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## Of Iron Men and the Beer: Democratization and Commercialization in the Triathlon History

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### ABSTRACT

This paper on the social and economic history of triathlon restores the past that has been overshadowed by the International Triathlon Union and the World Triathlon Corporation narratives. It is based on documents from the 1970s and 1980s. Focusing on the USA, the paper explains how two processes shaped triathlon. The first was democratization which formed mass-participation sports. Triathlon, with its inclusive features, was born out of the fitness, running, swimming, and masters sports movement of the 1970s. Key ideas of this mass-sports originated from 'left-wing' sports movements of the 1930s. The second process was the commercialization and commodification of endurance sports in the 1980s. It was connected with the elimination of the Amateur Athletic Union's governing role in amateur sports. The commercialization of triathlon was started thanks to interests of Kona-Kahaua tourism, and mostly American Budweiser Light advertising. It gave support to two leading for-profit organizers, which instigated the commodification of triathlon as a whole. A five-fold increase in entry fees over five years has led to the morphing of a classless triathlon into a sport only for the wealthy. The root cause is the loss of amateurism in sports governance, that was provoked by the rise of neoliberalism in economic policy.

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In 2024, World Triathlon will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the sport it governs. Triathlon is one of the youngest and most atypical sports within the Olympic system administered by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). This system considers grassroots sports as its lower level, whereas at the top are the world championships and Olympic games, in which only elite athletes can participate. One atypical feature of triathlon is the joint participation of elite athletes and recreational amateurs of all ages, including veterans and seniors, in the top events, including world championships. 'Triathlon has always been an inclusive sport, in which the rules were not just focused on the top elite participants, but also on the millions of amateurs – [so-called] Age-Groupers – for whom events are usually held together for all categories', its officials emphasize.<sup>1</sup>

The multiple authority is another atypical feature of triathlon. The IOC recognizes only one governing body for each sport, a non-profit organization. The monopoly rights of governing bodies to hold world championships and world cups allow them to manage global sports domains, as well as economically support the bodies themselves. However, triathlon has at least two separate systems of international sporting events and at least two world-governing bodies. The non-profit World Triathlon, recently known as the International Triathlon Union (ITU), governs the selection system for the IOC Olympic games, which is based on the so-called 'Olympic' distance (1.5km swimming, 40km cycling, 10km running).

Besides, there is another international events system, the 'iron' (3.8km swimming, 180km cycling, 42.2km running), and 'half-iron' distances. It is controlled by private firms, primarily by the for-profit World Triathlon Corporation (WTC), which owns the *Ironman* and *Ironman 70.3* brands and holds its own independent world championships. Participation in the *Ironman* triathlons is open to anyone, without selection by ability. However, buying the rights to use the *Ironman* brand means an increase in the entry fees for the same event; for example, from €50-€60 for an independent race in Europe to €215 (plus 7 per cent) for an *Ironman 70.3* branded one, both are de-facto identical in terms of organization. High entry fees transform this openness into inclusivity only for wealthy people. Welcoming the first *Ironman* event in one of the developing countries, a political columnist noted that it is 'a symbolic peak for wealthy fans' of endurance sports and 'a demonstration of belonging to the white Western world, [which is] white and rich, but at the same time open'.<sup>2</sup>

The expansion of the WTC was repeatedly perceived by the ITU as an intrusion into its domain, which turned into open conflict more than once.<sup>3</sup> The lack of a unified history of triathlon is a continuation of this permanent struggle. Although talking about one sport, the historical narratives by the ITU and the WTC do not notice each other and overshadow the memory of early witnesses.<sup>4</sup> Popular folk stories about the invention of triathlon 'by Marines at a beer party in Hawaii' mask the lack of academic research. Some texts, including those by Scott Tinley, Sean Phelps, and others are of high value but require a broader perspective.<sup>5</sup> A recent study highlighted the early struggle between the European and American factions in the formation of a single governing body for triathlon, and suggested an explanation through the difference between non-commercial and commercial models of sports.<sup>6</sup> This topic will be continued below.

Based mainly on previously unused sources from the 1970s and 1980s, this paper pursues two goals. Firstly, it presents a unified narrative of triathlon history. Secondly, it finds the origins of the inclusivity of sports in general and the formation of this specific inclusivity only for the wealthy.

### What is Meant by 'Inclusivity' in Sports?

'In 1971, at age 35, I joined millions of other Americans in the jogging craze ... Before I knew it, I was competing in road races, which at that time, were relatively small (and inexpensive) affairs'. This is how Jack Johnstone begins his history of the first Mission Bay Triathlon.<sup>7</sup> It is this event of 1974 in San Diego that the ITU considers seminal.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it should be explained how the democratization of sports has

shaped this 'jogging craze'. Despite the broad definition of sporting democratization and the different focus in studies of running history,<sup>9</sup> this article emphasizes the change of the dominant model of sports, from the traditional-competitive one, in the traditions of the IOC, to the expressive one.

Nowadays, competitions in endurance sports (such as triathlon, long-distance running, road cycling, open water swimming, cross-country skiing, and others) are mostly inclusive events in Europe, North America, and the rest of the world. These inclusive sporting events have typical features of the organization, such as open entry for everyone without selection by ability, permissive time limits, time recording for all, ranking by 5-year age groups from seniors to juniors, and praising the oldest athletes and the last finishers. Today, these elements have become a natural part of the culture of non-stadium mass-participation sports. The typical sporting 'career' in this culture evolves from 5km runs to completing marathons, 'iron'-distance triathlons, and multi-day races.<sup>10</sup> Most of the athletes in such events are ordinary people who take part more 'to complete' rather than 'to compete'.

