

My life as a Sports Massage Therapist: “How I spent my Labor Day Weekend”

Ironman Louisville (KY) Triathlon

- Rocky Chen, AMTA-Oklahoma Chapter

“IronMan”. No, I’m not referring to the blockbuster movie that was released earlier this summer. If you own a Timex watch, look at it carefully. Chances are you will see the “M-dot” logo, along with the word “Ironman” on the watch.

The “IronMan” I’m referring to is an endurance event that starts with a 2.4-mile swim, continues with a 112-mile bike ride, and concludes with a 26.2-mile run (yes, that is a FULL marathon) for a total of 140.6-miles. You may be familiar with the Ironman World Championship Triathlon in Kona, Hawaii, but what you may not know is that most of those athletes had to qualify for that race by completing a PREVIOUS Ironman triathlon and finishing in the top 3-5 in their age group. Each Kona-qualifying event has 2,500 athletes who are racing against the clock to finish the 140.6-mile course before the 17-hour deadline (7:00 AM to midnight).

This was my 2nd year working as a member of the Sports Massage Team at Ironman-Louisville. This year, we had 3 AMTA members from the Kentucky Chapter, 1 member from the Oklahoma Chapter, and 1 member from the Kansas Chapter. Other “notable” massage therapists included the Massage Director and a Team Captain from the Ironman-Florida Sports Massage Team and the Sports Massage Therapist for the Dallas Mavericks NBA Team (9th season). The IM-L’ville Sports Massage Team had about 30-35 massage therapists working on race day and provided services for 750-800 athletes. Many of us worked 6-hour shifts, between 4:00 PM and midnight, and had the opportunity to meet some very inspirational athletes.

This is one of the most satisfying events to work at as a sports massage therapist. There are few other events where the athletes who get on your table are more appreciative than Ironman finishers. Most of them had been on their feet (and on their “seat”) for over 10 hours, and their 10-15 minute session on the massage table is the FIRST time they’ve been off their feet or seat for most of the day.

Some therapists were fortunate enough to work in the Medical Area where they provided “cramp management” relief to the athletes who were admitted there due to dehydration, loss of electrolytes, and heat exhaustion. It was a great opportunity to work alongside doctors, nurses, EMT’s, and other medical personnel during an endurance event such as this. You have the chance to experience various medical conditions you may not normally experience with your clients, such as hyponatremia.

Many of these athletes had spent 6 to 10 months training for this event, sometimes up to 30-35 hours a week which is akin to having another full-time job. I told many of the athletes that I worked on race day that getting a massage, about 15-30 minutes after they completed their race, is their first step in post-race recovery. These athletes spend so much time preparing for the race and getting to the finish line, very few of them actually think about what they’ll do after their “double fistpump” victory pose for the finishline photographer. Many of them will re-hydrate or eat some solid food or go to bed and get some well-deserved rest. However, the veteran athletes all know that one of the FIRST things they need to do is to get a 10-15 minute post-race massage to help increase bloodflow to their tired

muscles to minimize the delayed-onset muscle soreness (“DOMS”) which EVERYBODY knows will be rearing its ugly head the next 2-3 days.

Ironman triathlons are one of the few races where professional athletes are competing on the same course, at the same time, as “regular” athletes (in triathlon, we’re called “age-groupers” because we’re competing against other athletes in the same 5-year age group such as “30-34 male” or “20-24 female”). I spoke to several age-group athletes who were at the Kona Ironman race last year and they told me that the defending National Champion was participating in that particular race, and had actually encouraged them on the race course!!

Jen Patterson, an AMTA-KY member who volunteered last year and this year, said, “It was just incredible to be a part of such a great race. To see all these athletes train so hard for something they are so passionate about, and then to actually cross that finish line, even I was feeling emotional.” Jen said that being around these athletes fuels her own passion for being active and living life to its fullest. Jen just completed her first 2 triathlons this year and is looking forward to using her experience (as a triathlete) to help improve her understanding of the specific needs that triathletes have of their massage therapists.

Sharon Miklos, President of the AMTA-Kansas Chapter, was excited to be a part of this event. Sharon had worked at the OKC Memorial Marathon in April 2008 and the Ironman-Kansas 70.3 Triathlon in Lawrence, KS, in June, but this was her first time working a full Ironman Triathlon. She said she had an amazing time, working with these ultra-distance athletes, and that this experience will help her next June when she will be coordinating the Sports Massage Team at the 2009 Ironman-Kansas triathlon.

Laura Boozer, Massage Director for IM-Louisville, is an Ironman Triathlete herself, having completed Ironman-Florida the last three years and the Great Floridian Iron-distance Triathlon in Clermont, FL, the previous 2 years. This makes her the ideal person to organize the Sports Massage Team for this event since she knows what it’s like to be on the OTHER side of the massage table. In fact Laura’s husband, Chris, proposed to her at the finish line of Ironman Florida last year, after HE had completed the course about 30 minutes before she finished. Chris & Laura are the main reasons why the IM-Louisville Sports Massage Team has been so successful the last few years. Laura said, “I would like to see more local massage therapists participate and support this race.”

In fact, there are only 6 Kona-qualifiers in the U.S.: Coeur d’Alene (ID), Arizona (Tempe), Lake Placid (NY), Louisville (KY), Wisconsin (Madison), and Florida (Panama City). Each of these events is capped at 2,500 athletes, and pre-registration usually fills up less than an hour after registration is officially opened. So, not only is the EVENT highly competitive, registration for these events is also a competitive process.

If you’re interested in volunteering for IM-Louisville in 2009 (again, Labor Day weekend), please contact Laura Boozer at ironmanlouisvillemassageteam@yahoo.com. If you are a sports massage therapist, or a local AMTA-KY Chapter member interested in getting into the field of sports massage, this is one event you should consider putting on your calendar.

Rocky Chen is a massage therapist in Oklahoma City and is currently the Sports Massage Chair for the AMTA-Oklahoma Chapter. He is also a triathlete and a member of the OKC Triathlon Club. He has been on the Sports Massage Team for 15 Ironman Triathlons and is Massage Director for the Redman Triathlon in OKC, site of the 2009 USA Triathlon Halfmax Long Course and Club National Championships.