messages are being displayed on private passenger vehicles, their frequency and the kinds of vehicles most likely to use this medium for expression” (Case 1992:107). He used conflict and symbolic interaction theories to survey more than 2,000 vehicles. Window decals or stickers were the most frequent form of car sign observed, followed by license plate frames in second, bumper stickers in third with customized tags and chrome stickers further down the list. Case compares personalized license plates, another type of car sign, to graffiti as “being current, spontaneous expressions of individuals in an environment” (Case 1992:118). Self-identification car signs were the most common; school or university support signs were the most frequent. The most important conclusion reached by Case was the confirmation of his hypothesis that the higher the number of car signs appearing on the vehicle the lower the vehicle’s value. Car signs allow users to customize their vehicle to match their interests. They are often an extension of the self.

Barbara B. Stern and Michael R. Solomon’s “‘Have You Kissed Your Professor Today?’: Bumper Stickers and Consumer Self-Statements” reveals the importance of the car as a site for individuals to display symbols representative of themselves. Cars have a greater sense of permanence, comparable to caves: “Unlike tee shirts, cars are durable goods, and bumper stickers represent a more permanent part of automotive décor than any single tee shirt in one’s wardrobe” (Stern and Solomon 1992:169). The car is considered an appropriate place to project status. One of the most common forms of self-expression was recreational activities. Stern and Solomon picked up on similar themes to those in Case’s research. Representations of recreational sports activities are common in their analysis of bumper stickers. They see cars as an “extension of the self” and

“powerful symbols that express cultural values such as power, freedom, materialism, success and individualism” (Stern and Solomon 1992:169). Car signs enhance this relationship between owner and vehicle.

Adalberto Aguiere, Jr. analyzed bumper stickers while driving on California freeways. His article, “Social Communication and Self Identification: Participatory Behavior on the Freeway,” provided tremendous insight into the use of various car signs in a variety of situations. The oldest forms, bumper stickers, “have always been a popular means for making a statement” (Aguiere, Jr. 2004:94). His coverage of car signs range from the use of bumper stickers to suction cups. The latter is similar to today’s magnetic decals which can be placed in a variety of locations on the back and sides of cars. They “can be easily replaced, just as easy as changing one’s clothing style, to reflect a new self-identity. In contrast, the bumper sticker is a much more permanent expression of self due to its almost permanent adherence to the car’s bumper” (Aguiere, Jr. 2004:95). Aguiere, Jr. concluded that there are two reasons people place bumper stickers on their cars: “to make a statement, and to identify one’s self to others on the freeway” (Aguiere, Jr. 2004:94). He points to an important distinction between bumper stickers and other signs. Bumper stickers are adhesive, making them essentially permanent. An automobile can further function as a representation of its owner even when not in use. Vehicles are an extension of the self, allowing for owners to communicate while on California roads.

The common conclusion among researchers is that the car is representative of the individual. Car signs take this one step further. They act as a communication system. Car signs provide an opportunity for people to project their beliefs, support and accomplishments.

A model exists for investigating the meanings of car signs. Sociolinguist Dell Hymes, as discussed in his 1974 book “Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach,” developed the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model to analyze different forms of communication. Hymes developed his model as a way to analyze “the relationships among speech events, acts, and styles, on the one hand, and personal abilities and roles, context and institutions, and beliefs, values, and attitudes, on the other” (Hymes 1974:45). He studied various forms of communication, in which speech is defined to include writing. This allows for the employment of his model to analyze car signs.

Linda-Renee Bloch used this model to examine Israel’s political discourse in “Mobile Discourse: Political Bumper Stickers as a Communication Event in Israel” (2000). Her ethnography consisted of analyzing over 300 Israeli political bumper stickers in the mid to late 1990s. Bloch signifies the link between Israeli bumper stickers and the characteristics of Israeli drivers. Israeli drivers tend to be aggressive, and Israelis have a “cultural tendency toward very direct verbal expression” (Bloch 2000:54). The bumper sticker rhetoric reflects this direct expression. They are a means for Israelis to express their political positions. The car signs are a reflection of national traits and community identity.

I employ Hymes’ macro and micro level analysis onto car signs below. The S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. mnemonic device is presented in an order which allows the reader to understand all of the individual components. Previously, researchers did not address the importance of car signs to individual users. I bridged this deficiency in personal perspectives by asking direct questions to individuals in the questionnaire and, more importantly, in the interviews. (Please see the Appendix for car sign statistical data.)



## *Macro Level Analysis: Endurance Sport Car Signs*

### Macro Analysis of the Act Situation

#### *Setting*

Hymes refers to the setting as the physical location of the speech act: its time and place (Hymes 1974:55). The physical location for car signs is the vehicle to which it is attached. However, the actual location of the car in space and time can vary. The automobile may be in motion on the road while driving to work or idle in a parking space at a shopping mall. All the while, the car signs are visible for all to see. Vehicle occupants in other automobiles are able to see the car signs when driving, while pedestrians are able to view them by walking past a parked car. The signs themselves do not change; they remain unaffected by the vehicle's present location.

#### *Scene*

The scene differs in that it constitutes the “‘psychological setting,’ or the cultural definition of an occasion” (Hymes 1974:56). The placing of a sign, whether it signals the driver as an Ironman or marathoner, indicates the completion of an arduous athletic task. This stands out against the backdrop of our sedentary society. Within the sport itself, the completion of a particular event signifies an occasion, or rite of initiation. An Ironman or marathoner is considered a high distinction within triathlon and running, respectively. Not all triathletes and runners reach this level.

Additionally, the car can be seen as a metaphor. The car is an extension of the self. Cars act as status symbols within society. Expensive cars are more prestigious. Additionally, Americans pride themselves on their individuality. These individuals are

able to personalize their vehicles by utilizing available signs to signify their proudest athletic accomplishments. In a sense, the car becomes the medium for an athlete's resume. This causes their vehicle to stand out from others.

## Macro Analysis of the Instrumentalities

### *Channels*

Hymes defines channels as the “medium of transmission of speech” (Hymes 1974:58). There are five different car signs currently in use: bumper stickers/decals, trailer hitch cover, license plate frame, vanity tag and customized tag. The bumper sticker/decal is the most common type of sign. It can be either an adhesive sticker or a magnetic decal. The trailer hitch cover fits over the spot where one would attach a trailer hitch to their vehicle, with a decal on the end of it (Figure 7). The license plate frame is placed on top of the tag and surrounds it. It is attached using the same screws which hold the plate in place (Figure 8). Florida is among a number of states that issue “Share the Road” tags which promote cycling safety on their streets (Figure 9). Finally, state DMVs allow users to place customized phrases on their state issued tags (Figure 10). This is limited to seven characters in Florida.

### *Forms of speech*

In general, a language is “an expression of a historically continuous community” (Hymes 1974:59). Forms of speech allow for individualization. Variation occurs among different types of styles: “The term ‘style’ implies selection of alternatives with reference



**Figure 7: Cycling Trailer Hitch Cover.** (Source: <http://bestbuybikebicycletrailer.blogspot.com/2010/05/serfas-bicycle-hitch-cover.html>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 8: Triathlete License Plate Frame.** (Source: <http://www.amazon.com/Triathlete-License-Plate-Frame-Swim/dp/B000HUIJYW>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 9: Florida Share the Road Tag.** (Source: <http://myfloridaspecialtyplate.com/share-the-road.html>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 10: Florida Custom License Tag.** (Source: [http://www.ask.com/wiki/Vehicle\\_registration\\_plates\\_of\\_Florida](http://www.ask.com/wiki/Vehicle_registration_plates_of_Florida), accessed September 12, 2012.)

to a common frame or purpose. [...] Having identified codes, varieties, register, or even community styles, one could still speak of personal styles with regard to any of them” (Hymes 1974:59). The differing forms of speech among car signs entails a variety of shapes, colors, fonts and figures.

The shape of the tag is standard. Variation among car signs occurs to a small degree among trailer hitch covers, and to a large degree among stickers and decals. Trailer hitch covers end in either an oval or the shape of a cyclist. A huge amount of variety exists among decals. The “26.2” marathoner’s decal may appear as an oval, a circle, a rectangle or a shield. This also applies to other themes and sports. A decal appearing in pink marks the participant as a woman. There are pink “140.6”, “26.2”, “13.1”, “RUN” and “runner girl” decals. The “runner girl” is an example of a decal available in a variety of colors. Certain colors are unique to brands. “USA Triathlon” stickers appear in red, white and blue; “Ragnar Relay Series” stickers are orange; and “The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society Team in Training” stickers stand out in their characteristic purple. These colors emphasize the brand and aid people in recognizing them.

Fonts differ in shape and sizes. There are a variety of decals printed with the word tri: “TRI”, “tri.”, “iTRI” and “gotta tri...”. Another decal displays “TRI” and places the word “SWIM” vertically within the T, “BIKE” within the R and “RUN” within the I. The “ULTRA Marathoner” decal uses all caps on the first line to emphasize the “ultra” significance (ultra races are typically 50 kilometers and longer). Some “26.2” and “13.1” decals have jagged numbers. Specialized Bicycles relies on a specially curved “S” to denote its brand.