However, in the middle of the twentieth century, inclusivity was still not typical for endurance sports. In 1959, no more than 3–4 running marathons were held in the USA, where the Boston Marathon was the most prestigious and largest, with 198 starters only.<sup>11</sup> Before the running boom, most athletes planned, if not to win, to be in the top ten. The time limits were relatively short, and the time of the last athletes was not recorded.<sup>12</sup> Very few solo runners 'completed' the course, indeed, when the finish line had already closed and the organizers had long since dispersed.<sup>13</sup>

From the 1950s to the 1970s, in the USA, there was a process of democratization of sports and active leisure, which included a gradual change in views on the goals of sporting activity in society, the emergence of inclusive features in the organization of endurance sporting events, and, as a result, the influx of many new recreational amateurs. Gradually, the completion of the endurance race began to be recognized as an achievement by the sporting community. That is how what used to be called 'sports' has become more of a 'movement'.

## Democratization of Sports as a Left-Wing Idea

Contemporary ideas of mass inclusive sports were promoted by left-wing political movements of the early twentieth century. 'Sport for All', 'Sport for Health and Recreation', 'Leisure Sports', 'Mass or Popular Sports', and related slogans are the legacy of the traditional gymnastics and labour sports movements in Europe.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the global sports world as a whole in the interwar period was multipolar, reflecting the rivalry of political ideologies. Beside the IOC, there were the Socialist Workers' Sport Internationals and the Red Sport Internationals, with their own mega-events, Workers' Olympics and Spartakiads, respectively. Left-wing movements opposed elitism, commercial exploitation, and militaristic chauvinism of bourgeois sports. They criticized the IOC for promoting nationalism, and an addiction to records, and, as a result, effectively turning sports into an elite-only engagement (in terms of athletic performance), which slides into professionalism.<sup>15</sup> Declaring the ideals of amateur sport, the IOC has de facto contributed to the emergence of shamateurism (i.e. various unspoken practices of payment or compensation for lost earnings to elite

athletes).<sup>16</sup> In turn, workers' sports movements promoted an inclusive version of amateurism based on solidarity and mass participation.<sup>17</sup>

Precursors of present-day inclusive sporting events can be found in the left-wing movements. The 1931 Worker's Olympic Games in Vienna were open to everyone, regardless of ability; more than 100,000 athletes took part in them, whereas only 1,408 elite athletes gathered at the 1932 IOC 'bourgeois' Olympic games in Los Angeles.<sup>18</sup> Another example is the annual Cross L'Humanite, organized by the French Communist Party's newspaper, with distances both for beginners and advanced runners, up to 10 kilometres. From its debut in 1933 to 1938, the entries for this event had grown from 1,499 to 4,242. A crowd of thousands of spectators cheered both the winners and the 'nameless young fellows with feet stained with black mud, those whose long troop ... stretched out on the lawn against the grey horizon'.<sup>19</sup>

### **'Left' Origins of the Running Boom in the USA**

Left-wing sports movements are often associated with Europe, where they had the greatest support. However, they have also had an impact on American sports. The roots of the running boom in the USA lie in the democratic practices of the New York Pioneers Club (NYPC), founded in 1936 by black activists who advocated social inclusion in athletics.<sup>20</sup> In 1958, the NYPC's black leaders including Ted Corbitt actively contributed to the foundation of the New York Road Runners Club (NYRRC), and the Road Runners Club of America, that played a key role in the development of the running movement. It should also be noted that it was the US Communist Party that organized the Chicago counter-Olympics of 1932 and initiated a crusade against racial segregation in sports in the 1930s.<sup>21</sup>

The early beginning of the running boom in the USA were also an impact of the fitness-campaign launched by President John F. Kennedy and the Presidential Council on Fitness in 1960. This campaign was initiated out of concern for the health of Americans, who had become 'too soft' in comparison with the first settlers,<sup>22</sup> and sports began to be promoted as a means of restoring faded physical activity. In February 1963, Kennedy proposed a 50-km hike as a fitness test, which many Americans perceived as a personal challenge and a call for immediate action.<sup>23</sup> The statistics of the Boston Marathon illustrate the likely impact of this campaign. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the entrants at this event averaged 175, with a few fluctuations. But in the 1960s, there was a seven-fold increase, with entries reaching 1,342 by 1969.<sup>24</sup> In April 1963 *Sports Illustrated* noted the emerging interest in participating in the Boston race, where among the runners now were not just the 'top ten focused' athletes but ordinary citizens with motivations 'just to complete'. Kennedy called for Americans to be 'more vigorous' and to do sports;<sup>25</sup> the *Sports Illustrated* author seemed to comment directly on this call: 'A red-blooded American male can dream of playing in the Masters [Golf], the [MLB] World Series ..., but chances are he will never get any closer than [a VIP-chair on the stands]. One event he can enter, however, is the Boston Marathon.'<sup>26</sup> Statements of Kennedy and his advisors, that 'a healthy nation depends on a solid middle class of athletes who never win a championship, but who ... have skills just adequate to enjoy whatever sport they pursue',<sup>27</sup> clearly continues traditional-gymnastic and left-wing ideas about sports. The obvious

conductor of these ideas from pre-war Europe of the 1930s to post-war America of the 1950s was Dr Hans Kraus, Kennedy's personal physician and advisor, the most influential figure in the early formation of the fitness boom.<sup>28</sup>

### ***How Endurance Sports Became Inclusive***

A significant milestone in the democratisation of sports was the emergence of competitions for adults (so-called masters, or veterans) with age-group categories and permissive time limits. In 1963, the NYRRC's leaders Joe Kleinerman, and Ted Corbitt organized the first running event for men in groups over 40, 50, and 60. It was a 3-mile cross-country.<sup>29</sup> The further all-American development of the masters sports movement is to the credit of David Pain, who organized the first National Masters Athletic Championships in San Diego in 1968. This idea was supported by swimming enthusiasts with similar national masters meets in 1970.<sup>30</sup>

