



# FINGERPRINT

VOLUME 22 FEBRUARY 2019

## Tara Norton '98: Ultra Woman by Bruce McKinnon '90



That feeling. When you fall. And you know you have to get back up again. Because you're the only one who can do it. Some loathe it, but others live for it.

Picture yourself on a bike. It's warm. You're in Hawaii, competing in the 2008 Ironman World Championship and having the "race of your life." You've completed this race before (finishing 12<sup>th</sup> overall last year) and today, you feel you're on track to crack the top 10. "Eighty miles into the bike, I was in 4<sup>th</sup> place overall, and out of nowhere a volunteer stepped onto the course." The unavoidable collision sees you plow into this person at good clip – about

30k – and you're down. But you somehow manage to get back onto your mangled carbon fiber bike and continue riding for about another mile, all the while weeping, because you know you're hurt and this race is over. The post-crash diagnosis reveals 11 broken bones.

For those unfamiliar, the Ironman races feature a swim-bike-run challenge. According to Wikipedia, "an Ironman Triathlon is a series of long-distance races consisting of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride and a marathon 26.22-mile run, raced in that order and without a break." I feel weak just reading that.

S-C grad Tara Norton was the one riding that bike. "It's kinda crazy that they let me get back on it. The handlebars were cracked and I was a total mess." At the time, she had competed professionally in more than 20 'Iron Distance' races over the previous seven years. Getting back up after this crash was difficult, but, as it turned out, doors opened that led to different directions.

Tara and her husband Bruce wanted to start a family and their daughter Maya was born in 2012. "I thought I might make it back after having Maya and I did try a triathlon race about a year after she was born, but it became clear that a return to the Iron sports was really not possible at that point."

"When I stopped racing as a pro, I started getting into trail running. For me it was something different and I didn't have to worry about being good at it. I could just go out and enjoy myself and not worry about trying to win anything or get a best time. So I signed up for a 50k and what I liked is that the trails tested me both physically and mentally, but there was no expectation. I didn't have to worry about speed, and it was fun! It's like, as I get older, I'm going slower, so I just want to go farther. The trails are so beautiful and the terrain is softer underfoot."

And softer terrain with a little less pressure seemed a good fit for a body in need of recovery from a variety of physical ailments. These included: multiple shoulder dislocations; a biceps tendon tear; a

hamstring injury sustained while training in New Zealand, where “the tendon was torn right off the bone” and where the tendon was later ‘regrown’ with stem cells harvested from Tara’s hip bone; as well as a variety of broken bones.

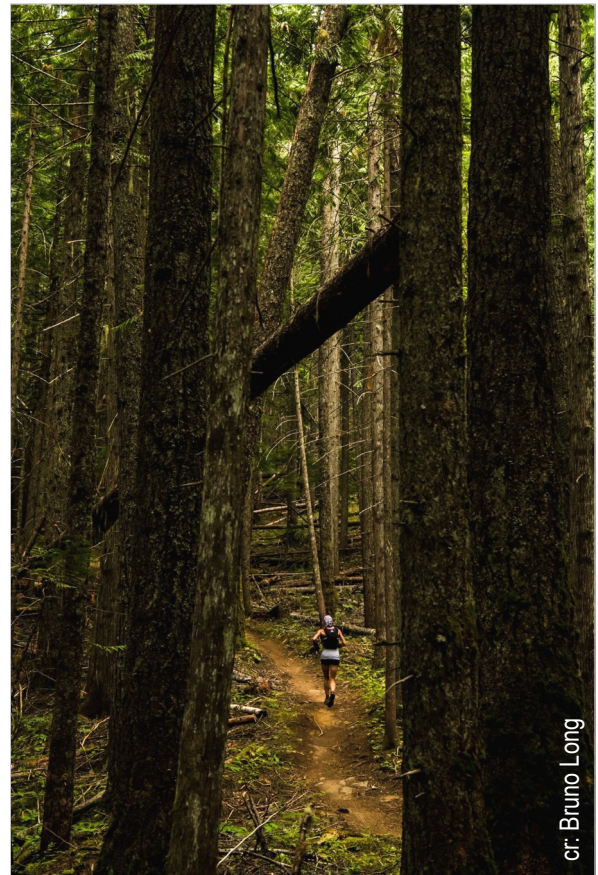
As her recovery progressed, she transitioned from competing to coaching for Team Atomica. And as her life as a coach, parent and trail runner moved forward, so too did her passion for challenge move to a whole new level: Tara was bitten by the ‘Ultraman’ bug.

By way of comparison to Ironman, and according to [ultramanlive.com](http://ultramanlive.com), “the Ultraman is an athletic odyssey of personal rediscovery... covering a total distance of 320 miles. It requires that each participant complete a 6.2 mile open ocean swim, a 261.4 mile cross-country bike ride, and a 52.4 mile ultra-marathon run.” The Ultraman races happen over 3 days and are held in 5 different locations around the world.