**Figure 11: 140.6 Ironman Car Sign.** This car sign is available as both an adhesive sticker and a magnet. The 140.6 represents the number of miles in an Ironman race. (Source: [http://www.cafepress.com/+1406\\_ironman\\_triathlon\\_oval\\_sticker,342030428](http://www.cafepress.com/+1406_ironman_triathlon_oval_sticker,342030428), accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 12: Ironman Florida Car Sign.** The logo of the Ford Ironman Florida race at Panama City Beach (Source: <http://endorphinfanatics.blogspot.com/2012/01/running-around-4-florida-9-ivs-and.html#!/2012/01/running-around-4-florida-9-ivs-and.html>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 13: Half Ironman Car Sign.** An Ironman 70.3 decal representing the number of miles. (Source: <http://www.swimbikerun.com/product.aspx?zpid=25867>, accessed September 12, 2012.)

Figures are also prominently displayed on many decals. While there is a common “swim bike run” decal, there is another which has a swimmer, cyclist and runner. Some triathlon decals combine these figures with the words tri, triathlon, triathletes or swim, bike and run. The runner girl decal features a female figure running with the words “Runner Girl” underneath it. License plate frames also feature a blend of words and images. One of the most common frames has triathlon or triathlete and swim, bike and run figures. Their appearance on either the top or bottom line of the frame is interchangeable. Runners, cyclists and swimmers also appear on frames for their respective sports.

### Macro Analysis of the Genres

#### *Genres*

There are only a few different genres of car signs. Both apply to decals only. Hymes describes genres as possessing “formal characteristics traditionally recognized” (Hymes 1974:61). These genres are feminization and nationalization.

Feminine decals feature up to three identifiable characteristics: they appear in pink, include the word girl and/or portray a female figure. There are pink “140.6”, “26.2”, “13.1” (Figure 14), “RUN” and “runner girl” decals. The “runner girl” and “Swimmer Girl” are self-explanatory. The two aforementioned girl decals plus many general running and cycling decals display the images of women. All of the decals in this genre provide the addresser with the opportunity to further individualize and enhance the message they are delivering to passers-by. It is also worth mentioning that there are “Runner Dude” and

“Swimmer Dude” decals, but these are far less common and do not stand out the way feminized decals do.



**Figure 14: Feminine Half Marathon Car Sign.** This car sign is available as both an adhesive sticker and a magnet. The 13.1 represents the number of miles in a half marathon. The pink color suggests the finisher is a female. (Credit: <http://www.amazon.com/baysixusa-13-1-Oval-Decal-pink/dp/B002QCUXSE>, accessed September 12, 2012.)

The genre of nationalization represents decals for the national governing bodies of each sport. They are USA Triathlon (Figure 15), USA Track & Field, USA Cycling and USA Swimming. Each has its own unique adhesive stickers. USAT has different versions. These decals allow individuals to show their membership. USAT includes a free sticker every year, arriving with a user’s new or continuing membership cards. Paid membership is required for competing in a USAT sanctioned race, either as an annual or one day member. Conversely, this is not the case for USATF sanctioned races. (Both sports bodies sanction races at all distances.) Thus, it should come as no surprise that the USAT decal is by far the most frequently seen individual car sign at triathlon races, while the USATF decal is hard to come by. Three hundred and one USAT decals were present at seven triathlon races (2,954 total cars) versus one USATF decal at a half-marathon (779 total cars). It is important to note that while there were no USATF decals present at

the triathlon races, there were 34 USAT decals present at the half marathon. Seven USAC decals were also present at the triathlon races. The display of membership to national governing bodies allows the individual to show group membership in a common recreational pursuit.



**Figure 15: USA Triathlon Car Sign.** A USA Triathlon member adhesive sticker.  
(Source: Author)

### Macro Analysis of the **Key**

#### *Key*

The “key is introduced to provide for the tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done.” It can be non-verbal, and includes mocking on one end and seriousness on the other (Hymes 1974:57). There are a few car signs which exhibit humor, attempt to inspire or address contemporary issues. The most common example of triathlon humor is the decal, “how about a threesome?” or alternatively “threesome anyone?” Less common is “I see crazy people.” Both decals feature a swimmer, cyclist and runner underneath the text. Carolyn details why she decided to place the “threesome anyone?” decal on her car:

**Carolyn, 25-29:** “I’ve got, what’s the little dirty one? How about a threesome? Swim bike and run. [...] The threesome one I thought was funny, cuz it’s you know, a little crass. So you know, oh, I’ll put that on my car.”



Running humor is more varied. “I know I run like a girl, try to keep up” (Figure 16), is the most common. Others include “Running is cheaper than therapy,” “Running is a mental sport and we are all insane,” “if found on ground, please drag across finish line,” “Toenails are for sissies” and “Will run for beer.” “Shut up legs” is a cycling example, and “got chlorine?” for swimming. Humor is just one dimension of participant sport decals.



**Figure 16: Humorous Running Car Sign.** This is an example of a humorous car sign. (Credit: [https://www.onemoremilerunning.com/stickers-etc-/large-ovals-4x6-/i-know-i-run-like-a-girl-try-to-keep-up-large-oval-sticker/prod\\_492.html](https://www.onemoremilerunning.com/stickers-etc-/large-ovals-4x6-/i-know-i-run-like-a-girl-try-to-keep-up-large-oval-sticker/prod_492.html), accessed September 12, 2012.)

Some participants choose to place inspirational bumper stickers on their cars. “Swim Bike Run Age... it’s just the number on my calf on race day!” attempts to encourage people to participate in triathlon regardless of their age. “swim. bike. mom.” with complimentary pictures shows that mothers can be engaged in a competitive lifestyle. John “The Penguin” Bingham is a columnist for *Runner’s World* magazine. He encourages all types of people to become engaged in running, no matter how slow they may be. One decal encapsulates this attitude: “The miracle isn’t that I finished. The miracle is that I had the Courage to Start. John J. Bingham” (Figure 17).



**Figure 17: Motivational Car Sign.** An inspirational message associated with running. (Source: [https://www.onemoremlerunning.com/john-bingham-and-dane-rauschenberg-slogans/john-bingham-slogans/stickers-magnets/miracle-magnet/prod\\_608.html?ccUser=](https://www.onemoremlerunning.com/john-bingham-and-dane-rauschenberg-slogans/john-bingham-slogans/stickers-magnets/miracle-magnet/prod_608.html?ccUser=), accessed September 12, 2012.)

Certain car signs deal with very serious issues. The most serious issue facing cyclists, and by extension triathletes, is the threat of injury or death from cycling on city streets. Share the road/3 feet signs address the threat to cyclists directly, while safe street coalitions address the issue more broadly for all parties concerned. Safe street coalitions include “Safe Streets Miami” and “Naples Pathways Coalition.” Safe Streets Miami’s decal says “Pedestrians Motorists Cyclist Runners.” Both the Safe Streets and Naples adhesive stickers include websites. The share the road car signs are present either as adhesive stickers or as license plates. There are a variety of different appearances among the stickers. The most common is produced by Miami’s Mack Cycle & Fitness store. It is in yellow and shows a car on the left side and a cyclist on the right side. In between it states “3 feet please.” The state of Florida offers a Share the Road tag. Both the old and new versions picture a cyclist on the road, with the words “Share The Road” on the bottom. The new edition directs the audience to a website by adding “www” and “org,” to the preexisting text. Florida is not the only state promoting safe streets. Indiana has a “bicycle Indiana” tag stating “I *Share* the Road” on its bottom.

Car signs have a variety of functions. Many denote personal accomplishments or promote brands. Others provide a humorous take on the addressors' pursuits, provide inspiration to the unengaged or seek social change.

### Macro Analysis of the Participants

#### *Sender*

The sender is responsible for the creation of the sign. The creators vary. They are largely companies, but can also include the individual. The WTC owns the copyright for the M Dot, and the 140.6 and 70.3 mileage numbers are associated with their brands. The M Dot is a corporate logo. Anytime these signs are displayed, the company is essentially enjoying free advertising. The distribution of their signs is not limited to the WTC itself. Triathlon companies and car decal makers also make reproductions of these symbols. Car signs are also designed by American governing bodies (e.g., USA Triathlon, USA Cycling), triathlon and running clubs, triathlon and running store retailers, bicycle shops and advocacy groups. An individual may also custom design a car sign. The ATC provides an oval magnetic decal, with the club's name and logo, to paid members. Carolyn describes why she placed it on her car:

**Carolyn, 25-29:** "And the [ATC] one I just stuck on there because it was given to me. So I stuck it on my car (*laughs*)."

Many of the aforementioned car signs are provided for free, increasing the likelihood that people will place them on their vehicle. This explains the prevalence of USAT versus USATF stickers.

### *Addresser*

The addresser is the person who places the car sign on their vehicle. That is, the triathlete, runner, cyclist (Figure 18) and/or swimmer (Figure 19). The addresser decides from which of the available signs s/he would like to place on their automobile. This participant decides which athletic accomplishment warrants the placing of a car sign. However, just as important is the decision by an addresser to not place a car sign.