More advanced elements of inclusivity for sporting events were proposed by the Honolulu Marathon in 1973. It was founded by Dr Jack Scaff and the Mid-Pacific Road Runners Club (M-PRRC). Dr Scaff considered a marathon not as an athletic competition, but as a cardio test for everyone, being inspired by the researches of Dr Kenneth Cooper and Dr Thomas Bassler.<sup>31</sup> Compared to other events, the Honolulu Marathon cancelled the time limit for race finish and established age-groups by 5-years, from juniors to seniors; all its finishers received a commemorative certificate, shell lei, and T-shirt. At Scaff's marathon 'clinics', prospective athletes were encouraged 'to break the record from either end'.<sup>32</sup> One runner noted in 1981, that this marathon 'is for those who aspire to just finish, and it has become not only a race but a social event'.<sup>33</sup>

Such a radical democratization of sports caused concern among 'competitive-minded' old-timers. In 1969, this was echoed in the establishment of qualification requirements for participation in the Boston Marathon.<sup>34</sup> But in general, by the end of the 1970s, endurance sports in the USA had already recognized the Expressive model with its inclusive features of event organization as a new standard. In 1981, one famous journalist made a characteristic note: 'The Honolulu Marathon was a showcase example of the New Ethic. The main prize in this race was a grey T-shirt for everyone ... That was the test, and the only ones who failed were those who dropped out'.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Birthdays of Triathlon in San Diego ...***

In 1982, *Time* magazine reported that '5 years ago the Hawaiian Ironman was organised as the world's first triathlon'.<sup>36</sup> In the same year, the director of this event, Valerie Silk, described the details as follows: 'In 1977, Navy Cmdr. John Collins and some athletic compatriots were downing a few beers after a local fun run in Honolulu and were trying to dream up a new, more exacting way to test athletic ability'.<sup>37</sup> This 'beer' story with some variants has become a folk myth, which is still reproduced even in the academic literature. The WTC narrative also started from this 'party' of 1977.<sup>38</sup> But John and Judy Collins already in the 1980s emphasized the inaccuracies of this story, as well as the genesis of the Hawaiian Iron Man Triathlon from the San Diego Track Club

(SDTC) Mission Bay Triathlon, which took place four years earlier.<sup>39</sup> Both of these events originated from a fitness, running, swimming, and masters movement.

On 31 July 1971, to celebrate his 50th birthday, David Pain, the pioneer of 'masters' athletics, held a 2-segment 'biathlon' in Mission Bay, San Diego, for the SDTC. It was 4.5 miles of running, ending with a 300-yard swim. There was no fee; the prize was a keg of beer consumed on the spot by the participants. Becoming part of Pain's next birthday, ex-university swimmer Jack Johnstone was inspired by the idea of swim-run events. In 1974, another runner, Don Shanahan wanted to add bicycles to the next SDTC run-swim.<sup>40</sup> On 25 September 1974, Johnstone and Shanahan organized the first Mission Bay Triathlon, for the SDTC. This 10-segment triathlon started with running, then biking, and then a series of swim and run legs, for a total of 6 miles of running, 5 miles of cycling, and 500 yards of swimming. The entry fee was \$1.<sup>41</sup> Among its 47 participants were all four of the Collins family: John, Judy, and their children Michael and Christine. On 27 July 1975, the Optimists Club of Coronado organized the next, already four segment triathlon. It became part of the club's annual sporting Fiesta and consisted of a four mile mass-start bicycle stage, a 1/2-mile run, a 1/4-mile swim, and a 1/2-mile run again.<sup>42</sup> Judy Collins influenced the foundation of this triathlon, her children took part in it.<sup>43</sup> The 1976 edition of this event became possibly the first three segment triathlon in San Diego County.

### *... And Outside of It*

In August 1975, the Collinses, a Navy family, relocated to Honolulu. There, they joined the M-PRRC and the Waikiki Swim Club (WSC). In 1976, Judy and John participated in Dr Scuff's 'marathon clinics' and ran their debut Honolulu Marathon. They also participated in local swims, including the Waikiki Rough Water of 2.4 miles. On 8 May 1977, Judy Collins became the first woman and ninth swimmer to cross the Maui Channel of 8.8-miles. Before that, Judy had the idea of joining the Honolulu Marathon and Waikiki Rough Water distances with a cycling stage in a single triathlon. John proposed the 180-km distance of the Around Oahu cycling race. They arranged the stages to put the marathon on a cooler evening and to make it easier to monitor the swim. That is how the 'iron' formula of the triathlon was invented: 3.865km of swimming, 180km of cycling, and 42.195km of running. The Collinses originally thought of calling their event the Waikiki Swim Club Triathlon or the Around Oahu Triathlon, but later used the name 'Iron Man', the nickname of some local runner. 'No beer stories, please ... Long, slow distances were very popular at that time, and we just wanted to do one', Judy Collins explained.<sup>44</sup>

On 18 February 1978, the First Annual Hawaiian Iron Man Triathlon started from Waikiki Beach in Honolulu. 15 athletes began the race, of whom 12 successfully finished. Among them was John Collins, while Judy took care of the overall organization. The next edition on 14 January 1979 attracted about 50 entrants. But bad weather discouraged most of them, and the second Iron Man Triathlon was completed by 15 finishers only. Participants were required to come with their own support of one or more persons; late entries were acceptable; there was no time limit, cycling drafting was not banned; all finishers were awarded the same statuettes.<sup>45</sup>



The invention of triathlon in San Diego is known, but it turns out that it was not unique. From 1971 to 1978, at least ten endurance triathlons arose in the USA. One running manual already gave a broad definition of this sport. 'For those with varied athletic interests, biathlon and triathlon events combine running with bicycling, swimming, horseback riding, or even kayaking and Nordic skiing'.<sup>46</sup> These early triathlons used formats such as: run & swim & mountain run (Clear Lake Triathlon, 1971); run & bike & kayak (Eppie's Great Race triathlon, 1974); run & swim & canoe (Sewanee Outing Club Triathlon, 1977); ski & bike & kayak (Squaw Valley Triathlon, 1974); bike & run & swim, or bike & swim & run (DSE Triathlon, 1975; Los Alamos Triathlon, 1975; Albuquerque Triathlon, 1976; Stonegate Lake Triathlon at Davis, 1977; Ancient Mariner & Rusty Pelican Human Race Triathlon, 1978); etc. One of these events and its founder should be highlighted. On 7 November 1975, the first annual Dolphin South End Runners Club (DSE) Triathlon took place in San Francisco, became the first real one in California; that is, a pure 3-segment mix of cycling, running, and swimming.<sup>47</sup> The DSE founder, Walter Stack, had been doing such a workout since 1966 as an everyday routine. In December 1975, he even became the hero for *Sports Illustrated*.<sup>48</sup>

