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Age Group Athlete

First Ironman to Compete with MS

Hopkins's Iron Resolve

Jenny Hopkins has every reason imaginable not to put in all the training and sacrifices required to become an Ironman finisher, but she never dreamed of using any of those excuses as she prepared for Ford Ironman Lake Placid last July.

In 1998 the 30-year-old was diagnosed myasthenia gravis (MG), a rare neuromuscular disease that was diagnosed with because she kept falling over while running and skiing. Encouraged to take part in "moderate activity," Hopkins trained for her first marathon, which probably wasn't exactly what her doctors were thinking.

Running provided stress relief for Hopkins during her undergraduate degree at Mount Allison university. By the time she was in her first year of law school and training with the University of Ottawa track team, she had added swimming and biking to her training regime to rest her body from all the running. She did her first triathlon that year.

In 2007, a year after graduating from law school and well embarked in a career in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Hopkins started to feel a tingling in her spine. As if MG weren't enough of a challenge, she learned that she also had lupus and multiple sclerosis (MS). After receiving that news she went from the doctor's office right to a workout with the Ottawa Athletic Club's Women's Race Team.

When she crossed the line in Lake Placid she became the first person with MS to finish an Ironman. Despite her incredible determination, even she was surprised to have made it that far.

"I didn't think, at first, that I was going to make it," Hopkins says, noting that Lake Placid was only her fourth triathlon. "I wanted to raise money and awareness for MS. Last summer my health wasn't good, but then I got on a new cocktail [of medications] that balanced things out."

While the medication certainly helps, the list of excuses Hopkins could have filed to get her out of workouts is impressive. Some days she finds herself swimming with just one arm because the other simply gave out part-way through a workout. On other days her legs fail out on the bike, forcing her to wait by the side of the road until they "come around" again.

Fatigue, though, remains the biggest challenge. "You feel achy and tired all the time," Hopkins says. "You almost become accustomed to it."

Resolutely upbeat, Hopkins is quick to point out the upside of her Ironman training regime. "There are a lot of positive side effects to the training," she says. "Most of all it helps keep me sane and helps me monitor my health."



above Jenny Hopkins competing in the long course triathlon at the 2009 Muskoka Triathlon & Duathlon

Every day Hopkins has to take a number of pills and give herself injections. On race day she took 16 different pills along with the regular needles. She also had to pack her own food because she is intolerant to wheat and lactose, which makes some of the regular aid-station nutrition options impossible to take.

Hopkins raised money through her participation in the Ironman, too.

"All the funds raised are going to the End MS program to help fund research," Hopkins says. "I really want to give back and help find a cure. This way I have no one to blame but myself for not finding a cure."

Hopkins has no intention of stopping her impressive training schedule any time soon. She'll compete in a marathon this fall and, if her health holds out, she'll do another Ironman.

"I won't stop training – being active is a major part of my life," she says. "As long as my body will let me, I'll keep pushing myself as much as I can to stay healthy. I'm going to be active as I can for as long as I can."

And those excuses? Hopkins will pass.

"It's easy to fall into the habits of not being active when you're not feeling well," she says. "In the end, in the long run, I end up feeling better. Hopefully I can show other people with MS that you can do it. –KM