**Figure 18: Cervelo Bicycles Car Sign.** This is a rectangular bumper sticker for a cycling company (Credit: <http://www.cervelo.com/en/>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 19: Freestyle Swimming Car Sign.** This decal represents the most prominent swimming stroke. (Credit: [http://www.swimandtri.com/scripts/Swim\\_and\\_Tri\\_Freestyle\\_Decal\\_Product2160.aspx](http://www.swimandtri.com/scripts/Swim_and_Tri_Freestyle_Decal_Product2160.aspx), accessed September 12, 2012.)

The decision against displaying car signs has been addressed previously. Stern and Solomon noted the absence of car signs is “a statement as significant as their presence” (Stern and Solomon 1992:169). Bloch discovered that the decision to employ “mobile rhetoric” (Bloch 2000:73) was to “demonstrate support, while for nonusers it

was a reluctance to mar their cars” (Bloch 2000:434). Their research lacks specific statements by individuals explaining their decision.

A triathlete who drives a vehicle void of car signs is also sending a message to the audience. It is a message that they may not want to damage their vehicle. Forty eight year old Ironman and 22 year triathlon veteran Mark describes his reluctance to place car signs on his car. His primary vehicle, a BMW, and his wife’s car do not have any decals, while his Jeep Wrangler has a USA Triathlon sticker. He points out a swimmer he knows from his gym whose Tahoe is covered “from top to bottom, and across is Ironman Florida, Ironman Texas, Ironman 70.3” stickers. He thinks it is crazy that triathletes would want to plaster their vehicle with car signs. However, he does allow leeway for individuals who want to post decals as a sign of a proud accomplishment.

### *Audience*

The audience is simply everyone who is able to see the car signs. This includes drivers, passengers and pedestrians. All are considered audience members even if they cannot understand the meaning behind the signs. Audience members are not passive. They will engage the addresser in order to understand their meaning. Multiple interviewees described their engagement with passers-by:

**Bryan 45-49:** “Most people don’t know what they are.”

**Alejandro 40-45:** “When I’m valet parking, people are like what are those things? [...] It’s always intriguing. And yeah, I get people asking all the time.”

### *Addressee*

The addressees are the target audience for the addressor. There are a variety of addressees. Using running as an example, an individual who places a “26.2” decal on

their car is addressing three disparate groups: marathon finishers, runners and non-runners. The addresser is signifying their inclusion in the marathon finisher's club to those holding the same status. They are informing runners in general, that they have a heightened position within the running community. To non-runners who recognize the meaning of this sign, they are signaling their accomplishment. This allows the latter group to participate within the speech community without being an actual member (Gumperz 1972:16). Additionally, addressers double as addressees:

**Alejandro 40-45:** "I am always seeing people with stickers. [...] I am trying to figure out what they mean."

**Bryan 45-49:** "When you see other people out there with them on, then you know that they are runners, or triathletes."

### Macro Analysis of the Act Sequence

#### *Message Content*

The act sequence involves the literal meaning of the message being presented. The interpretation of a "140.6" decal can be to signify that the car's owner completed all of the Ironman's 140.6 miles. The decal displays the driver's dedication to the triathlon lifestyle for all to see. Likewise, a "39.3" decal can be interpreted as having literally run 39.3 miles or completed Disney World's Goofy Challenge (run a half marathon Saturday morning and a full marathon Sunday morning). Different interpretations can be rendered depending on how the message is read and understood.

## Macro Analysis of the Norms

### *Norms of Interaction*

Norms of interaction involves the “rules governing speaking” (Hymes 1974:60). Hymes insists that in order to study these norms one must “[analyze the] social structure, and social relationships generally, in a community” (Hymes 1974:60). Since the vehicle acts as a representation of the self, one can expect signs present on the automobile to reflect the true character of the driver. The only rule that can be determined in placing participant sport car signs is that the driver actually accomplished what is being featured in the sign. The driver would be breaking an unwritten rule if s/he displayed an Ironman or marathon decal but had not completed the distance. However, there is some blurring. Since vehicles can be shared, it is possible that at a given time the performance presented on the sign is not representative of the driver. If asked by a stranger the meaning of a car sign or if complimented, this driver would be expected to honestly divulge that the accomplishment was performed by someone else. Aside from providing an accurate portrayal of one’s accomplishments, car signs should not be removed. They are the property of the owner. It is the individual’s sole discretion when and where to place car signs.

### *Norms of Interpretation*

The interpretation of a car sign may be in the eye of the beholder. Intelligibility is required in order to decipher the full meaning of many car signs. As discussed previously, there are a variety of addressees. A marathon runner will understand the meaning of a “26.2” car sign regardless of whether or not they display one themselves. However, a

neophyte runner may not understand the meaning of “26.2” sign. Needless to say, that this may very well be the case for a non-runner. There is also layered meaning beyond the simple completion of 26.2 miles. A non-marathoner may consider the accomplishment to be a greater feat than a marathoner. Additionally, the time taken to complete a marathon divides marathoners into different categories. There is a large difference between a five hour marathon runner, a four hour marathon runner and a three hour marathon runner. It is not possible to detect these differences from simply viewing a “26.2” decal.

A conflict also exists between the different participant sports. Car signs are open to interpretation “when members of different communities are in communication” (Hymes 1974:60). This is especially true when comparing triathlon car signs to its constituent sports signs. What is considered a greater accomplishment: running 26.2 miles or completing an Ironman 70.3 (which includes 13.1 miles of running)? Is completing an Ironman (including a 26.2 mile running leg) a better achievement than running a 50 or 100 miler? Ironman couple, Alison and Bryan describe their position on the subject:

**Alison 45-49:** “It’s like an accomplishment. Like I’ll see somebody with a 13.1 and I’m like you know that’s (**Bryan 45-49:** Wow.) wow, knowing that we’ve done so much more than that. But it’s you know, everyone’s got to start somewhere. But also feel like, it’s kind of like (**Bryan:** I’m bragging, basically.).”

Prestige and status is involved when displaying accomplishments within and between different sports.



## Macro Analysis of the Ends

### *Purposes- Goals*

The purpose for deploying car signs can vary. “In the first instance, descriptions of speech events seek to describe customary or culturally appropriate behavior” (Hymes 1974:57). Interviewees describe their purpose in placing their decals:

**Carolyn 25-29:** “The 140.6 if no one else had a magnet on their car, then I would not put it there but it’s kind of like, cool, I’ll join the club, and since I am a member of the Ironman club, well than damn it, I’ll have one too!”

**Alison 45-49:** “When I’m going down and sitting there at a [traffic] light, I know people are seeing my swim, bike, run, it kind of like, it kind of promotes fitness. Like, get out there, and get out and exercise, and do something.”

The goals are as varied as the addressors. The car, as an extension of the self, allows for individualization while concurrently providing the addresser with an outlet for showing a sign of community participation. They achieved different accomplishments and make their own decisions in the deployment of car signs.

### *Purposes- Outcomes*

The outcome is the actual end of the speech act. How is the message directed by the addresser received by the audience? Alejandro explained the meaning of his “26.2” decal to an audience member:

**Alejandro 40-44:** “26.2 is the distance for a marathon. ‘Oh, so you run marathons?’ Yeah. ‘Oh, how cool.’”

**Alison 45-49:** “Somebody asked me if [a 140.6 decal] was a radio station (*laughs*).”

Non-actors within the audience show little understanding outside of the endurance participants. However, interaction takes place beyond the road. Face to face conversations allow addressers to engage non-actors.

### *Micro Level Analysis: M Dot*

Ironman signs reflect the highest level of prestige within triathlon. These signs reflect a dialect within this communication realm. Ironman signs encapsulate the individual's identity. The M Dot is the ultimate Ironman symbol. It is the official logo of the Ironman brand. Its name derives from its formation: an uppercase M combined with the dot of an i. It is essentially the blending of the letters I and M. I and M when combined, as IM, form the abbreviation for Ironman. (For example, Ironman Florida is abbreviated as IMFL.) The M Dot is the graphical representation of the Ironman. While the M Dot appears in the Ironman name too (in place of the m), these signs will not be analyzed. The M Dot on its own will be analyzed below.

### Micro Analysis of the Act Situation

Triathlon participation rates are soaring nationwide. Yet the Ironman race remains the pinnacle of accomplishments. The successful completion of this race, no matter how many hours it takes, allows for an individual to choose to place an M Dot car sign on their vehicle. While it is this rite of initiation which grants membership to the Ironman fraternity, there is individual choice as to whether or not this status needs to be revalidated. There are participants who believe that once Ironman status is attained, it is necessary to complete a rite of intensification. The race must be completed again at set intervals in order to continue to maintain Ironman status in perpetuity.

### Micro Analysis of the **I**nstrumentalities

The M Dot only appears in two channels: decal and trailer hitch cover. It is most commonly seen as a decal. The decal varies. It may be a rectangular adhesive sticker (Figure 20), an oval sticker or magnet (Figure 21), an adhesive shield (Figure 22) or adhesive chrome (Figure 23). The M Dot itself has a standard form. Its shape and font do not change. It appears as red in color unless it is a chrome decal, in which case it is silver. The trailer hitch cover is essentially the same in appearance to the oval sticker or magnet (Figure 24).