### Beginning the Triathlon Boom

In the 1970s, likely reasons for the slow but steady expansion of biathlons and triathlons were personal contacts, small articles in the press and club newsletters, and the world of rumours. For example, a casual witness of the triathlon in Coronado, described it in the news of Albuquerque,<sup>49</sup> where the new triathlon very soon arose.<sup>50</sup> In the 1980s, the triathlon boom began. It was triggered by the long-read 'Iron Man', published by *Sport Illustrated* in May 1979. Its author, Barry McDermott, described the Hawaiian triathlon in a very ironic style. 'The significance of the event is that there is no apparent significance. No prize money is involved, and little fame'.<sup>51</sup> Despite the feuilleton style, this article aroused the interest of a wide audience. A number of editions around the world, including socialist Czechoslovakia,<sup>52</sup> reprinted information about the unusual sporting event. Triathlon even became a topic for the NBC primetime *Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*.<sup>53</sup>

During 1979–80, at least 20 new triathlons emerged around the world, including in the USA, Canada, Australia, and Czechoslovakia. At least two triathlons in 1980 used the phrase 'Iron Man' in the name or in advertising, namely: the Triathlon v Přední Hluboké in Czechoslovakia<sup>54</sup> and the 'Iron Man Contest' at Hamlin Beach, New York.<sup>55</sup> In fact, it was then that the perception of triathlon as a 'sport of iron men' emerged. Using the scaled proportions of the Iron Man or their own distances, these new triathlons became news for the press and the world of rumors and encouraged the next events.

However, when exactly was the starting point? Since July 1969, the Cambridge Sports Union had been holding annual 'biathlon' (3-mile run, 880-yard swim) in Stow in the Greater Boston metropolitan area. Its organizer said that he picked up the idea somewhere in the press.<sup>56</sup> Besides, in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the U.S. Army sports clubs supported triathlons of 4000 meters running, 880 yards swimming, and pistol shooting.<sup>57</sup> However, an important difference is that these pentathlon-style triathlons were an 'old' traditional-competitive sport, while the 'new' ones emerged as leisure events.



### ***First Triathletes as a Classless Community***

Early triathlon in the USA was a classless sport, in which mainly young adults participated. At the 1981 Del Mar Day Triathlon in San Diego County, 74 per cent of its 310 starters were between 18 and 34, with an average age of 27.<sup>58</sup> The average age at the first Hawaiian Iron Man Triathlon was 28 years. In the 1970s, the Honolulu Marathon's pasta parties brought together 'millionaire bankers and Waikiki dishwashers'.<sup>59</sup> The 1978 Hawaiian Iron Man Triathlon slightly differed in that there were no bankers at all. Among its 15 starters were three students, three Marines, two doctors, one barman, one taxi driver, and other people of very modest professions; probably the wealthiest among them was John Collins. Three main contenders for the 1979 Iron Man podium were similar in a passion for sports, but two of them do not have a permanent job. Only one, a 35-year-old bar owner, was 'able to combine a lust for training with the successful operation of his [business]', whereas another a 28-year handyman with a BS in physics and \$4,000~\$5,000 annual income, 'would be content never to work another day', while the third, a 25-year-old former student, was 'somewhere in the middle'.<sup>60</sup>

Social composition of the early 'iron' events in Kona was also diverse. In 1981, some athletes were on bicycles rented or bought at a sale. Others were part-time lifesavers, young men with 'very few dollars in their pockets', who shared an inexpensive apartment and mostly ate various fruits from the nearest forests, but once a week they could 'treat [them]selves to the local all-you-can-eat joint for four bucks'.<sup>61</sup> In 1982, Silk said that 'the majority [of triathletes in Kona] ... are highly skilled, professional people', and the reporter lists some of them: bellboy, carpenter, shipwright, sports instructor, philosopher, special agent, Vietnam War veteran, practicing environmentalist.<sup>62</sup> The last and oldest finisher, an icon of the California running community, 74-year-old Walter Stack, was a brick carrier. In 1982, the future winner of 100+ pro triathlons, 22-year-old Scott Molina, worked as a liquor store clerk and a part-time cook, earned about \$6,000~\$7,000, and lived in a trailer.<sup>63</sup>

### ***Non-Profit Origins of First Triathlons***

In the USA of the 1970s, running races and triathlons were perceived as inexpensive by their participants. The entry fee for the first Hawaiian Iron Man was \$5, leaving a small deficit of \$25 in the event's budget. The second edition, with a fee of \$8, became a break-even event. For comparison, the 1978 Maui Marathon's fee was \$7 pre-registered and \$9 later.<sup>64</sup> The first two Iron Man triathlons were organized by the Collins family with the support of the WSC, where Judy was president in 1979. The Hawaiian Iron Man originated from non-profit amateur sports; it 'was designed as a low fee or no fee, low profile event to be added to the annual calendar of the WSC', Collins explained.<sup>65</sup>

Non-profit amateur clubs were the social basis of endurance sports, and included running and triathlon. The cornerstone of their functioning was the volunteer activity of their members, amateur recreational athletes, who created weekend sporting events for themselves. For example, the SDTC was founded in 1953 by seniors of the San Diego University athletics team who were looking for 'more inclusive, post-graduation

competitions that didn't require long drives to Los Angeles.' The DSE was created in 1966 by 58-year-old aspiring jogger Walter Stack to promote running 'by emphasizing fun and welcoming ... everyone regardless of ability'. The WSC was founded in 1970 by a group of adult swimmers, participants of the first Waikiki Rough Water event.<sup>66</sup> In the USA, the growing 'ecosystem' of recreational endurance sports was a new phenomenon and had not yet formed a generally recognized governing body. At the same time, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) remained the single arbiter of the regulation of amateur sports in general. Some non-elite athletes and clubs were affiliated with the AAU, as sometimes local authorities required insurance for recreational events.<sup>67</sup>

Although early triathletes look like young, carefree adults, the volunteer organizers of early triathlons and endurance sport events were more mature and well-established people. In 1968, the pioneer of 'masters' athletics was 44-year-old David Pain, a prominent civil attorney. The 1974 Mission Bay Triathlon was organized by 36-year-old Jack Johnstone, a math teacher, and 31-year-old Don Shanahan, a lawyer. In 1978, the founders of the first Iron Man were 39-year-old Judy Collins, a renewable energy expert at the University of Hawaii and 41-year-old John Collins, a US Navy marine engineer.

