



The Oregonian

Collins puts his all into the triathlon

The Seattle native swims, bikes and runs almost 32 miles to become the best in the nation

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BRAD SCHMIDT
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FOREST GROVE -- Ben Collins wades in the green-brown water of the Henry Hagg Lake shoreline, his white swim cap soon to be lost in the distance among other competitors at the 2007 USA Triathlon Age Group National Championship.

It's 8 a.m. Saturday, and in roughly two hours Collins expects to be physically spent, mentally unstable and altogether unsure. He and 1,270 others will swim 1.5 kilometers, cycle 40k and run 10k -- a total of nearly 32 miles -- in a competition among the country's best amateur triathletes.

Collins, 24, from Seattle, took second place at the same race in Kansas City last year. With the 2006 winner now a professional, Saturday's challenge -- held for the first time in Oregon -- is Collins' to lose.

It's the biggest race of his life. But because of staggered starting times, Collins, a 2012 Olympic hopeful, essentially will compete against himself.

"Beep!" blares the horn -- and they're off.

A relative newcomer to the sport -- the triathlon began in 1974 and became an Olympic event in 2000 -- Collins has competed in roughly two-dozen races, about a quarter of which he's won. He spends 15 to 25 hours a week training, and recruited longtime adversary Brian Davis, who qualified for the Olympic Trials while swimming at Northwestern, to help him keep his focus.

Swimming was Collins' passion in high school and college. But he also dabbled in track and cross country in high school. After college, he returned home in 2005 and began competing in triathlons. His interest grew greater when he moved to Honolulu, where he utilized his mechanical engineering degree and designed autonomous underwater vehicles. He met up with a triathlon group and found a coach in Michael McMahon.

"To see him doing so well, dominating in the swimming, of course, but also holding his own in the bike and run was really impressive," says Davis, who recently competed in his first triathlon in Issaquah, Wash., with Collins. "I'm not surprised at all. He's the most tenacious guy ever."

The 5-foot-9, 160-pound Collins leaves the water Saturday 17 minutes, 46 seconds into the race, ahead by 45 seconds in his 20-to-24 age group.

"He is an absolute star of the future!" public address announcer Tim Yount tells the crowd. "This kid can race!"

He leaves the transition area on his cycle, unaware of what lies ahead.

Midway through the 40k, an older woman unsteady on her bike collides with him. She falls but he keeps his balance. He feels bad, wishing he could have gone back to see if she was OK.

Meanwhile, Collins decides to ease up the last five kilometers he cycles, saving himself for the final portion of the race.

"He is going to annihilate this field at this pace!" the public address announcer tells the crowd as Collins returns, dropping off his bike with a two-minute lead and entering the 10k run.

If not for that ridiculously sharp turn during the 2006 International Triathlon Union World Championships in

Lausanne, Switzerland, Collins probably would have turned professional last year.

Ahead of his age group by a couple of minutes, Collins took a turn on his cycle so sharp that the tube tire rolled off the wheel. He remembers going over the bike's handle bars and being taken by ambulance to a hospital.

His parents, waiting at a nearby checkpoint, realized something was wrong when he didn't pass by.

"There was disappointment with it," his father, Robert Collins, says of the accident. "It can't all be glory."

Collins dislocated his left clavicle, broke his right wrist and wore a cast for eight weeks. But he never stopped training.

From around the final turn, Collins appears Saturday and runs 50 meters, past American flags waving in the wind and under the inflatable finish line. The race is over and he raises his hands above his head in celebration.

"Oh my!" the public address announcer says. "Did Ben Collins have the race of his life!"

Collins pours water over his head and puts a bag of ice down his shorts and inside the back of his jersey to cool down.

"I think I did a lot of things right," says Collins, who thinks he's done enough to win but won't know for sure until later in the day. "I don't think I could have asked for much more."

He looks forward to the ITU World Championships in Hamburg, Germany, on Sept. 1, with plans to turn pro the following day. Winning Saturday's race would give him the momentum and confidence he's seeking.

"I'm nervous, man. I want to know what the results are," he says with a sigh. "It's tough."

Saturday evening, at an awards ceremony, his time is officially announced: 1 hour, 57 minutes, 8 seconds.

He's the fastest amateur in the United States.

Brad Schmidt, 503-221-8161; bradschmidt@news.oregonian.com

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