### Micro Analysis of the **G**enres

There are two genres. The most common is the basic M Dot. It is often by itself, or may be accompanied by the word finisher. Then there is the M Dot flanked by Kona and Hawaii (Figure 25). This signifies the greatest of all accomplishments: completion of the Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii. Nearly all of the spots in this race must be reached through qualifying at other Ironman races. Some spots are given to individuals in an annual pay for lottery, and even fewer for people with compelling stories. These stories are often included in the NBC network's broadcast of the race.

### Micro Analysis of the **K**ey

The only possible key for the M Dot is to encourage others. It may be to encourage other triathletes to compete at a longer distance or for non-triathletes to become engaged in athletic pursuits, triathlon or otherwise.



**Figure 20: M Dot Adhesive Car Sticker.** (Credit: <http://www.ebay.com/itm/IRONMAN-HAWAII-ORIGINAL-STICKER-M-DOT-TRIATHLON-NEW-/180653868119>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 21: M Dot Magnetic Car Decal.** (Credit: [https://shophonu.com/images/source/IMG\\_0196.jpg](https://shophonu.com/images/source/IMG_0196.jpg), accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 22: M Dot Shield Car Sign.** (Credit: <http://ironmanstore.com/accessories/stickers-emblems/ironman-finisher-chrome-car-emblem.html>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 23: M Dot Metallic Car Sign.** (Credit: <http://www.inlandautoandsports.com/store/review/product/list/id/2366/>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 24: M Dot Trailer Hitch Cover.** (Credit: <http://ironmanstore.com/accessories/souvenir/m-dot-1-25-inch-trailer-hitch-cover.html>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 25: M Dot Kona Car Sign.** (Credit: <http://uniteinthefight.ca/cody-westheimer-does-kona-for-a-cause/>, accessed September 12, 2012.)

### Micro Analysis of the **P**articipants

As a corporate logo, the WTC is the sender of the M Dot. It is a representation not only of the individual's accomplishments but a promotion of the race series too. The Ironman is the addresser. While all individuals in society are free to view the M Dot, only certain addressees will recognize the importance of the symbol.

### Micro Analysis of the **A**ct Sequence

The M Dot sends the message that the participant finished an Ironman race. This person was able to complete a 2.4 mile swim, a 112 mile bike ride and a 26.2 mile run within a 17 hour time limit. The M Dot can mean many things to the addresser.

### Micro Analysis of the **N**orms

As with any sign, it must be hoped that the sign is being shared honestly. That the M Dot is not being deployed fraudulently.

### Micro Analysis of the **E**nds

The goal(s) of the addressee can vary. While the M Dot has certain meanings for the addresser, the addressee may interpret it differently.

### *Car Signs as an Indicator of Net Worth*

Car signs can have importance beyond individualism and group cohesion. Charles Case put forth a hypothesis that the lower class would use their cars to express themselves more than the powerful upper class. His data appear to reveal an inverse

relationship between the number of car signs and the average car value. Therefore, car signs are “a crude indicator of wealth or social status” (Case 1992:114). Additionally, Aguierre, Jr. questions the importance of the location of other car signs, such as car window suction cup signs, to bumper stickers. He suggests their location may be indicative of social status. His position is based on the idea that the lower class is more likely to place adhesive stickers on their bumpers while the well to do would rather not tarnish their vehicle. The upper class is more likely to place signs, such as suction cup mounted items on the interior side of a window, at a higher level (Aguierre, Jr 2004:95). The work of these previous researchers suggests the need to address this issue here.

Decals are the sole car sign not restricted to a particular place. Trailer hitch covers are found below the bumper while license plate frames, Share the Road tags and personalized tags are all in line with the bumper. The bumper sticker’s name implies that it can only be placed on the bumper. Smith describes how “the recursive bumper sticker in a sense is ‘shaped’ by the restrictions inevitable with its linear form and the *function* of the bumper” (Smith 1988:147). However, the bumper sticker has never been restricted to this location. The addresser is free to place it on any metallic surface or window. Likewise, its shape has changed. Its new iteration, the magnetic decal, is restricted to only magnetic surfaces. Recording the exact location of all decals was beyond the scope of this research project, due to the fact that it was the work of a lone researcher with (race) time restrictions. I can say from my observations that the decals appeared in a variety of locations. The vast majority appeared on the rear of the vehicle and above the bumper. That is, they appeared on the back window or the metallic surface between the window and the bumper. Some

magnetic decals were placed on top of or next to the gas tank cover, while some stickers were placed on the corner wedge of the side rear left and right windows.

Establishing a link between car sign quantity and vehicle value is a complicated task. The counting of car signs is obviously a simple one. Determining automobile value is another story. As per restrictions placed on this project by the Institutional Review Board, only vehicle make and model were recorded. Each vehicle was judged as to whether or not it appeared to be in new condition. The vast majority of vehicles fit this description. The next step is determining car value without knowledge of the model year or its internal qualities (a vehicle may include upgrades to the base model). At best, an estimate can be made. One method is to use the Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price or the Black Book Official Used Car Market Guide. Furthermore, due to the previously mentioned time restraints, only the makes and models of cars which had car signs, with the exception of one race, were recorded. All of these challenges mean that the best estimate would be an approximation. I have decided to mainly provide my observations rather than devising a model with multiple shortcomings for attempting to analyze the collected data.

Seven triathlon race parking lots were examined. A total of 2,840 cars were present. Of these, 815 cars displayed 1,597 car signs, for an average of 1.96 car signs per vehicle. A note must be mentioned here. The data from each race site is not mutually exclusive since cars were not allowed to be individually identified by tag number. There are a few cars I did recognize at multiple race sites. The makes and models present represent cars indicative of high net worth individuals and families. Many sports utility vehicles and minivans, especially the Honda CRV (3.56% of 815 vehicles) and the



Honda Odyssey (2.82% of 815 vehicles), were present. The Porsche Cayenne was seen numerous times. Prestigious brands such as BMW and Mercedes were common too.

There are several half and full marathons located in south Florida. However, they usually do not have a centralized parking lot. Participants are often expected to park in a multitude of garages. However, a brand new half marathon, the Multirace Key Biscayne Half Marathon, utilized one central parking lot. This allowed for the survey of cars for a comparison of car signs between triathlon sites and a running race site. An analysis of the half marathon data reveals 779 total cars with 217 displaying 417 car signs (a 1.92 average).

The idea of using car signs as an indicator of net worth may no longer be valid. I saw low and high end cars featuring a similar number of car signs. Further study would yield more valid data given that the data presented here provide an approximation at best. Multiple researchers are needed to act in concert in order to record detailed information, including the make, model, year and condition of *all* vehicles. However, my observations indicate that there may no longer be a negative correlation between the number of car signs and vehicle value. Triathletes are usually high net worth individuals. Previous research revealed that non-users did not want to mar their vehicle. The negative stigma appears to have disappeared.

### *Conclusion*

A significant number of endurance sport athletes are choosing to personalize their vehicles in order to highlight their athletic accomplishments, show their group membership and inspire non-participants. The car sign is the newest and most malleable

form of triathlon paraphernalia. They are a form of overt prestige and “an exercise in establishing their triathlon pedigree” (McCarville 2007:170-1). Car signs delineate boundaries between triathletes and non-triathletes. Stratification of the triathlon community can be viewed while driving to work every morning.

## **CHAPTER SIX: TATTOOS**

The body acts in a similar function as a car. The body is a canvas for accepting art forms to be presented to the public. The human body allows some triathletes to go beyond the semi-permanence of a car sign and embrace the permanence of a tattoo. It is not uncommon for Ironman triathletes to receive a tattoo. The preferred choice is the Ironman symbol. The location of the M Dot varies by individual but is often visible. It is often placed on either calf (the calf is also where a participant's age is marked before a race). Therefore, it is visible for other competitors to see during triathlon races and while mingling with the general public.

The M Dot tattoo symbolizes the triathlete's accomplishment. It is a sign of overt prestige given its often visible location, especially on the calf. Besnier and Brownell describe how "reconceptualizing the body as a cultural construction makes it possible to [... examine] how sport creates connections between people" (Besnier and Brownell 2012:454). The Ironman community is the most elite within triathlon. While a number of triathletes customize their tattoos and many choose not to mark their skin, this does not nullify the connection among all Ironman finishers. The tattoo allows for the construction of images which reflect the individual's achievements. The M Dot tattoo permanently marks the individual's inclusion in the Ironman family.

### *Tattoos in Society*

Enid Schildkrout described skin as “a visible way of defining individual identity and cultural difference” in “Inscribing the Body” (Schildkrout 2004:319). Her article in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* provides historical context for the application of anthropological theory to tattooing culture. Historically tattoos have been used to reflect status. These signs can reflect genealogy, age rank or political status. Becoming an Ironman for the first time is a rite of passage and tattooing can be a mark of initiation. Tattoos are “ways of writing one’s autobiography on the surface of the body. These practices express belonging and exclusion, merge the past and the present” (Schildkrout 2004:338). Additionally, “bodily inscriptions are all about boundaries, a perennial theme in anthropology” (Schildkrout 2004:338). The Ironman tattoo shows the importance of group identity and boundary maintenance within the triathlon community and among the general public.