### **A 'Box of letters' Changes Its Owner**

In the 1980s, the 'ecosystem' of recreational endurance sports underwent a serious transformation, adding new elements – the organizers of commercial events and professional athletes. In the USA, it happened shortly after the cancellation of the AAU's governing role. Before that, the factual professionalization (shamateurization) of the IOC Olympic sports (still called 'amateur sports' in the 1970s) and the desire of business to directly use elite athletes as a means of advertising provoked a crisis of amateurism as an ideology and a governance system.<sup>68</sup> This crisis led to the US Amateur Sports Act of 1978, which abolished the AAU's status as a national arbiter for amateur sports. The Act was passed due to the pressure of elite athletes demanding to cancel the AAU's amateur code, which was de facto violated by many of them.<sup>69</sup> The rhetoric of deregulation directed against the AAU coincided with the beginning of a neoliberal trend in economic policy.<sup>70</sup> The majority in Congress wanted to make US Olympic sports more competitive and better funded, however, without establishing any new regulation.<sup>71</sup> Further development of triathlon was the consequence of this deregulation.

The famous *Sports Illustrated* article brought the Collins family a 'box' of letters with questions about entries for the next 1980 Iron Man. John also gave permission to ABC Sports to broadcast the event, since 'the filming bore him no expenses'.<sup>72</sup> However, further triathlon history was made without the Collins family. Before January 1980, John was assigned to a new duty station, and the Collins' were looking for a volunteer director to take care of the race. Many who planned to participate as athletes said no to also serving as the race director. With the guarantee of volunteer support from the WSC, the 'box of letters' ended up with Hank Grundman, director of the Nautilus Fitness Centre, a franchisee of the weight machine fabricator; and later, with his wife and co-owner, Valerie Silk. 'No money changed hands, and no papers were signed', explained the Collinses. 'We did not know Hank's surname, and

did not meet or know the name of Valerie until 1983.<sup>73</sup> In February 1980, the Hawaiian 'iron' triathlon attracted 108 athletes in Honolulu. Thanks to the Collinses and ABC's *World-Wide Sports*, viewers across North America could see this event. The new directors renamed it the 'Nautilus Triathlon', removing the 'Iron Man' in its title. This 'iron' triathlon turned out to be the last one held on the Oahu island with a \$10 entry fee.

### Commercialization of Hawaiian Triathlon

In February 1981, the Nautilus International Triathlon, with 386 athletes, took place in Kona, the Big Island of Hawaii. The move to another venue looks like an effect of a tourist promotion campaign that began with the Kona-Kahaua Chamber of Commerce in the 1980s. It was the Chamber, who 'gave its support and expertise to the new Nautilus International Triathlon (later known as Ironman)'.<sup>74</sup> The entry fee was \$25 when buying a tourist package and \$70 without it.<sup>75</sup> Before that, on 1 July Silk and Grundman registered a local profit firm, the Hawaii Triathlon Corporation (HTC), to manage this event. Soon after, Silk divorced her husband, and the HTC became her main business. The race of 1981 could no longer be called 'a low profile' event: more than 900 volunteers were involved to replace the friends and family personal support of athletes; all organizational and inclusivity features of the Honolulu Marathon were adapted.

The 'self-coronation' as the 'World Championships' reflected the influence of a new sponsor, American Budweiser. During the 1980s, Anheuser-Busch was a leading sponsor of North American sports.<sup>76</sup> The 'Bring out your best' campaign used the link with top-level sports for Budweiser Light (later shortened to Bud Light).<sup>77</sup> In the spring of 1981, Freewheelin' Films, who had made commercials for Budweiser, signed a \$5,000 contract with Silk for the title sponsorship.<sup>78</sup> On 6 August 1981, the HTC applied for registration of the brands 'Ironman Triathlon' and 'Iron Man World Triathlon Championships'; and began to secure federal registrations for these brands by November 1983.<sup>79</sup>

In 1982, the entry fee became \$100. In this year, there were two editions of the Hawaiian 'iron' triathlon, on 6 February and 9 October, under the titles 'Budweiser Light World Ironman Triathlon' and 'Bud Light World Ironman Triathlon Championships', respectively. The cooperation with Budweiser helped to further attract sponsors. As one expert commented, 'Other heavyweight companies have followed Busch's lead'.<sup>80</sup> Prior to getting the sponsorship of 'the King of Beers', Silk sold the television rights to ABC for \$10,000. In February 1982, Julia Moss crawled on all fours at the finish line, an event broadcast with great success. The next contract with ABC grows to \$100,000.<sup>81</sup> From 1985, the HTC began licensing other triathlons as the 'official qualifiers' for the Kona 'World Championships'.

### First Commercial Series

In February 1981, Carl Thomas, Vice President of Speedo International, was in Kona and thought up a new triathlon series with the aim of promoting swimming equipment. His idea was a 'short' triathlon, more accessible to beginners, with funding

based on its entry fees. 'Speedo would own [the series and] not be putting any money in directly, but [the producers] did get to use the entry fees to run it, pay ourselves, etc.'<sup>82</sup> With the aim of creating media content as well, a prize fund was founded to encourage potential 'stars' to participate regularly. In July 1982, the first triathlon of the US Triathlon Series (USTS) started with 600 athletes in Torrey Pines, San Diego. The second one, with 1000 athletes, in San Francisco, in July of the same year, turned out to be the biggest mass start for both triathlon and swimming at that time. In its debut year, the USTS had five 'short' triathlons (of 2km swimming, 35km cycling, and 15km running) on the West Coast,<sup>83</sup> with a \$30 entry fee for each.