In the 2016 Ultraman World Championship on the Big Island of Hawaii, Tara was experiencing some leg pain. This pain had been a nuisance during training leading up to the race and she hoped a few weeks’ rest before the competition would allow things to settle down. She finished the 3-day race placing 12<sup>th</sup> overall and 2<sup>nd</sup> among the women competitors. Though her pain was excruciating and she was on crutches, no damage was noted on a post-race X-ray. But lurking, undetected, was a sub-trochanteric femoral stress fracture.

About 4 days later, because you are Tara, you’re on a hike in the mountains on the island of Kauai. It’s a little slippery and you fall. You don’t know it yet, but the “snap” as you tumble is your femur breaking just below the greater trochanter. All you know in the moment is that you are down and in pain. A lot of pain. In the middle of nowhere. With no cell service. It looks like it may be a hip joint dislocation, as your foot is pointing in an odd direction. Some well-meaning medically trained people who happen by offer to reset the hip, to no avail. (Imagine having a fresh femoral fracture tractioned and twisted, as though to reduce a hip dislocation!) Your husband has to leave you with your then 5-year-old daughter and go for help. After a number of hours you are rescued and evacuated to hospital. Over the following days, thanks to the skill of an excellent surgeon (who happens to be a runner, so understands how important this is to you), you have a 12” rod residing within your femur. The recovery is long and includes such interventions as hyperbaric oxygen therapy, but fast-forward to 2018, when you are competing again.

Not just any old race. This is the Doxa. It’s a form of relay triathlon, held in stages and typically completed by teams. Tara was approached by the organizers of the race to see if she might be interested in competing as a solo racer. According to [doxaraces.com](http://doxaraces.com), “you... will travel 285 miles from start to finish over a two-day period of non-stop triathlon. The overnight triathlon relay is an unforgettable and incredible experience.”



"I had actually never heard of Doxa when they contacted me to ask if I would consider being one of the first women to attempt completing this race as a solo athlete. When I did some investigation, I was immediately intrigued for many reasons. The fact that there are 36 different legs to Doxarace (as opposed to just three in a traditional triathlon or four in Ultraman) added a whole new level of challenge for me. And while there are 62 miles of running in total, I liked the idea that the longest individual run segment is just 10.5 miles. Oh, and the race goes on all through the night!"

In July 2018, Tara became the first (and fastest) solo woman athlete to complete the race. "I lay down to sleep twice (not for too long, because the rest counts against your time), but I completed it! It was amazing and I'm glad I did it, but I wouldn't go through the night again. I'd much rather sleep at night!"

A month later, in August 2018, trail running beckoned. The Trans Selkirks Race ([transelkirks.com](http://transelkirks.com)) is described as "a multi-day trail running adventure which allows athletes to access and traverse wild and remote landscapes, while building camaraderie, overcoming adversity and sharing a singular adventure." Held in the mountains near Revelstoke B.C., this event happens over 5 days and quite literally involves running up and down mountains. Participants are required to carry hydration, head covering, a rain jacket, and – you guessed it – bear spray. The distance total is about 100 miles, and the elevation gain is about 33,000 feet. So much for the 'athletic odyssey of personal rediscovery' afforded by Ultraman! Tara observes, "The 5 day trail run was, I think, harder than the Doxa, going up and down mountains for 5 days... But so beautiful... we went to places where you had to be heli-lifted out and nutrition was heli-dropped in. At the end of the first day I was so sore I couldn't even sit down! It was insane. I hurt. A lot. But my leg was better than it's ever been."

And then came November, and with it the 2018 Ultraman World Championship. Back to Hawaii, where Tara completed the race and placed at the top as the fastest woman competitor. Have I mentioned she is now 47 years old?

"Like all of us who do these things, I love to challenge myself physically and mentally, and I thrive on pushing my limits. I also want to continue to show my daughter, Maya, that anything you set your mind to do is, in fact, possible to accomplish. I had to dig very deep to finish the Ultraman Worlds in 2016, but I still loved every moment of the three days of that race."

While in Hawaii, Tara and her family returned to Kauai to finish the fateful hike begun in 2016. They also found time to reconnect with and thank the surgeon who repaired Tara's femur. "He knew I wanted to run again, he runs himself, so he used the technology appropriate for me and my goals, not the same rod he would have used on a 90-year-old. My break was sub-trochanteric and the chances of it not fusing well were very high. But honestly, when we reconnected, he said that at the time he wasn't sure I would ever run again, and certainly not like this!"



Back in Toronto, Tara continues her coaching and work as a massage therapist. "I'm as busy with my practice as I want to be, which is part-time. It works really well for me, unlike the old days when I was doing 30 treatments a week. Many of my clients have been with me for 20 years, but now I'm doing maybe 8 treatments a week. And I have my coaching. I feel so lucky, because I love what I do."