Angela Orend and Patricia Gagne (2009) delved into the world of corporate logo tattoos and their relationship to the body, in “Corporate Logo Tattoos and the Commodification of the Body.” They reveal the motives behind the choices of tattoo consumers. The authors interviewed 21 participants. The preference for a corporate tattoo is an attempt to promote a particular lifestyle. While brand loyalty is associated with corporate tattoos and the enforcement of group boundaries is pertinent, the importance is usually personal. One participant in their study had the Ironman M Dot tattoo. He explained that, “When I got it, I didn’t think of it as a corporate symbol. It was more of an accomplishment I made” (Orend and Gagne 2009:505). My interest is solely in the M

Dot tattoo. I contributed to the understanding of this exact tattoo by asking Ironman tattoo interviewees their thoughts on sporting a corporate logo.

Data from observations, questionnaires and interviews appear below. The focus is on the M Dot Ironman tattoo given its widespread prevalence among triathlon tattoos. I asked 58 survey participants a contingency question about tattoos. A sizeable number, 37.9 percent of respondents, have at least one tattoo. Of those who indicated the presence of a tattoo on their body, 40.9 percent ( $n=22$ ) have a triathlon related tattoo. All but one of the nine has an M Dot tattoo. Moving on from the overall sample size, it is possible to delve in deeper and analyze the tattoo data within the context of Ironman finishers. The questionnaire shows 19 survey participants have completed an iron distance race. Nine of them have at least one tattoo, and eight (42.1%) of the nineteen Ironman finishers have an M Dot tattoo. For most of them, the M Dot is not their only one. The M Dot is the sole tattoo for only two of seven. The Ironman data, with its small sample size, suggests that Ironman finishers are not ink adverse. However, the questions asked did not address whether or not the Ironman tattoo was their first tattoo. For example, Mark has multiple tattoos today. However, the M Dot transcribed on his heel was his first. I frame the discussion of tattoos using Dell Hyme's S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model.

Ironman symbolism represents the individual's achievement in overcoming obstacles in order to finish the race while elevating them within the triathlon hierarchy. What is most important are the meanings people attach to the symbols. The symbols Ironman triathletes display to represent their group status are also part of their individual identity.

*Analysis: The Tattoo as a Body Sign*

The human body is the setting for tattoos. Today, there is no limit to where tattoos can be placed. The triathlete's body is visible in a variety of settings. Tattoos are often visible to fellow competitors at triathlon races, and may also be viewable in settings outside of triathlon related activities. It is the triathlete's choice to determine the ideal location for their tattoo and how visible it will be. The most popular location for the M Dot appears to be the calf. It is here that the athlete's age is written by a volunteer wielding a black 'permanent' marker on race day. It is a symbolic location.

The American Academy of Dermatology describes five categories of tattoos: traumatic, amateur, professional (cultural and modern), medical and cosmetic (Goldstein 2007:418). Triathlon tattoos are modern, professional tattoos. A tattoo artist performs the service for a paying customer. Variation occurs among different types of styles. Tattoos come in a variety of shapes, colors, fonts and figures.

The completion of an Ironman race marks the entrance of an individual into an elite group. The M Dot is the ultimate Ironman symbol. It is the official logo of the Ironman brand. Its name derives from its formation: an uppercase M combined with the dot of an i. It is essentially the blending of the letters I and M. I and M when combined, as IM, form the abbreviation for Ironman. (For example, Ironman Florida is abbreviated as IMFL.) The M Dot is red in color and is the graphical representation of the Ironman. The tattoo is a public mark for other members, and non-members to see.

Ironman triathletes are free to choose if they want to receive a tattoo. First, there is the decision to complete an Ironman:

**Mark 45-49:** “If you’re a runner you inspire to run a marathon, and if you’re a triathlete you inspire to do Ironmen. [...] 1984 there were only 50,000 people in HISTORY, that had completed an Ironman distance race. But now, my guess is there are 50,000 a year!”

**Alejandro 40-44** “It is that you can accomplish something that humanly is really hard to accomplish. And there is that .1% of the population in the world. So it’s just your body can do really amazing things. So this is what attracts me.”

Conversely, there are those who do not wish to receive a tattoo:

**Carolyn 25-29:** “I have none, and I just do not like permanent artwork on my body.”

**Me:** “So no desire to have an Ironman (**Carolyn:** Never.) tattoo?”

**Carolyn:** “Never.”

The decision for the majority is not to receive a tattoo. The decision is very personal.

Some individuals, such as Carolyn, object to the presence of any tattoos. Others, such as

Sarah, object on religious grounds. Sarah is Jewish and believes that tattoos are forbidden

by God as described in The Bible. The decision against an M Dot tattoo hinges on

personal beliefs.

M Dot tattoos can be individualized. For Americans, this is an outgrowth of the

American ideal of individualism. Unlike M Dot car signs, the Ironman tattoo is

malleable. People are free to design a tattoo to their specifications. The photo set below

shows a tattoo belonging to two individuals who were profiled in an Ironman website

column called “Ink of the Week.” The two individuals describe their designs:

**Kira Maicke:** “I knew I wanted to have the MDOT look like it was made of iron with the light showing across it and include the rivets (Figure 26). I also knew I wanted to make it look like it was a part of me and under my skin. [...] It’s definitely one of the biggest and most grotesque IRONMAN tattoos I’ve ever seen. I knew I couldn’t just get the red MDOT since I have a huge issue with getting a tattoo someone else has. My tattoo screams, ‘I AM AN IRONMAN!’” (Ironman 2012d).



**Figure 26: Non-Standard Iron M Dot Tattoo.** This customized M Dot tattoo is designed to appear like real iron while the second design is three-dimensional in nature. (Source: Ironman 2012d.)

**Ben Greenfield:** “The first time I went to Kona was an accidental qualification and I had no idea what to expect, so I just showed up clueless. Turns out the epic ocean swim, fiery highway heat and chiseled lava fields took such difficulty to overcome, that I felt compelled to get myself branded to remember the effort. [...] I wanted to symbolize the heat of Kona with intense fire, the ocean with some kind of splashing water and then IRONMAN itself with (gulp) my own 3D twist on the MDOT logo (Figure 27).” (Ironman 2012a).





**Figure 27: Non-Standard Three Dimensional M Dot Tattoo.** This customized M Dot tattoo, located on the upper back, is designed to symbolize the Ironman Kona Championship race. (Source: Ironman 2012a.)

Both tattoos taken together show differences in shape, color, font and figure.

Alejandro (M 40-44) is yet to complete an Ironman race. He has completed several races at shorter distances and a few ultra marathons. If he completes an Ironman race, he stresses that the M Dot will be the only tattoo he voluntarily receives. He would combine his modern tattoo with a traumatic tattoo he accidentally received. Traumatic tattoos are “caused by unwanted embedding of dirt or debris beneath the skin, which leaves an area of pigmentation after healing. This commonly occurs in “road rash” after bike or motorcycle accidents” (Goldstein 2007:418-9). Alejandro describes how his Ironman tattoo would combine elements with his traumatic tattoo:

**Alejandro, 40-44:** “When I was 14 I had a motorcycle accident. [...] I have a scar and it’s a circle on my leg and I want to have (*laughs*) the head of that Ironman guy with that

circle and just stick it by there ‘cause it is the only good thing that will look good on that scar, putting that Ironman guy on that scar.”

Alejandro describes a novel approach to combining an accidental tattoo with a very purposeful future accomplishment.

The Ironman stable of races grew tremendously. There are 28 Ironman races, such as Ironman Arizona (Figure 28) and Ironman Lake Placid (Figure 29), plus the Ironman World Championship in 2012. Additionally, there are 57 Ironman 70.3 races this year. Some individuals decide to receive tattoos which reflect the race they completed.

The ultimate race is the Ironman World Championship. It is held annually in Kona, Hawaii. It is simply known among triathletes as Kona. Nearly all individuals who compete in Kona have reached the event by qualifying at another Ironman race. These triathletes finished at or near the top of these races. The course itself is considered the most grueling. The bike course is characterized by strong winds and the run course takes place among the lava fields. The temperatures are sizzling. It is an honor just to complete the race. Thus, many people decide to memorialize their accomplishment:

**Mark 45-49:** “The Ironman logo on my heel that I had done about a year after I did Hawaii. I think it was the sense of accomplishment of finishing Kona. [...] A validation, a battle scar, if you will.”

**Kenyon C:** “Finishing the IRONMAN World Championship was a goal of mine since 1989. In 1999, I started training specifically to qualify for and compete in Kona. [...] I finally did. [...] It was the hardest thing I had ever done and it deserved a permanent memento to commemorate the accomplishment. [...] The volcano exploding represents the release of emotion upon crossing the finish line in Kona, hearing Mike Reilly say, “You are an IRONMAN.” (Ironman 2012c) (See Figure 30)

**Darryl Lem:** “I got the tattoo two days after the race, although I had designed it years before.” (Ironman 2012b) (See Figure 31)

The customized tattoos blend the M Dot symbol against the backdrop of triathlon’s most prestigious race.



