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## The Tinman tradition

As Tupper Lake's Tinman Triathlon celebrates its silver anniversary, many things have changed, though community support remains a constant

By NOELLE SHORT • Enterprise Sports Writer

TUPPER LAKE —

In the early 1980s, triathlons were the new thing, and the community of Tupper Lake was ready to give it a try.

Marathons were a dime a dozen and were held in all the major cities, but a triathlon, with a swim, run and a bike, demanded endurance from athletes and also required unique features from the host location. So, when a group of Tupper Lakers started thinking of an event that would return to the town year after year, the answer they came up with was the Tupper Lake Tinman Triathlon.

Beginning in 1983 with 68 competitors taking part, the Tinman is a 1.2 mile swim, 56 mile bike and 13.1 mile run and is one of oldest triathlons in the United States. It's only three years younger than Ironman Hawaii, and its pioneering demeanor is evident in the fact that the word "triathlon" was added to the Ninth Edition of the Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary the first year the Tinman took place.

On Saturday, June 30, the Tinman will celebrate its 25th anniversary, and since July 23, 1983, the race has come a long way. Most notably since the inaugural event, participation has increased more than 16 times, with more than 1,100 athletes expected for the silver anniversary. The Tinman's potential was evident in the first couple of years, considering it tripled its size from the first year to the second year from 68 to 208 participants and expanded to more than 300 in the third year.

"The idea was to get an event that would grow and would become a solid, annual event that would be economically and athletically helpful for the area," said Keith Walsh of Saranac Lake, who was the Tinman race director for the first three years. "We also wanted to bring an event to Tupper Lake that would celebrate the beauty of the area and everything that goes with a race like this."

According to Walsh, as the first race director of the Tinman he was carrying out an idea that was presented to him in January 1983 by Steve Case of Tupper Lake, who at the time was the newly appointed director of the Tupper Lake Chamber of Commerce. Case knew that Walsh was a marathon runner and thought that together they could organize a marathon to be held in Tupper Lake. However, Walsh swayed Case in the direction of establishing an annual triathlon, since it was "an up-and-coming sport and we had a great location for it."

Unfortunately, several weeks after Case pitched his idea to bring a new event to Tupper



Jim Frenette, left, and Ted Merrihew hold the finish line tape as the winner of one of the first Tinmans in the mid-80s approaches the finish.

Lake, he died tragically in a car accident. Walsh said that it was an unfortunate time, but he decided to go ahead and put the race together for that summer.

### Some things change...

In a pre-Powerbar and Powerade era, the first Tinman Triathlon was homegrown and hardcore. The bikes were heavier, wetsuits were rare, bike racks were wooden, buoys were made of milk jugs and the finish line was held by two people on either side. However, the competitive spirit was there from the start, including Ironman qualification status in its second year, and the improvements came with experience.

Jim Adams, 60, of Altona, knows better than anyone some of the changes the Tinman Triathlon and the overall sport of triathlons have endured over the years. Adams has competed in all 24 Tinmans and is registered to participate again this year to make it all 25.

"When I started, people didn't wear wetsuits and most people did not have high-tech bikes — there weren't even energy bars back then," Adams said. "I think a lot of the early triathlon athletes were runners who, like me, dusted off an old bike that weighed 27 or 28 pounds. I started out as a runner, and I saw a triathlon and thought that it would be an exciting sport to try."

### Things that have stayed the same all 25 years:

- Tremendous volunteer support
- Pre-race carbohydrate-loading dinner
- Post-race barbecue chicken dinner put on by the American Legion
- Free t-shirts and meal tickets for volunteers
- Sponsorship from Tupper Lake Coca-Cola and the Tupper Lake McDonalds

### Things that have changed:

- Swim, bike and run courses
- Sprint added in 1998
- No longer an Ironman qualifier
- No longer a New England Regional Championship event
- 2007 marks the first year the sprint is changed to a New England Olympic Championship for New York State.

Adams said he doesn't remember much from the first Tinman — "it was a long time ago" — but he does remember that "it was just a handful of people and the course was a lot different than it is now."

According to Ted Merrihew of Tupper Lake, who is a past Tinman race director and along with Wayne Leonard were the lone local people to compete in the first event, the course of the Tinman for the first few years was completely different from the setup today. In the beginning, the swim leg was held at Little Wolf Beach, but was eventually moved to Raquette Pond where the Municipal Park could be used as a transition point.

