

Going for a Gold Medal as an Ironman

By Chuck Slate

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TODAY in Cleveland, Jim Quinn of Pleasantville will be swimming, biking and running for a gold medal in the Triathlon World Championships. There will be national television coverage and a field of 2,700 athletes from 70 countries.

That is the easy part. Quinn is also swimming, biking and running toward Sydney, Australia, and the year 2000, where the triathlon will be an Olympic event for the first time.

Swimming, biking, running -- and taking a calculated risk.

For Quinn today is a man with a mission and a full-time training commitment. He has left three years in the banking and financial services industry in his wake as he races toward Sydney.

"I've decided to commit myself totally to the 2000 Olympics," he said shortly before leaving for Cleveland last Wednesday. "I am looking to create a life style where I'm working under contract to a sponsor for whom I can be a spokesman while devoting myself to full-time

training."

It is, the former college swimming star said, the only way.

"I'm competing for a spot on the United States Olympic team, not to just be moderately successful," the 25-year-old Quinn said. "I want to train like the best, devote time like the best to be the best. And the best triathletes in the world work at it full time."

A simple description of the event, often called the ironman competition, makes the need very clear:

Swim a mile as fast as you can. Haul yourself out of the water immediately and race to your waiting bicycle, changing necessary gear on the fly. Then cycle as hard as you can for 24 miles. And when that is over, shed those bike cleats, tug on those running shoes and run along rough, uneven city streets for 6.2 miles.

Catch your breath after the finish line -- but not before. An extra 30 seconds putting on or taking off bicycling cleats can turn a gold medal into a bronze, or nothing at all.

And all three disciplines as well as the fourth of quick-change artistry should be completed in well under two hours. "You need a smooth transition as well as mastery of three different disciplines," Quinn said. "It's a full-time job."

At least. The operative question seems to be: why?

"After Hopkins I wanted to stay competitive," said Quinn, a 12-time All-American swimmer at John Hopkins University. "The triathlon was a challenge."

Quinn is already among the best amateur competitors of his age group in the country. Now the challenge is to improve his personal-best time of 1 hour 55 minutes by 5 minutes for the Olympics, where professionals and amateurs compete together.

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"I need to devote my energies wholeheartedly," said Quinn, explaining his sponsorship search. "My training times, most notably running and biking, are faster than they ever have been. But I have to, and will, improve them further."

He does the swim stage in 19 to 20 minutes, the bike run in 50 to 55 minutes, and his best road-race clocking is 32 minutes 30 seconds. With transition time, it comes to around 1:55.

"And," he observed, "my running time is already a full five seconds faster than that of the reigning world triathlon champion and record holder, Spencer Smith of Britain."

Quinn, who does all his training in Westchester with his heaviest workouts on the weekends, is big on mental as well as physical preparation, and also on attention to detail. "Before I compete, I go over the course," he said, "to see where my bike will be when I come out of the water, and where my clothes will be, and where I will leave my bike and gear after the cycle. Then I picture the switches in my mind. Without mental rehearsal, you're in big trouble."

And how has he pictured today's competition?

"My plan is to get off to a fast start in the swim -- to be in the lead pack," he said. "I want to let down the hammer on the bike, to be in the lead, then wreak some major havoc on the running portion."

Some fast steps for Quinn, one large step toward Sydney.

"I'm in the best shape of my life, and I've never felt better about any decision," Quinn said as he embarked on what he terms his "calculated risk."

"I'm fully capable of winning my age division in Cleveland. I want to bring back gold."

Ditto four years from now in Sydney.

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