**Figure 28: Ironman Arizona M Dot Tattoo.** This customized M Dot tattoo, appearing on the calf, is a symbolic representation of the Ironman Arizona race. (Source: [http://www.tattoodonkey.com/-ironman-triathlon-tattoos/biskvitka.net\\*uploads\\*posts\\*201111\\*1321215721\\_11.jpg/](http://www.tattoodonkey.com/-ironman-triathlon-tattoos/biskvitka.net*uploads*posts*201111*1321215721_11.jpg/), accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 29: Ironman Lake Placid M Dot Tattoo.** This customized M Dot tattoo, appearing on the calf, signifies the completion of Ironman Lake Placid (Source: <http://oi54.tinypic.com/30w1op1.jpg>, accessed September 12, 2012.)



**Figure 30: Kona Volcano M Dot Tattoo.** This customized M Dot tattoo, appearing on the calf, signifies the Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii. The volcano is symbolic of the volcanoes located in Hawaii. (Source: Ironman 2012c.)



**Figure 31: Kona Love M Dot Tattoo.** This customized M Dot tattoo, appearing on the calf, represents the Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii. The 733 was the participant's race number at the race. It appears between muscle fibers. The top of the tattoo says, "Ko Aloha La Ea" meaning, "Keep your love." (Source: Ironman 2012b.)

Tattoos are a non-verbal communication system. While the key in a language varies, Ironman finishers often wish to inspire others:

**Darryl Lem:** “I started as an overweight, everyday guy, unsure if I could even finish the distance while doubting my sanity for getting off the couch and even trying. [...] I wanted my tattoo design to show people that on the surface, I look like any ordinary person; however, under the skin breaking through is a warrior who will never give up.” [Ironman 2012e]

The M Dot can serve as inspiration to triathletes who are yet to complete the distance and as motivation for people to become engaged in exercise.

The sender is responsible for the creation of the sign. The World Triathlon Corporation owns the copyright for the M Dot. It is a corporate logo. Anytime these signs are displayed, the company is essentially enjoying free advertising. Alison noted the free advertising point: **Alison 45-49:** “We’re not getting paid for it, so (*both her and her husband, Bryan laugh*).” The Ironman website recently launched a column called “Ironman Ink.” The weekly introduction incorporates the meaning promoted the idea for Ironman finishers to acquire their ink too:

*“Finishing an IRONMAN® is a goal like no other. The training and determination needed to accomplish it is unparalleled. The symbol of an IRONMAN athlete's triumph--the mark of their discipline--is the ink on their skin. This is IRONMAN Ink.”* (Ironman 2012a)

The WTC is a for-profit company leveraging its ardent supporters to further its aims. The incorporation of the Ironman’s logo into a participant’s tattoo broadens the reach of the Ironman brand.

No interviewee ever considered the fact that they were opting for a corporate logo. Mark’s body is covered with many tattoos, but his first was the M Dot:

**Mark 45-49:** “That being a corporate sign? [...] I had never thought about it like that until you just said that. That would be almost like putting my bank’s logo on me. [...] Although, you know, what I think it does tell you is about the power of that brand. I mean, I don’t think that there are a lot of people who would ever think about putting a corporate logo on themselves. But think about how many people, just that you know, that have that logo on them. That’s pretty amazing.”

The question which arises is how they would feel about their ink if the company became embroiled in a major scandal, such as Enron or Lehman Brothers. The WTC scored an average of 8.94 ( $n=18$ ) for company quality on a zero through ten likert scale among south Florida Ironman finishers (46 total respondents rated the company an 8.02). The company has gone through a rough patch over the past few years. I suffered through their inaugural 2010 Miami Ironman 70.3. This franchised race suffered from poor conception and operation. The WTC offered a free entry to nearly their entire stable of 70.3 races the next year for every participant who started the race. More recently, race organizers of the Muncie (Wisconsin) 70.3 cut the race distance in half to accommodate a heat wave on July 8, 2012. I posted the decision on my triathlon club’s Facebook page on a Friday afternoon. There were over 30 comments within five hours. The overwhelming majority derided the decision. Their feelings were that the participants should be responsible for making their own decisions. Nonetheless, in interviews which took place prior to this most recent event, the Ironman is held in high praise:

**Bryan 45-49:** “Every Ironman event I’ve been in, you know I heard Miami that year was [awful], but it’s been phenomenal (Alison: yeah), top notch. You know, I’d (Alison: I’m proud to be a part of it) recommend an Ironman event to anybody.”

**Alison 45-49:** “First thing we ask when somebody says a race is coming up: Is it Ironman or no? And then usually we don’t even think about it [if it is not an Ironman branded race].”

Mark is a 22 year triathlon veteran who watched the sport and Ironman brand grow over the past two decades, which places him in a unique perspective. He finished multiple half iron and full iron races, including the Ironman World Championship:

**Mark 45-49:** “I tell people what you need to understand is it’s a business, and it’s a corporate logo. It happens to put on triathlons. [...] There are probably 200 objects that have that logo and growing! And so you know, it’s a corporate empire. And are they going to make mistakes along the way, like they did a couple of years ago in Miami? Of course they are. Would I hope that like any other good corporate citizen that they would do the right things and correct it? Sure. You know, do I think that generally speaking, do they put a good product on? Yeah, I do. [...] I think nobody puts on a better race than WTC.”

The WTC continues to overcome participant backlash and persevere.

The audience is everyone who is able to see the artwork while the addressees are the target audience. Addressees include Ironman finishers, triathletes in general and non-triathletes. The intelligibility and interpretation of the tattoo is a complicated task. The standard M Dot is easily recognizable within the triathlon community. Triathletes are well placed to make inferences as to the meanings of alterations.

**Ben Greenfield:** “To the average person who doesn't really know about IRONMAN, it simply says that I have a big lego piece on my back with some fire and water on it. But to any of my fellow triathletes, it is a symbol that I completed an IRONMAN with pride and that triathlon is an integral part of my lifestyle” (Ironman 2012a).

**Mike Pickett:** “[The M Dot] helps me be the role model I want to be — a healthy, daring and (hopefully) inspirational father” (Ironman 2012e).

**Darryl Lem:** “I hope that my tattoo tells others that under my skin is a warrior who has broken through is old unhealthy lifestyle and emerged triumphant” (Ironman 2012e).

**Kenyon C.:** “To other athletes, I want it to say, ‘Don’t even think of trying to pass me!’” and “‘Don’t mess with me!’” “To everyone else, I want it to say, ‘I will accomplish absolutely anything I put my mind to’” (Ironman 2012c).

Kenyon’s intended outcome actually backfired in the case of Sarah. She is not an Ironman finisher, and when racing in a marathon happened to see many marked

individuals. Here is what she had to say about a source of motivation for her during the Miami Marathon:

**Sarah 40-45:** “That M Dot that was on the calf of a lot of people came in handy for me because they were right in front of me, and that motivated me, thinking ‘He’s an Ironman,’ ‘She’s an Ironman,’ and I’m about to pass them.”

The M Dot is a form of status projection to those who know and those who don’t:

**Alison 45-49:** “Most people, you know, it’s such a small community of us, but most people don’t even know what the Ironman is. But the one’s that do are just like ‘Wow!’ you know, ‘I can’t believe you’ve done something like that.’”

**Brian 45-49:** “It’s a conversational piece. They’ll say, ‘What is that?’ Oh it’s an Ironman. ‘What’s an Ironman?’ Then you tell them (**Alison:** the distance) It’s 2.4, and they go, ‘Oh my God.’”

**Alison 45-49:** “Yeah, yeah. It’s like, ‘I can’t even run for 3 miles.’ So it’s just kind of advertising your accomplishment.

While participants did not consider their receipt of an M Dot as a corporate tattoo, the addressors are aware of the lack understanding of the M Dot:

**Mark 45-49:** “Somebody asked me once, ‘What is that International, why do you have the International Harvester,’ which is a farm company, ‘tattoo on your ankle?’ (*laughs*) [...] Back when I did it Adam, the Ironman logo was known, and now. I mean just look at our triathlon club. This year after [Ironman] Florida 3 or 4 people had the M Dot put on. It’s become quite a thing now. I’d like to say that I was at the forefront.”

**Kira Maicke:** “People normally comment on the detail if they don’t know what the symbol stands for” (Ironman 2012d).

The addresser is indicating their status as an Ironman. However, the Ironman symbol does not have wide brand awareness among the general public.

The rule governing the Ironman tattoo is that the individual actually earned it. The M Dot is meant for Ironman finishers, or for triathletes who have finished iron distance equivalent races (e.g., The Great Floridian, Beach2Battleship). Carolyn described two



instances: one involves her husband receiving his M Dot in advance of completing the Ironman and another individual who did not complete the distance:

**Carolyn 25-29:** “[My husband got his] M-Dot before he raced, but he knew, like, he would have to die to not have it. But he got it several months before, and he said [...] it was his motivation. [...] Now granted, you know, with my husband, he did it a little wrong. You should do the race before you get it. But he earned it. He set a record at the Great Floridian that our entire group has been unable to break.”

