

**TRADE A TANGO FOR A TRIATHLON?
WRITTEN BY CHRISTOPHER HENDERSON FOR THE MUSSELMAN TRIATHLON, 2008**

When race director Jeff Henderson walked into a Musselman Triathlon organizational committee meeting in early 2004, he brought with him the usual list of concerns to be dealt with and decided on: race course improvements... schedule adjustments... new volunteers. Only this time there was something new...

"I received an email from someone who recently registered," Henderson said. "She wants to know if – and I'm not joking here – she can wear 'floaties' during the swim."

That participant was Pittsford resident Cindy Devore. She'd registered for the mini-Mussel as part of an agreement with her husband, Carl: she wanted to ballroom dance; he wanted to do triathlon.

"He did, so I did," she says. "I think he had the easier conquest, personally."

Devore's difficulty was a fear of the water that she obtained as a four year-old, following a near-drowning experience. She'd gone years without facing that fear; when her husband agreed to do the hustle if she'd Mussel, she knew she had to do something she'd put off a long time: learn to swim. And, be comfortable swimming in open water. Quickly.

She began by writing her initial email to Henderson; he replied by informing her that USA Triathlon prohibits the use of personal floatation devices – or "floaties" – in sanctioned races.

Devore was undeterred, and sent off a second email.

"I explained that the word triathlon and the name Cindy Devore would never be used in the same sentence, were it not that I was married to Carl Devore. What I do for love!" she remembers. "I told Jeff that I do not like to swim. I do not like the thought of swimmy things nibbling at my legs. I was fearful of being out in a lake alone and unable to put my feet down on solid earth. I told Jeff normally I swim to avoid drowning, run to evade danger, and bike best on the back of my tandem with my husband hauling my butt across town."

In short, Devore was apprehensive. Henderson, she recalls, was not.

"He said he knew I could do the triathlon, and encouraged me to buy a good quality wetsuit. He assured me if I did, I would "bob like a cork" in the water," she says. "He told me there would be people in kayaks and on jet skis looking out for anyone in trouble, and confidently told me, again, that I could do this."

It was Henderson's words that helped Devore make her decision.

“I realized that a young man – young enough to be my son – who had never met me, had more confidence in me than I had in myself. I was long overdue for a belief-in-myself-check,” she says. “So, I began the process of training for my first triathlon.”

Devore began by reading. A lot.

“Many books on training for marathons and triathlons sat on my nightstand,” she says. “I read each one, picturing myself floating effortlessly in the water, riding with strong shoulders on a bike, running fast and strong. Copies of Triathlon Magazine and Inside Triathlon began to pile on the floor by my bed. I am a good reader and a greater positive thinker, able to envision myself alongside professionals.”

But first, she'd have to start with the basics; she hadn't yet even gotten into the water.

“The simple act of learning to swim was a terrifying experience,” recalls Devore. “It began with me simply standing in the shallow end, holding on to the edge of the pool, trying to put my face in the water. I had to adjust to tolerating the bubbles. They were killers. I felt sick each time I swallowed dirty, chlorinated water, from my efforts to try and figure out how to breathe in synchrony with a stroke like the picture of the lady in the book,” she remember.

Devore had help from local triathlete and Musselman champion '04 Mary Eggers. Eggers provided the coaching Devore needed to gain confidence – little by little.

“I looked ridiculous swimming in my wetsuit in an 83 degree room with 80 degree water, but it was the only way I could ultimately get over my fear of going into the deep end without a floatie,” Devore says. “Kids would come up and ask me why I was dressed like I was, and then swim off like fish. I just kept my focus that at least I was in the water swimming.”

It would take Devore several years to forgo the wetsuit.

“I had trouble learning to coordinate my breathing and finally followed Mary's suggestion to breathe to one side on every stroke, because I never felt like I was getting enough air. I forced myself to let go of the side of the pool and head into the deep end using a kick board.”

She'd done it... almost.

Recognizing that triathlon is a multisport event – a swim, a bike, and a run – Devore had to simultaneously train for the other two portions of the race, as well.

“The biking training was a little easier, but only because I was able to breathe oxygen without getting a mouthful of water,” Devore jokes. “Uphills resulted in amazing quadriceps burning... downhill scared me to death... wet roads made me uneasy... and zooming traffic that came too close for comfort? Terrifying.”

Devore remembers finding motivation in the triumphs of the Tour de France champion that year.

“I loved the flats where I felt like Lance Armstrong whizzing past the mountains in the background,” she says. “But in reality, most of the time, biking felt uphill in both directions.”

The run wasn't a cakewalk, either. Following surgery for a foot injury earlier, Devore had become an avid walker.

"My doctor told me what everyone hears following surgery: walking is better than running, swimming is better than walking," she says. "We all know why swimming wasn't my first choice, so I became a fairly fast walker."

Running, however, was a different story. Devore had to balance her training with care, making sure that nothing exacerbated her injury and prevented her from accompanying her husband as he held up his part of the bargain: ballroom dance. Carl Devore stood by his wife – or, more accurately, swam by, cycled by, and ran by her – every step of the way.

"I dreaded each time my husband cheerfully asked, "So, how would you like to do a swim today?" "Like?" I would respond incredulously? "Like?" For Devore, there was no like – it was a necessity. Her husband understood.

During bike training, she remembers her husband dutifully riding behind her. "There I was, gasping for air, while my husband pedaled effortlessly behind me, whistling Beethoven, asking me between movements, "How's it going?" "Going?" I would think? Am I actually moving? It felt like a standstill." Her husband understood.

Carl was so understanding that he decided to drop out of the half-Iron he'd signed up for, exchanging his registration for one in the mini-Mussel, so that he could race next to his wife.

Devore remembers her reliance on Jeff Henderson, as well. He, also, understood what she was going through.

"I would drop Jeff a note as I did the first time and, for some inexplicable reason, he would write me back amidst all the other things he had to do, and he would encourage me to keep plugging." Devore remembers growing more and more apprehensive as her first race grew near. "I needed Jeff," she says. "I wrote Jeff and told him I was still plugging, but barely, and sought his reassurance."

"Pluggers become finishers and finishers will someday rule the world," Henderson would tell Devore in one of his many emails.

And that would become her mantra. And on the first mini-Mussel ever, Devore became a finisher. She had a little help from Carl – and no help from "floaties."

Carl, in fact, raced in the 'novice', or beginner, heat, staying with his wife during the swim, even dropping back a bit to swim next to her when a tinge of self-doubt set in. Staying close during the bike, the two finished the run as a pair, crossing the finish line side by side, to the call of the announcer: "And here come Carl and Cindy Devore. This is Cindy's first triathlon, and she is now a Musselman!"

Not bad for a woman who, not very much earlier, was afraid to do a dance with the water.