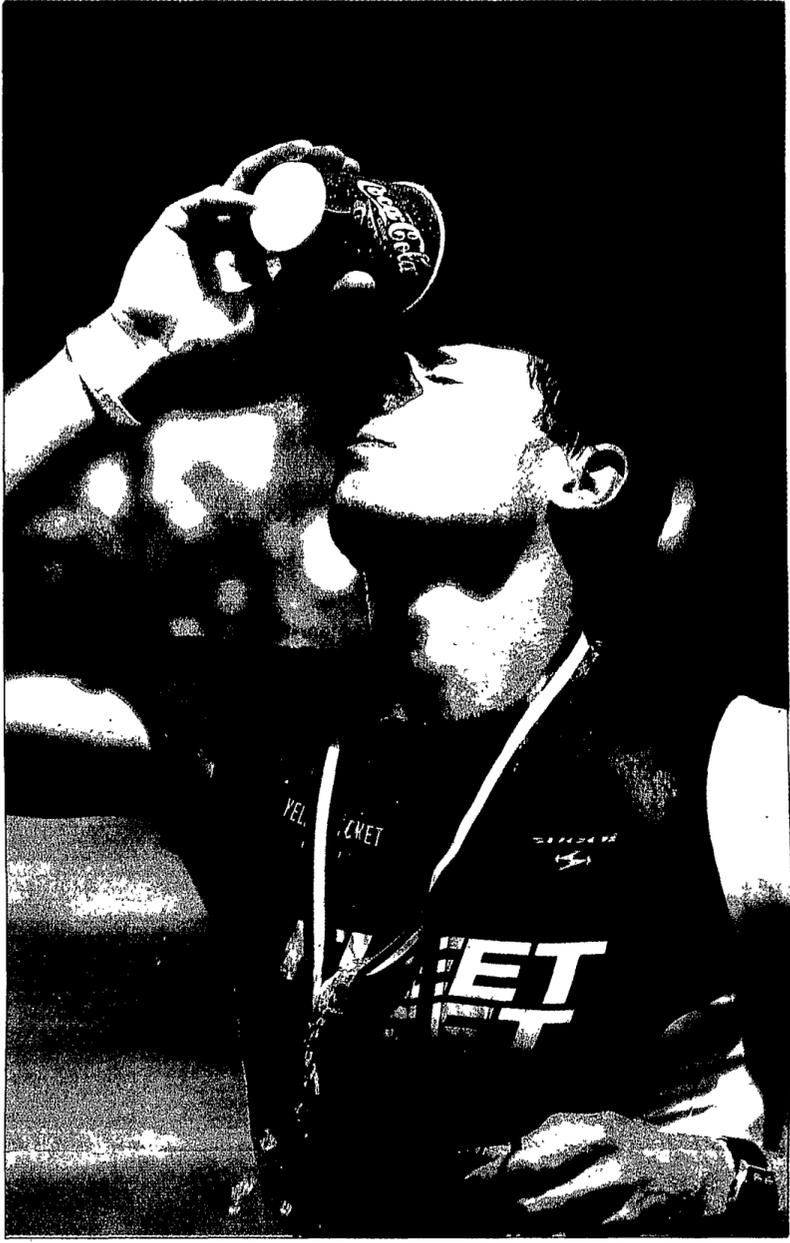
For the first three years the bike leg went south to Long Lake, until organizers realized that it was safer for bikers to head west toward Cranberry Lake where there was less traffic and congestion in the middle of the day. In addition, the run was also changed from a nature trail, which was formerly the Old Wawbeek Highway that led toward the fork of state routes 3 and 30, to a route that traverses throughout the town and village of Tupper Lake.

And, in addition to course changes, technological advances inevitably made their way onto the Tinman scene, with digital timing the first major change to take place.

"The biggest concern was the timing, because it was just before digital chips were coming on the scene and we could pretty much hand-time 68 people, but with 300 people in the third year, it was getting to be more a challenge," Walsh said. "By the fourth year they had a matt system and digital chips."

One of the biggest changes for the Tinman, however, started in 1985 when Dave Scott, a four-time Ironman Hawaii champion, including the first race in 1980, came to speak at the event.

"Dave was always in the news and to competitors he was



A 2005 Tinman Triathlon competitor refreshes himself at an aid station during the 13.1 mile run of the event.

(Enterprise photo — Lou Reuter)



For 25 years, more than 400 local volunteers of all ages have helped to make the Tinman Triathlon happen.

the guru of the sport," said Jim LaValley, who was race director at the time of Scott's visit. "By bringing Dave in, it exposed the country to how serious Tupper Lake was about running this triathlon."

### And some things stay the same...

One thing that has always remained the same with the Tinman is the volunteer support that turns out every year. According to Michelle Cote, who has served as the Tinman race director for the past three years, with more than 1,100 athletes expected to compete this year, including 900 in the Tinman, 200 in the New England Olympic Championship for New York State and 45 teams, volunteers are needed more than ever.

"From the littlest thing to the longest day our volunteers help out," Cote said. "We have close to 450 volunteers from ages eight to 75."

According to Cote, the tasks run from serving a pre-race pasta dinner; registering athletes; handing out t-shirts, timing chips and medals; opening 5 to 6,000 water and Powerade bottles for the aid stations; managing 21 aid stations on

race day; acting as parking attendants; operating safety boats during the swim; following the last biker and runner in from the course; and in the American Legion and Red Hat Lady's case, putting on a post-race chicken barbecue.

"So many people in Tupper Lake come out to help with the Tinman that it impresses upon the athletes that this is a friendly place," said Jim Frenette, Sr., who served as the captain of the transition area from the mid-80s to 2005. "It's the combination of two things, which is terrific: We can introduce people to the beauties of this area and can demonstrate what a great bunch of people we have living around here. We couldn't do it without the volunteers and the volunteers seem to love it."

Overall, those who have been

a part of the Tinman, as competitors, organizers or volunteers, all seem to think that 25 years came pretty quick and are excited for what is ahead.

"I think what is most impressive is what it grew to," Walsh said. "I think the magnitude of the race has grown so big from when it started. We had a lot of fun and it was just as exciting (when we started). The race was extremely exciting with the swimmers going out. It was really a rush to do it and to put it on. I don't think that part has changed, but it has definitely matured and grown professionally. I feel like Tupper Lake is very proud of this event, and I know personally, I look back and think, 'I can't believe we started that.'"

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Top: A Tinman competitor sprints out of Raquette Pond and enters the transition area at the Tupper Lake Municipal Park to begin the bike leg of the race. Bottom: the Tupper Lake Municipal Park is jam packed even in the early days of the Tinman competition.

(Photos courtesy of the Tupper Lake Chamber of Commerce, taken by various Tupper Lake photographers)