

FROM OBESE TO INSPIRATION: A MUSSELSTORY
WRITTEN BY CHRISTOPHER HENDERSON FOR THE MUSSELMAN TRIATHLON, 2010

Kevin Shaw, 44, of Binghamton, NY credits triathlon with a healthy new lifestyle – for himself, and for those he has inspired.

“Three years ago I was riding in the car and we passed a very large man riding a bike,” says Shaw. “I’d been known to tow my children around town in a trailer on the back of my bicycle. My youngest, Alexis, a little over two years old at the time, said ‘Dad... that man looks just like you riding your bike!’ I tried to take it to mean that he was on a bike but, after thinking it over, I realized she meant because his butt was hanging over the seat.” Shaw would file the comment away and continue his life, unaltered.

“A few weeks later my oldest daughter was watching one of those medical shows on the Discovery Channel. The topic was obesity, and they were interviewing a man who weighed more than 600lbs. My other daughter, Alexis, watched the television and then turned, carefully studying my midsection, before making an announcement: that I looked just like the man on television.

“I paid attention to the show. I didn’t look exactly like the guy on television, I thought, but I had gotten pretty flabby,” Shaw says.

It got him thinking.

“I had two data points, both from people close to me that weren’t old enough to apply filters to what they say. They were saying, simply: you need to get in shape,” he says. “At 41 years of age I decided I needed to take some action.”

Shaw located the digital scale and stepped onto it. It read 320 lbs.

“I knew, then, that I needed a big goal that would keep me motivated and take long enough to force a complete lifestyle change.”

That January Shaw signed up for an Olympic distance triathlon in Vermont.

“I didn’t know how to swim, and only had a mountain bike; the whole triathlon experience seemed completely unattainable,” he remembers. Shaw joined the YMCA and bought a Total Immersion book and DVD and began teaching himself to swim.

“It was very disheartening,” he says. “I couldn’t swim one length of the pool. I kept at it, doing the balance drills. I ran outside. I felt like I should be losing weight, but every time I stepped onto the scale it kept

saying 320. I finally realized that I must have been way over 320, and the scale's max must have been 320 lbs. It wouldn't read lower until I went lower – life is not fair.”

After three weeks the scale read 319, and Shaw was on his way. Down to 270 by the first triathlon, it was go time.

“I felt sick the morning of the race. At 2:00 a.m. I walked to a gas station and bought a roll of Tums and a roll of Roloids. I ate most of them and felt a little better. I slept from 3 to 5 and then headed to the park for the race. In retrospect, I should have bagged it,” Shaw says. “My mother had traveled with us from New York, though. And I really wanted to prove to my kids that you can do whatever it is you set your mind to.”

“My legs were already cramping by the time I finished the swim,” Shaw remembers. “As I was doing the second loop on the bike I made the decision to pack it in after the bike leg, to call it a day. I was physically and mentally defeated. As I was coming into the bike finish my family was there with their home-made posters of swimmers, bikers, and runners. I started to cry. They were all standing by the fence in the transition area, going crazy, and my wife enthusiastically reminded me that I was two-thirds of the way there.”

Shaw had to keep going.

“I was determined to finish, even if I had to walk the entire six miles.”

As Shaw walked onto the run course his six year-old – the same who had spurred his new-found fitness with a comparison to a morbidly obese patient on the Discovery Channel – saw fit to point out all of the people who had already finished the run. Still, Shaw was undeterred.

“I ran the first mile, but was forced to begin walking,” Shaw remembers. “As I was walking this triathlete ran up behind me, put his arm around me and – I will never forget this – asked me ‘How ya doin’, brother?’” The man would walk with Shaw for a few minutes, offering encouragement, before continuing on. Shaw, with the encouragement of his daughters, wife, mother, and a complete stranger, would finish the race.

“I was third from last, and last in my age group,” he says. “Yet I felt victorious for some reason.”

In September 2007 Shaw's father – ‘Dashing Don’ Shaw, a former racecar driver, died. This caused his older sister, Mary, to go into “a bit of a funk,” he says – starting with gaining weight and getting down on herself.

“This past Christmas she made a comment that she wished I could be her personal trainer. My initial thought was ‘what the hell do I know about personal training’ – why me?” Shaw says. “My wife pointed out that my sisters and many others find me motivational.”

Shaw would respond by starting an email distribution of what was going on with him and his extended family. He named it ‘Friends and Family of Dashing Don's Race Team’. His oldest sister began running and attended a boot camp; she and her daughter participated in a marathon in Las Vegas. Mary, who had been in the ‘funk’, began working out and running three times a week – and has lost nearly forty pounds. Shaw's youngest sister has entered several road races and has become an ‘exercise fanatic’; even his oldest daughter has gotten into the act, losing six pounds and getting in shape.

“I am absolutely thrilled with the progress my family and friends have made in their lives,” Shaw says. “I never thought of myself as a role model for healthy living, but I am okay with this role. I prefer this to the role of overweight bike rider or the obese man on Discovery.”

Shaw, who is down to 202 lbs, is signed up for the Musselman half-Iron, and will race his first full Iron-distance race in September.

An entirely new lifestyle – brought on through the eyes of two little girls who didn’t know any better than to tell it as they saw it – and fueled by triathlon.