Since 1983, Bud Light has been a long-time title sponsor of the USTS, which became a separate firm, the CAT Sports Inc., co-owned by Thomas and his partner. The 1983 series grew to 11 events, with about 1000 athletes each, and culminated with the inaugural 'Bud Light USTS National Championships'. In the 1980s, the USTS became the largest triathlon series as well as a key player in the development of the growing sport. Over 11 years, the USTS held about 120 triathlons in the US, with about 100,000 athletes and \$1 million prize money for professionals. It also created about 25 media broadcasts for ESPN, NBC, and others. The USTS introduced a revisited 'short' distance, which later became the 'Olympic' distance. It also added such features as bicycle racks and transit fences.<sup>84</sup> It seems that these improved the media image, but the organization of events became more complicated in comparison with the early forms, where athletes came with their own assistants.

In the 1980s, Bud Light was a key sponsor not only for USTS and Hawaiian Ironman, but also for many other triathlons in North America. The growing triathlon audience proved a suitable target audience for advertising in the light beer niche, where Anheuser-Busch was competing with Miller Brewing.<sup>85</sup>

### Nice and Other World Championships

On 2 November 1982, the Nice International Triathlon, another important World Championships of the 1980s, was held on the French Riviera for the first time. This triathlon with its long 'Nice' distance (3 + 120 + 32 km) was created by the International Management Group (IMG); with the broadcasting rights for CBS, an opponent of ABC.<sup>86</sup> Prior to the ITU's formation in 1989, the Nice World Triathlon Championships successfully competed in media importance with the Hawaiian one. In 1986, the former was watched by 19 per cent of the CBS audience, or 7.6 million households, while the latter was viewed by 16 per cent of the ABC audience, or 5.9 million households.<sup>87</sup> From 1983 to 1988, the *Los Angeles Times*, *UPI Sports*, and *Sports Illustrated* called the event on the French Riviera the 'World Championships', while in Kona it was just the 'Ironman Hawaii'.<sup>88</sup> In January–March 1987, IMG managers were negotiating the purchase of the Ironman Hawaii. Valerie Silk was ready to sell through mediators rather than directly; but Al King thought that \$5 million was a 'ridiculous asking price', and Mark McCormack chose 'not to waste time'.<sup>89</sup>

Triathlon 'stars' and the prize money have become a means of competing between championships. Media attention had already shaped the first pro-triathletes, mostly ex-university swimmers. In 1983, Dave Scott, winner of the 1980 Oahu and 1982 Kona 'iron' triathlons, was sponsored by Anheuser-Busch, Nike, Bell, and Peak

Performance. He also organised paid coaching clinics and personal consultations for amateurs.<sup>90</sup> In 1982–1984, Team JDavid/Hoover Racing was the ‘beloved pet’ of Nancy Hoover, San Diego’s largest philanthropist. Team JDavid sponsored half of the best triathletes, including Scott Molina, Mark Allen, Scott Tinley, etc. In Nice, 25 members of Team JDavid lived in the luxurious Hotel Negresco; while Dave Scott was in a ‘clean but spartan’ Mercure.<sup>91</sup>

The first regular prize money was offered by the USTS, it was modest \$2,500 in 1982, and \$4,500 the next year. In 1983, the prize pool of the Nice World Triathlon Championships was set at \$75,000.<sup>92</sup> Team JDavid increased it by \$25,000, for reducing the run from 42 km to 32 km, which its athletes insisted on; this is how the ‘Nice’ distance appeared. In 1985, the date of the Nice triathlon with its \$75,000 was put close to the date of the Hawaiian triathlon, where there were no prizes yet. Professionals had to choose, and most preferred Nice. Next year, in 1986, Hawaii for the first time offered prize money of \$100,000.<sup>93</sup> Before that, it turned out that a ‘Ponzi scheme’ was the source of Hoover’s charity.<sup>94</sup>

The championships of USTS, Nice, and Hawaii were the ‘triple crown’ of world triathlon, as *Triathlete* magazine called it. On top of that, there were three other one-off and ‘self-crowned’ World Championships in the 1980s – the 1986 Perth Triathlon World Championships, in Australia; the 1987 Bahamas International Triathlon Championships, in the Bahamas; and the 1988 Kelowna Triathlon World Championships, in Canada.<sup>95</sup> All of them used the ‘short’ distance (1.5 + 40 + 10 km). Probably, this resulted from professionals lobbying since ‘long’ distances require time to recover. Despite the different ‘crowns’, the same pool of elite athletes gathered at all these events with a solid prize pool. Remarkably, these championships are not mentioned now in the narratives of the ITU, the WTC, and most other historians.

### Commodification of Triathlon in the USA

The emergence of commercial organizers in the ‘ecosystem’ of amateur sports has changed it. For running, the growing popularity led to ‘more organizations finding that road races are good fund-raisers’. As a result, in 1985, numerous races in the US already charged entry fees of \$6 to \$10, and then ‘provided all entrants with a handsomely designed T-shirt’; but still, there were ‘plenty of excellent races that have entry fees of \$0.5 to \$2 but do not give you a T-shirt or similar memento’.<sup>96</sup> For reference, annual inflation during 1981–87 was less than 5%; and \$10 was equivalent to a mini keg of beer.<sup>97</sup>

