



TRI ON THE RISE

**WITH MORE AND MORE RUNNERS TAKING UP CROSS-TRAINING,
THE TRIATHLON CLUB OF SAN DIEGO REAPS THE REWARDS**

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARK JOHNSON

Thomas Johnson first learned about the Triathlon Club of San Diego when he noticed triathletes showing up at La Jolla Cove on Friday afternoons. Johnson, 46, was a swimming regular but hadn't touched a bicycle in 20 years. For him the notion of swimming, biking and running in a single event was nuts. Today Johnson is celebrating his one-year anniversary as president of the largest triathlon club in the United States, maybe even the world. We caught up with him to find out how it all happened.



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HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH THE CLUB? I had been a Cove swimmer for a decade. I met Jim McCann, who was club president from 1999-2007, until he passed away from a stroke. All I knew at that moment was the Ironman in Hawaii. I said, "That's crazy, I would never do that." About three years later I found myself with some extra time on my hands, and I ended up doing the Mission Bay Triathlon in October of 2001. I was hooked. The following spring I ran into Jim again down at the Cove and I joined the Tri Club.

HOW BIG IS THE CLUB TODAY? A little over 2,600 active members in greater San Diego. We are one of the oldest and largest triathlon clubs on the planet. The club was founded in 1984 by members of the San Diego Track Club. Many of those people who helped found it are still active members.

IS THE CLUB EXPANDING? Yes! The club is growing. About a year ago we had about 2,300 members. I think what is so special about the club is that we enable people to participate at any level and any distance. We have coaching that will get you from being able to swim 50 yards in a pool to competing in the Gatorman Championship, a three-mile rough-water swim (at the La Jolla Cove). The Tri Club is not only about competing in a local triathlon and then marking it off your bucket list, but it's also more of a way of life that complements your family and professional world.

THE CLUB ORGANIZES WORKOUTS ALMOST EVERY DAY. HOW DO YOU KEEP IT ALL GOING, ESPECIALLY WITH SO MANY MEMBERS? Our club is 100 percent volunteer run and driven. We are always not only looking for new members but also developing those members into active volunteers to help make all of the workouts that the club delivers across the county—the races, the training, the social events. It takes a small army of volunteers to make them happen.

YOU WERE ELECTED PRESIDENT IN SEPTEMBER OF 2009. SINCE THEN, WHAT'S SURPRISED YOU? How many events we put on every week and month throughout the year. Each month we're hosting a club triathlon, duathlon, aquathlon or beginner triathlon, and now we have added a complete youth triathlon race series to our

schedule. This is in addition to our weekly organized coached track workouts, masters swim, bay and ocean swims—plus runs and bike rides all over the county. We are fortunate to be in the mecca of the endurance sports world and have monthly club meetings with top names like Craig Alexander and Chrissie Wellington sharing stories with our members and guests. All of this couldn't happen without the support of many club volunteers and our awesome sponsors.

ALONG WITH THE KIDS PROGRAM, HOW ELSE IS THE CLUB NURTURING TRIATHLON'S FUTURE? By getting actively involved with different associations. We work with the World Triathlon Corporation and their IronKids program. We just had more than 100 volunteers from the club over a four-day period help organize, stuff packets, provide medical support, bike support, technical support and coaching during USA Triathlon's Junior National Championships. We spent a lot of time with IMG Sports to help them further develop their San Diego triathlon. It's going to be a USAT-sanctioned Olympic-distance race in San Diego in March 2011. We helped them make some course adjustments. They were going to have it go down Via Capri off the top of Mt. Soledad. We looked at that and said, "Boy you might as well just line up 50 ambulances at the bottom of the hill!" We were able to help them out with that local knowledge you don't get when putting a course together from Google maps.

TELL US ABOUT THE CLUB'S CHARITY PROGRAM. The club has a charitable arm called TCSD Cares. We award scholarships and grants. In the past two years we've awarded a couple thousand dollars in educational scholarships called the Dave Martin Memorial Award. It was the result of some fundraising done after our tri club member Dave Martin was killed by a shark in Solana Beach in April of 2008. The Martin family asked us to administer the funds and to award them to a deserving college-bound club member who exemplifies the tri club spirit and community involvement. We are expanding our scholarship awards in 2011 to include more scholarships in youth and education. We are also very active in fundraising for the Challenged Athletes Foundation, and we help CAF host the San Diego Triathlon Challenge every October at La Jolla Cove. Plus, just lending a hand to members in the club who need assistance with events, a bike, maybe some gear. That's a big way that the club is giving back.

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THE CLUB ORGANIZES AND HOLDS 28 RACES EACH YEAR—THAT'S AN AMAZING NUMBER; WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR SIGNATURE EVENT? I think the number-one greatest event that the club puts on is the aquathlon series down at La Jolla Shores. We do six a year on Thursday nights from May through October. We've had upwards of 400 people participate. Where else can you swim 1,000 yards and run three miles on the beach in a timed event followed by a catered meal watching the sunset with a few hundred of your closest friends after a great workout? And all of these events are free for club members.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY FOR SOMEONE TO GET INTO TRIATHLON? Come to one of the club's two beginner meetings each month. Our beginner coaches lead these and will provide you with the background and information on how to prepare for your first triathlon and take advantage of all the club's resources. Then join the club and register for one of our club races or a local event. We also have beginner-oriented workouts, like beginner bike rides twice a month. We meet on the Highway 56 bike path. It's a no-drop ride. We also offer some beginner runs in different parts of the county that cater to people that aren't running six-minute miles. And we rent the JCC (Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center in La Jolla) pool every Monday and Wednesday night. We have a technique and stroke clinic that helps athletes develop the fundamentals to swim competently and with confidence. From that, we have a beginner open-water swim program on Mission Bay Thursday nights and at La Jolla Shores every Monday night. Then we suggest people sign up for one of our beginner triathlons in Coronado. We do six a year. They are only for beginners so you don't have anybody screaming "On your left!" It's really a progression. You don't need a \$20,000 carbon fiber bike with Zipp 808s (race wheels). We are really trying to show that there is a path.

WHERE DO YOU SEE THE CLUB FIVE YEARS FROM NOW? In a beautiful clubhouse overlooking La Jolla Cove with free-and-easy parking for all club members! Seriously, I want

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to see the club continue building the things that have made it so wildly successful: development of beginner athletes, charitable involvement, more club races and clinics and a leadership path for volunteers who want to step up their commitment to the club and community. Finally, I see our membership exceeding 5,000.

SOUNDS LIKE THE CLUB WOULD BE A GOOD PLACE FOR SAN DIEGO NEWCOMERS TO PLUG INTO A LIKE-MINDED NETWORK. I've asked some of our members, "How did you find the club?" They say: "I never thought about doing triathlons, but when I got to San Diego I saw so many people out enjoying the amazing weather and scenery I wanted to be out there too, so I Googled 'tri club.' You guys came up as the number one hit. I went to a beginner meeting, and I was surprised by how welcoming and receptive people were." It's really that openness and inclusiveness that our club provides. We have members from 6 years old to 80-plus. We have members who are challenged athletes, and we have members who are competing at the elite Ironman distance.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO SOMEONE WHO COMPLAINS THAT TRIATHLON IS ECONOMICALLY OUT OF REACH? We tell people you don't need a \$10,000 bike. I'm riding a Trek 2200 from 2001 in 10 triathlons a year and doing just fine. Would I like to have a \$20,000 carbon fiber bike? You bet, but it's more about being able to compete with your friends, having a great day... and then having some beers. **CM**

 To learn about or join the Triathlon Club of San Diego, visit triclubsandiego.org.