**Carolyn 25-29:** “One person I met, [...] he was a disgusting little boy, who hung around here. And he actually got an M Dot on his leg never having done more than a sprint, and no desire to go past it. And that I think, I think infuriates me! Now that’s something you earn.”

These two examples present rule violations. The latter case is an egregious violation and misrepresentation. The only practical solution for this deviant behavior would be his exclusion from triathlon social circles.

### *Conclusion*

A triathlete’s decision to inscribe their body with a tattoo is a personal decision. The tattoo is not a form of paraphernalia. However, it is a very important status symbol. The body acts in a similar manner to the automobile. Triathletes can choose to present their history of accomplishments for others to see. Boundaries are drawn between audience members. The M Dot tattoo reinforces the individual’s identity as an Ironman and their group membership. The tattoo creates cultural connections among triathletes.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION**

The progression to permanence in triathlon paraphernalia shows an intricate connection between the physicality of the items and their embodied cultural meanings. The temporal linear progression presented stretches from the race to the individual's body. Prestige accumulation begins with the race itself and extends to the accomplishments of the individual. The embodiment of these accomplishments and the choice of the individual to display their status symbols also move along a continuum. Everyone receives a medal while the tattoo is a personal decision. The medals are privately displayed while the tattoos serve to promote the individual publically. Triathlon status symbols are the basis for establishing triathlon pedigree.

The Ironman is at the pinnacle of triathlon accomplishment. Just as runners aspire to be marathoners, triathletes yearn to become an Ironman. The Ironman race series is a globally recognized brand replete with its own corporate logo and symbol. It is these representations that many triathletes imbue with meaning. Recent national corporate entries into triathlon do not have the value driving their participants to produce and place signs on their vehicles or bodies. The World Triathlon Corporation has built a stable of races from the Olympic to Iron distances which is cementing their mark on the sport. Ironman finishers willfully, without prompt from the WTC, pay to have tattoo artists make permanent etchings into their skin. Ironman athletes are a proud community. Ironman finishers have reached the highest status attainment among their brethren.

Triathlon is an egalitarian sport. Women clearly feel at home competing amongst men. They see themselves as equals and are not disturbed by masculine semantics. Triathlon provides women with an outlet for showing their equal capacity to be athletically competitive. When the Ironman term is applied to women it is not understood to be derogatory in nature. The unisex term is a sign of empowerment and belonging. Rather than divisive, it unites all Ironman finishers. Female Ironman or Ironwoman finishers they are not; women are Ironmen.

The Facebook status update is literal. The status update is a means for updating triathlon status. Facebook is used by triathletes to reach a larger audience than is possible in their day-to-day lives. Users can reach many individuals (triathletes, non-triathletes, family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances) simultaneously. The message content ranges from training information to actual race results. Photographs add a visual element. Facebook acts as a conduit for enhancing identity formation and status projection. It is an overt form of prestige display. Many triathlete friends use Facebook daily to detail their every training entry and comment on the statuses of their fellow compatriots. Our social worlds have been recreated and intensified on the internet.

Triathletes revel in their lifestyle and status. Their prestige is earned and displayed within the triathlon hierarchy. This is no different than the display of status within the United States. The United States is predicated on the ideal of meritocracy. Triathlon shares this characteristic. Many researchers have commented on how social class hierarchies are recreated within sport. Triathlon is an excellent example of how through the use of an expensive sport, the middle and upper classes are able to enhance their overall status. Triathlon is an elite, expensive and prestigious sport.

Status boundaries are drawn among triathletes and between non-participants. The status earned by triathletes creates an individual image and establishes boundaries. The boundary between the triathlon community and others is definitive. The triathlete hierarchy is more complex; motivations vary. Triathletes are intrinsically motivated to improve their athletic performance. While drawing on internal characteristics, many choose overt status markers. Car signs and tattoos show a concerted effort to project their status. The status symbols are a physical representation of triathlon accomplishments.

### *My Social Standing within ATC*

My standing has changed drastically over two plus years. I was very green in my first year as a member and a triathlete. When I asked members how many years they had been a triathlete, the majority of answers seemed to be three. Now I am in my third year of triathlon, and find myself in the reverse position of providing information to neophytes. Last year I became the Results Committee Chair of my local club. This position has enhanced my place within the club. I have made the position mine, bringing racer status updates to the Facebook group page during Ironman and Ironman 70.3 races. One member provided this quote on a thread as he followed my commentary of last year's Ironman Florida: "Give this man a mic!" (a reference to the Ironman announcer). Members have an appreciation for my role. I now highlight the fastest man and woman for each discipline (swim, T1, bike, T2 and run) in my race result posts on our website. I have decided to use this data to create season ending awards. Yet, nearly two years will pass between my last triathlon and when I intend to complete my next one. I also have no plans on racing past the Olympic distance in the foreseeable future. The club hierarchy is

based on years of experience and club involvement but also by race distance completed. I will be lower on the totem pole as newcomers continue to pursue Ironman glory. I remain content with my plans. To each, their own.

### *So You're an Ironman, Now What?*

There is a saying that everyone has their Everest. Everyone has a major goal they want to accomplish. The completion of an Ironman race means reaching the pinnacle of triathlon accomplishments, with perhaps the exception of competing in Kona. The ascent to a higher status requires movement in another direction.

There are many options present. An individual may decide to pursue faster Ironman times or compete on more difficult courses. Others may pursue a different sport entirely, while retaining their triathlon identity. Ultra marathons are enjoying a national boon right now. The number of races has grown tremendously over the last several years, including in South Florida. Bob Becker's Ultra Sports, LLC now features four races in the area: The Keys 100, The Palm 100, The Peanut Island 24 and The Everglades Ultra (all of the races offer lesser distances and time periods, and the first two include relay options). Many are unaware of distances beyond the full iron. A double iron distance or longer race combines the allure of triathlon with ultra sports. USA Ultra Triathlon hosts the Florida Double Iron Triathlon in Tampa Bay every year. For clarification, that is a 4.8 mile swim, a 224 mile bike ride and then a double marathon (52.4 miles). While the triathlon originated in the United States, Europe spawned the sport of quadrathlon (swim-kayak-bike-run, although alternative orders are used based on race site location). While it has begun to spread throughout the continent with cup races and now reaches to

Australia, it has yet to reach the United States. Veteran triathlete Mark proffered his outlook on the possibility of quadrathlon becoming the next big ticket event in the United States:

**Mark 45-49:** “The unique thing in the mind of the triathlete is, and I don’t know how long you’ve been doing it, I think we’re always looking for that next challenge, and sometimes that next challenge might be something like this.”

I sought to examine the question of ‘What’s next?’ through a series of survey questions, asking interview subjects and listening to conversations over the course of the past year. The questionnaire asked participants to rate their interest (on a 0 through 10 likert scale) in completing an ultra-marathon, a double ironman or beyond, or an iron distance quadrathlon (2 mile swim, 12.4 mile kayak, 100 mile bike and 26.2 mile run).

The results show a significantly higher interest in all three options among Ironman finishers (Table 10). The interest is considerably higher for completing an ultra-marathon. A few of the interview subjects expressed interest in completing an ultra. One, F 25-29, already was in training for her first ultra. A local firefighter, M 45-49, recently completed the Badwater Ultra (considered the most difficult race in the world). Another local firefighter, M 35-39, completed the Spartan Death Race. He was the center of attention at the club’s summer party. He told stories from his 60 hour plus adventure which featured carrying a canoe as part of a team above their heads for several hours while marching up and down hills, carrying rocks up and down mountains, chopping wood for hours on end and other tasks. He is already signed up for next year. I asked him if there are any pictures to prove he actually completed this race. He said, yes. While working on this section I saw a Facebook post about an annual 100 mile group bike ride

in Georgia as an alternative to the Augusta Ironman 70.3. The main difference between triathlons and long distance bike rides is that the latter are not competitive. It is about the internal drive to complete a long distance or tough course, rather than seeing how you compare against your peers. The only triathlon constituent sport not touched on is swimming. My primary objective in the coming year is to complete the Nike Swim Miami 10K. A variety of ultra-distances exist in triathlon and among its constituent sports. As more people complete the Ironman, these ultra endurance athletes are seeking out new challenges. These enhance their position as a high status individual within the triathlon community.

	Ultra Marathon	Double Iron Triathlon	Full Quadrathlon
<b>Average</b>	<b>6.00</b>	<b>2.44</b>	<b>3.47</b>
n	16	16	17
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.45</b>	<b>1.22</b>	<b>1.96</b>
n	53	54	55

**Table 10: Triathlete Rating of Ultra Endurance Races.** The first data set shows the average, on a 0 through 10 likert scale, of interest among Ironman finishers in completing an ultra-marathon, double iron triathlon or beyond and a full quadrathlon. The second data set is for all respondents, inclusive of the Ironman finishers.