In the 1980s, triathlon in the USA showed rapid growth. In 1982, the number of participants was 100,000; in 1983, 250,000; in 1984, 545,000; in 1985, 800,000; and in 1986 one million.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, there was an overall increase in entry fees in all of triathlon. In 1982, a novice triathlete paid a fee of \$10.<sup>99</sup> Five years later the typical rate reached \$50. This price increase became a topic of discussion in American triathlon magazines. In 1981–82, the pioneer of commodification was the Kona event. ‘When [Valerie Silk] hiked the fee from \$25 to \$85 ... then jacked it up to \$100, she received many calls from outraged applicants’. She claimed that ‘Once they came to the race, ... I never heard another peep’.<sup>100</sup> Another important role was played by the largest organizer, USTS. In 1982, their entry fee was \$30, which was then increased

to \$40 in 1985 and to \$50 in 1987. In the press and triathlon magazines of 1983–84, there were still reports on noteworthy races for which the payment was twice or three times less. (Valley Isle Triathlon: \$15; Texas Triathlon: \$14; Florida University Triathlon: \$7; Oxford Triathlon: \$5, etc.) In the '1984 Race Calendar' of the *Tri-Athlete* magazine, events in California (where triathlon became popular the earliest) charged an average fee of \$13.20. However, in other States, it was \$30.80, and there were three times as many such events.<sup>101</sup>

From 1985–87, stakeholders discussed the overall increase in entry fees for triathlon. As one athlete wrote, 'It seems that the USTS sets the stage for the going rate', and the other organizers followed. He criticized the emerging inaccessibility of triathlon for many fans, including himself: 'I'm not the average triathlete who makes 30 grand or more annually; I'm a starving student.'<sup>102</sup> The change in prices affected the substitution of the original, more democratic generation of participants by a wealthier one. In 1981, a typical triathlete probably had an annual income of \$6,000–\$7,000. In 1985, the average income was \$38,600.<sup>103</sup> In 1986, the average income was already \$51,700.<sup>104</sup> If in 1985, athletes mostly voiced dissatisfaction with high prices, in 1987 few of them said: 'Entry Fee? Who cares!'<sup>105</sup> It seems that the sport, which had become expensive, gradually become an extension of classhood.<sup>106</sup>

'Where is all that money going?' another student asked in 1985. One expert noted that USTS did hold high-level races, but other events raise the price without offering the same level.<sup>107</sup> A number of organizers explained the event's economy, but without details about expenses and incomes. The key factor was the cost of a venue; it added the costs of organizing a transit zone and three races at once (which allegedly led to expenses four times more than for a single sport), as well as insurance and souvenirs.<sup>108</sup> The cost of resources and the very fact of paying for them depended on the perceptions of suppliers regarding the organization of events as a kind of economic activity. One race director, Dave McGillivray admitted: 'People see me as a profit-making organization and so they charge me, I get charged for everything'. Before he used to receive some resources for free.<sup>109</sup> Another race director noted that he still received modest bills because his race was 'for charity', and thus could offer relatively low prices.<sup>110</sup> The sharp rise in the insurance cost had also affected the costs and even forced the cancellation of small races.<sup>111</sup>

This discussion highlighted the opposing views on the sports event economy: 'commoditized' versus 'non-profit'. The first was formulated by Carl Thomas of USTS. 'If a triathlon or [any other sport] didn't make money, how could it exist? If it didn't make money, there wouldn't be a sport. Hey, we live in America, don't we?'<sup>112</sup> Another view was voiced by a volunteer director from York, Joe Brillhart. Firstly, he said that many events were overpriced. 'It is poor financial race management. Entry-fee inflation is the easy way out, and we owe it to the sport to not allow [this]'. He argued that 'fourfold' expenses can arise only as a result of poor logistics, and insurance is an imposed service. Secondly, he suggested how to save money: 'One way is to not pay the race director. Aren't triathlons community events? Who says directors must be compensated?' Thirdly, he identified the changing 'ethics' as a key cause of the entry fee's increase: 'New-wave race management seems more committed to pleasing the sponsor or other interested parties than the participant. Whose race is this anyway?'<sup>113</sup> The first view obviously triumphed during the 1980s in the US. However,



this led to an increase in the costs of venues and other resources for all organizers. In 1990, the ITU World Championships in Orlando, which was organized by CAT Sports and McGillivray's firm, received bills from the venue's owner 'even for the sand that was "lost" from the beach'.<sup>114</sup> Ironically, after the end of the Bud Light sponsorship, CAT Sports failed economically and ceased to exist in 1993.

### Struggle for Governance of Triathlon

In the USA, the national governing body for triathlon began to form in California in April 1982, and it had established itself as the Triathlon Federation/USA (TriFed/USA) by August 1983. Gradually, TriFed/USA came to an internal conflict. In 1987–89, two executive directors left it, one because he 'failed to fully satisfy the needs of the sport's two largest race organizations, the Bud Light Ironman and the Bud Light US Triathlon Series'.<sup>115</sup> It is obvious that various business interests have been within American triathlon since the very beginning, which directly affected international relations. Thomas' business partner testifies that 'CAT Sports was very active in Tri-Fed/USA and ITU politics domestically from the founding of both organizations'.<sup>116</sup> The formation of a world-governing body for triathlon was a 'USA-versus-Europe battle, with [Carl] Thomas and his FIT on one side and the Europeans, consolidated under the ETU banner [on the other]'; wrote *Triathlete* magazine.<sup>117</sup>

In May 1984, in Cologne, the European Triathlon Union (ETU) was started as the governing body for triathlon in Europe. In August Con O'Callaghan from Ireland was elected President; the Secretary General was Joop Van Zanten from the Netherlands, along with other board members. The ETU's architecture reflected the European model of sport, with non-profit national unions creating a single international federation. In the 1980s, the ETU was managed by volunteer board members and did not offer prize money at its events. The 1985–87 ETU calendars consisted of three annual European Championships: 'short' (1.5 + 40 + 10 km), 'medium' (2.5 + 90 + 20 km), and 'long' (3.8 + 180 + 42.2 km).<sup>118</sup>

In October 1984, in Kona, the Federation International Triathlon (FIT) was declared as the world governing body for triathlon. Carl Thomas became President and Valerie Silk joined the board. However, ETU members did not support the FIT, seeing it as an extension of Thomas' business interests. During 1983–87, the global support of the FIT was limited to the USA, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand. It coincided with the geography of the CAT Sports and HTC businesses. In 1985–87 the first 'Ironman' licensees' events appeared in Canada, Japan, and New Zealand. In 1986, the USTS system began licensing in Japan, which became the Japan Triathlon Series.

