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The Secret To Ironman Success?

WOMEN'S RUNNER-UP WANTS TO MASTER COURSE, GROW CLOSER TO COMMUNITY

by Dawn Henry
Special To West Hawaii Today

Saturday, January 10, 2009 7:19 AM HST



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Lance Armstrong isn't the only world-class professional athlete gracing the Big Island's highways these days. Keeping a slightly lower profile, Holland's Yvonne Van Vlerken, the world-record holder in Ironman-distance racing and last year's Ford Ironman World Championship runner-up, has been burning up the highway between Kailua-Kona and Hawi this month.

Yvonne Van Vlerken, left, who competed in last year's Ford Ironman World Championship, and Thomas Vonach are in the middle of a six-week stay on the Big Island. During that time, they hope to build a network they can rely on for years to come. Van Vlerken, who finished second to two-time defending champion Chrissie Wellington, has teamed up with local swimming coach Steve Borowski. - Brad Ballesteros | Special To West Hawaii Today

And while she's unaccompanied by shiny support vehicles, she often can be seen swimming, biking and running in the company of her partner and manager, Thomas Vonach, an Austrian age group triathlete at the top of his sport. Vonach has raced the Ironman in Kona seven times.

Van Vlerken is quick to admit that Kona seems far, far away from her home in the Netherlands. But such is the Big Island's pull that she and Vonach came back here on Dec. 19, just months after Van Vlerken's first Ironman world championship race to put in six weeks of training in the lava fields and ocean currents that are such a significant part of the world championship mystique.

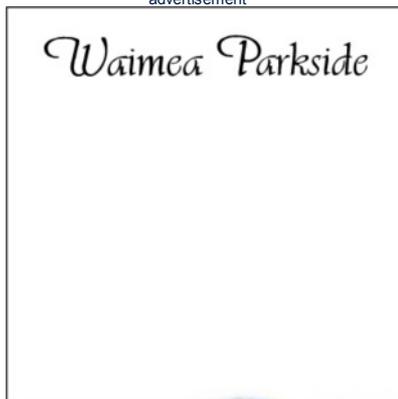
The Big Island is used to hosting its share of triathletes each October, and lately around Memorial Day, when hundreds of long-distance triathletes visit West Hawaii to compete in the popular Ironman 70.3 Hawaii -- the state's local Ironman world championship qualifier. Not so many professional triathletes come calling in January.

Van Vlerken said she's found a secret that might just make all the difference come October. She believes the weeks she spends in Kona now will give her an advantage over other female pros who are not as familiar with the course. She is here to ride "every hill," to swim "every current," to "feel every little thing" about the Ironman course, to commit it to memory. Then she plans to return to Kona in October that much more prepared to take on her competition.

Van Vlerken is relatively new to triathlon, entering just her third season in 2009 at 30 years old. But she's not new to crushing world-class competition. Prior to racing triathlon, Van Vlerken was a former world champion in long-distance duathlon, a gritty sport that includes only biking and running. Van Vlerken has made the switch to triathlon with apparent ease.

In 2008, her second year in the sport, Van Vlerken took on some of the world's top female triathletes at the Ironman-distance Quelle Challenge Roth Triathlon in

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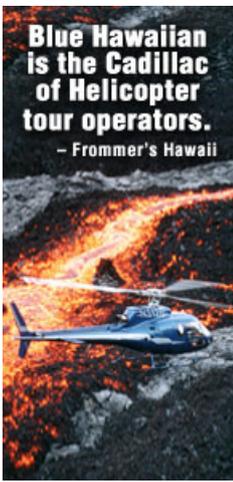
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Germany. In a day that saw blazing speeds from both the men and the women, Van Vlerken posted a win in world-record time, besting former Ironman world champion Paula Newby-Fraser's record on the same course by 5 minutes.

A few months later, in her first attempt at the Ford Ironman World Championship, she finished second in a talented women's field behind only Great Britain's phenom, Chrissie Wellington.

Van Vlerken says she trained repeatedly on the Roth Challenge course prior to her 2008 race. She's now got her sights set on the 2009 Ford Ironman World Championship scheduled for Oct. 10, and she's employing the same strategy in Kona.

She is showing her commitment to the Kona race in other ways, as well. She and Vonach recently hired six-time Ironman world champion Mark Allen to be their coach. Van Vlerken says she's looking forward to learning from Allen all he knows about racing in Kona.

There's more to Van Vlerken's visit to the Big Island now than just time on the road. After a hectic 2008, traveling and racing around the world, she's used these weeks in Kona to "find myself again." She practices meditation and yoga and says that, when she's not training, she's cherishing "the silent moments" she finds in Kona, "some time on the beach, looking at the ocean. This is the perfect place to find balance."

Van Vlerken and Vonach have been impressed by the number of people they've seen on the island participating in triathlon, and in particular, the number of people who flock to the ocean to swim and surf. Van Vlerken remarks, "everyone is in the water, children and parents. Hawaii is really the island of swimming."

Van Vlerken says that biking on the highways has been a little more stressful for her, where some cars are not used to driving near bicyclists. This is a change from her European community where bicycling is more popular and cyclists and cars are used to sharing the road.

But for someone who has added competitive swimming to her life only recently, Van Vlerken is continually impressed with how the Kona community takes to the water. She has teamed up with Steve Borowski, who coaches swimmers of all levels at Kona Community Aquatic Center. And this is another advantage Van Vlerken and Vonach see to spending time in Kona now -- it provides them with an opportunity to make contacts in the community, to build a support network that they'll be able to rely upon in the years to come. In tight economic times, they are happy to be able to contribute to the local economy and look forward to spending more time here in the future.

Van Vlerken and Vonach even took part in the Peaman Birthday Bonanza, a 3/4-mile swim and four-mile run conducted by local multisport enthusiast Sean "Peaman" Pagett conducted on Dec. 28. Vonach led Van Vlerken out of the water and was able to hold on to his lead to win the race in 37 minutes, 36 seconds. Van Vlerken finished second in 38:34. Picking up on the light-hearted competition that Peaman races foster, Vonach admitted, "I was running my soul out because I was so scared she was going to catch me."

"I could see that," Van Vlerken responded.

They look forward to racing in Pagett's next event, which takes place Jan. 25. Van Vlerken hopes her swim lessons with Borowski will give her a better chance to beat Vonach.

Watching dolphins spin in the water of Kailua Bay, Van Vlerken says, "I think we will spend more time here. They will see more us of in the Peamans."

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