A few participants spoke of the end of their Ironman careers. One gentleman, M 40-44, at the summer party discussed how he raced five Ironmans in two years. He said it was too much racing in such a short period, and discussed how the training taxed his body. Today, he focuses on the half iron races. The same can be said for a M 25-29. The individual is in the same age range as myself and has already completed an Ironman. Our

discussion took place between our cars. He pointed to his red M Dot Ironman decal to signify his accomplishment, but he has no desire to complete the distance again. He is also content with the series of Ironman 70.3 races.

### *Future Research*

There are many intersecting interests within triathlon deserving of further research. I came upon particular themes during my investigation that fell outside the scope of this paper. Besnier and Brownell's soon to be published *Annual Review* article reinforces the importance of sport in anthropology: "Sport provides a novel angle for the investigation of fundamental questions in contemporary anthropology" (Besnier and Brownell 2012:454). I agree with Besnier and Brownell's assertion that "ethnography could contribute to understanding the social problems in sport," (Besnier and Brownell 2012:454). I will present some of my findings here as well as other suggestions for future triathlon research.

### *Obesity and Body Image*

The sport life histories of amateur athletes need to be examined. Nearly all of the triathletes I have interviewed or spoken to casually over the past few years had a childhood devoted to a variety of sports. This is typically in the form of swimming, cycling, running or a combination. Some competed competitively, others just recreationally. The role of childhood athletics as a determinant for continued physical exercise into adulthood cannot be understated.



**Mark 45-49:** “So a big part of the health epidemic that we have in our society, I think, could be solved by a little more attentiveness to fitness.”

If the lack of physical exercise at a young age is a contributing factor to adulthood obesity, then interventionists would be prudent to investigate the role of sport and exercise over the life course. This data could be used to combat childhood obesity now and adult obesity later in life.

Triathletes seem to be comfortable with their body image. However, Alexandra pointed out the difference between an athlete’s body and the body presented on a daily basis in popular culture:

**Alexandra 25-29:** “The Ironman, that body is not the same as the swimsuit model body, and you know I just think that’s the reality of it. It’s not necessarily working out your body to be as aesthetically, like perfect, but I guess that’s just how it goes.”

She still appears to covet the ‘swimsuit model body’ despite her athletically fit appearance. *ESPN The Magazine*’s annual “Body Issue” shows that one can have an aesthetically appealing body as the by-product of sport’s excellence rather than restrictive dietary practices. Body image needs to be addressed concurrently with obesity.

### *Gender*

Female triathletes compete in the same races as their male counterparts, unlike other sports such as golf and tennis in which women receive secondary status by competing in events with different rules. This difference may be reflective of a more egalitarian society. Megan Kelly Cronan and David Scott, in “Triathlon and Women’s narratives of Bodies and Sport” (2008), examine the female gendered body in short

distance triathlons. These researchers call for an investigation of “race, class and gender variables” in future triathlon research (Cronan and Scott 2008:33). These demographic variables require further research.

Besnier and Brownell contend that “sport has played an important role in maintaining the sex gender system in the West” (Besnier and Brownell 2012:449). I contend that this is not the case in triathlon. Triathlon supports the American myths of individualism, equality and meritocracy. Consider the following response:

**Me:** “Do you mind if you get chicked (passed by a female during a race)?”

**Mark 45-49:** “I’ll be riding and there will be a gal with us, and they’ll be like ‘she’s pretty strong for a woman.’ And I’ll correct them and say ‘no, she rides pretty strong.’”

A female participant pointed out the difference between qualifying for the Boston Marathon and qualifying for the Ironman World Championship. Boston qualification is based on running below certain times, which differ for men and women. Conversely, Kona qualification is based on one’s relative rank against their fellow competitors:

**Sarah 40-45:** “Look at the Boston Marathon. The times for men are much faster than the time for women, to qualify for that. So are they giving us a handicap because they don’t think we’re competitive enough? You know? So I think that there is still some stigma.”

As I noted earlier, female Ironman finishers are content with being called Ironman. The egalitarian nature of the sport is a likely contributor. Comparative research across different participant sports is needed to assess the relative content of female participants.

### *Age*

**Mark 45-49:** “[People tell me] ‘it’s amazing what, you know, you do at that age’ [considering I’m] almost eligible for AARP. They think it’s pretty amazing that somebody my age can have the level of success that I have.”

The largest age groups in triathlon are for men and women in their forties. This shows that it is still possible to be competitive and engaged in vigorous exercise into middle age and beyond. There seems to be a generalization within society that as people age they become less capable of completing a variety of tasks. Endurance sports do tend to favor the aged as it can take many years to build up a solid endurance base. Staying physically fit in later years is linked to better health than for those who do not. Further research should look at not just the middle aged, but those in their sixties, seventies and eighties who are engaged in triathlon to varying degrees.

#### *Additional Topics*

The growth of triathlon is occurring at the same time as the growth of ultra endurance sports. The Ironman is defined as an ultra endurance triathlon, yet there are many distances beyond it. The growth in ultra endurance swimming, cycling and running is simultaneous. As people attempt to push their bodies to their biological and psychological limits, the socio-cultural aspects need to be investigated. The ultra running movement is still considered to be a small interconnected network of individuals. How will this change? What are the cultural reasons behind the pursuit of these distances?

The social structure within triathlon needs to be further examined. Participation in endurance sports is growing and having a direct and indirect impact on others. There are a number of married and dating couples who are able to share their training and race experiences together. How do their experiences impact their marriage? If one has heightened success, is the other negatively impacted? The number of hours people devote to the sport can have repercussions for their non-involved spouse and children. How does

the structure of relationships change if there are fewer hours to spend with your loved one? Social networking sites, such as Facebook, are fundamentally transforming the ways people interact on a daily basis. The abundance of triathlon related posts and the interaction between triathletes on group pages appears to be enhancing connections. Can Facebook serve as an adequate replacement for face to face interaction? If Facebook allows for a greater flow of information among triathletes, is it meaningful, or just a waste of time? There are many questions to be answered within the triathlon social sphere.

Triathletes have a variety of motives for becoming engaged in triathlon in the first place and continuing forward with the lifestyle. It is important to understand the motivations behind successful adult athletes in order to engage those who are not currently meeting the recommended national exercise guidelines. Triathletes may compete in large groups, such as The Team in Training, or as individuals while supporting non-profits. There is a focus in our society on the fundraising efforts of professional athletes but there is a deficiency in how amateurs are able to collect monies for their own causes, and the motivations behind them. Participant sport athletes are successfully using their sport as a fundraising tool.

Triathlon membership provides social benefits. Many triathlon clubs exist despite the individualistic nature of the triathlon race. Triathlon social benefits such as camaraderie, friendship and mentorship enhance the group's interconnectedness. Status within the sport and club is achieved through athletic accomplishment and contributions

made to the community. Many opportunities exist in the variety of race types and social interactions. Triathlon status is multifaceted.

## APPENDIX

### CAR SIGN STATISTICAL DATA

All of the data presented here is taken from the seven triathlon sites surveyed in the tri-county area.

Type	<i>n</i>
USA Triathlon	301
General	183
Half Iron Distance	106
Full Iron Distance	100
Clubs	51
Retailers	48
Humor	9
Duathlon	4
Other	4
Inspiration	2

**Table 11: Triathlon Decal Types.**

Type	<i>n</i>
Marathon	132
Half Marathon	131
General	34
Running/Endurance Clubs	32
Relay Races	28
Humor	18
Adventure Races	12
Running Race or Series	11
Running Store	10
Ultra Running	8
Inspiration	2

**Table 12: Running Decal Types.**

<b>Type</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Bicycle Shops	28
Bicycle & Part Companies	23
Share the Road	23
Safe Streets	21
Cycling Race Team	16
General	16
USA Cycling	7
Other Organizations	4
Inspiration	3
Humor	1

**Table 13: Cycling Decal Types.**

<b>Type</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
General	16
Statement	7
Humor	4
Other	1

**Table 14: Swimming Decal Types.**

<b>Sport</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Triathlon	79
Running	21
Cycling	3
Swimming	3

**Table 15: License Plate Frames by Sport.**

<b>Type</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
M Dot	8
Cyclist	2
26.2	1

**Table 16: Trailer Hitch Covers by Sport.**

<b>Type</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Current Style (FL)	59
Old Style (FL)	5
Out of State	1

**Table 17: Share the Road Tag Types.**

<b>Sport</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Triathlon	5
Other	9

**Table 18: Customized Tags by Sport.**

<b>Make</b>	<b>Model</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Honda	CRV	29
Jeep	Grand Cherokee	25
Honda	Odyssey	23
Honda	Accord	19
Mini	Cooper	19
Ford	F150	17
Jeep	Wrangler	16
VW	Jetta	15
Honda	Element	14
Honda	Civic	13
Ford	Escape	12
Honda	Pilot	12
Toyota	Corolla	11
Toyota	Tacoma	11
Ford	Explorer	10
Nissan	Exterra	10

**Table 19: Most Popular Vehicle Models Displaying a Car Sign.** Each model includes the base model and upgraded models. For example, the Jeep Grand Cherokee includes the Grand Cherokee, Grand Cherokee Laredo and Grand Cherokee Limited.



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