From 1983, the idea of Olympic recognition for triathlon was promoted by Václav Vitovec, a board member of the ETU and the only representative of the socialist Bloc countries among the 12 founding nations.<sup>119</sup> His leadership in the creation of a single body can be explained by two reasons: the early start of the new sport in Czechoslovakia as well as problems with its funding. The extended support of the authorities could arise only with Olympic recognition.<sup>120</sup> The lobbying efforts were crowned with success. In 1985, IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch wrote to the first ETU Congress about his wish to see triathlon at the Olympics soon.<sup>121</sup> Both factions, ETU and FIT, were interested in joining the Olympic family and tried to negotiate.



### ***Establishing of 'Failed States'***

In November 1987, the Federation Triathlon International (FTI) was founded as a single body, when ETU members joined a renewed FIT. Valerie Silk agreed not to use the 'World Championship' title for the Hawaiian Ironman without FTI approval, and she was elected to the FTI board. There were also elected President Joop Van Zanten, Secretary General Con O'Callaghan, and Treasurer David Curnov, from the USA. The calendar for 1988–90 planned two annual FTI World Triathlon Championships: 'short' (1.5+40+10 km), and 'long' (3.8+180+42.2 km). However, the FIT faction was dissatisfied with the governance passed to the ETU leaders. In January 1988, the US members ignored the FTI board in Canada, sending an ultimatum to appoint Thomas as Vice President and remove the planned 1989–90 Championships from other countries to the USA. In February, Silk also withdrew recognition of the FTI, despite the November statements. Samaranch was informed about the FTI failure.<sup>122</sup>

In April 1988, the IOC President personally proposed to the Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne et Biathlon (UIPMB) that it take triathlon under its wing as the fastest way to the Olympics. In August, all 23 triathlon nations agreed with this idea. In November, the UIPMB adopted triathlon as a third sport. With its new name, the Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne, Biathlon et Triathlon (UIPMBT) aiming for two UIPMBT World Triathlon Championships in 1988: 'short' (1.5+40+10 km), and 'long' (3.8+180+42.2 km).<sup>123</sup>

On 1 April 1989, however, the independent ITU was founded in Avignon. It became a 'palace coup', which was prepared by Canadian Les McDonald, who used the UIPMBT's support and money. The outcomes of this 'coup d'état' are important. Firstly, McDonald became the ITU president. Secondly, Thomas became the ITU treasurer. Thirdly, the first 1989 ITU World Triathlon Championships were held only on the 'short' (1.5+40+10 km) distance. Fourthly, for the next five years the 'long' championships did not exist in the ITU calendar. Fifthly, since 1989, the Nice IMG triathlon has not used the 'World Championships' title because the first official one was held in France. Sixthly, in 1989, the Hawaiian triathlon kept its title. Finally, in December 1989 Silk sold her business for \$3 million, and the HTC turned into the WTC.

In the next five years, the ITU leaders sought IOC recognition, but it was not easy. McDonald even had to sneak into the IOC meetings through a bathroom window with someone else's accreditation.<sup>124</sup> As a result, although UIPMBT planned it for Barcelona in 1992, triathlon did not appear at the Olympics until Sydney in 2000. After the recognition, McDonald tried to assert ITU governance over all forms, including 'long' triathlons. However, an endurance struggle with the WTC led only to open conflicts in 1996–97 and 2005–06, which came to nothing for the ITU.<sup>125</sup>

Initially, the WTC's international event system remained small. In 1989, the 'Ironman' brand had been licensed to only five events outside the USA: Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, and Japan. By 1999, just three more were added: Brazil, Spain, and Switzerland.<sup>126</sup> Since then, the WTC's system has expanded, driven by for-profit interests. Now there are more than 200 events in various endurance sports, including about 80 triathlons under the 'Ironman' and 'Ironman 70.3' brands,

in about 30 countries on all continents. In fact, now it is an economic competitor not only for the ITU but rather for the IOC. All these events are inclusive, but with an entry fee that looks like ‘a demonstration of belonging to the white Western world’ for some of its fans.

### It is Not a Beer but Neoliberal ideas?

Triathlon emerged as a sport for everyone, and in its first years, it was a classless leisure practice. Since 1979, the sport has evolved along two trajectories. In Europe, it was built as an amateur sport by a non-profit governing body that pursued the unity of triathlon and sought to avoid the influence of business interests. In the USA, sponsors, broadcasters, commercial event organizers, and professional athletes had a significant impact on the new sport, which quickly turned from a classless one into a sport for the rich. Ironically, Valerie Silk, who patented the ‘Ironman’ brand, had never participated in a triathlon and was not an athlete.<sup>127</sup> On the contrary, the first ETU board was made up of amateur triathletes - with one exception, Dick Poole, the first cyclist from Land’s End to John o’ Groats in under 48 hours.

The ‘iron’ distance in triathlon remains a significant symbol for the endurance sports community. The success of new franchises of ‘long’ triathlons, like the Challenge Family, demonstrates this. As a result of the ‘coup d’état’ of 1989, the ITU lost this control over the growing sport. The WTC franchise expanded ‘iron’ triathlons internationally, replacing a classless social composition with a wealthier one. These ‘new rich’ athletes began using participation as a class signal. However, after completing the Ironman events, they soon go out of triathlon.<sup>128</sup> Obviously, the issue is not the commercialization as such, but the transformation of sports participation into a commodity. In the USA, this happened under the influence of neoliberal ideas in economic policy. Amateurism as a principle and governance system has been eliminated. Thus, if ‘Sport for All’ is still listed in the European Sports Charter, it is necessary to understand how to implement this principle in practice. It is a topic for further research.

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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