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Quintessential Races: IRONMAN Canada

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The spectacular Whistler course swim start in Alta Lake. (Getty Images)

Looking back on a legacy race in Canada's west.

by David Landers

It's easy to assume that a Maple leaf tattoo is a sign of Canadian pride. Then you see the red M-dot-ish leaf on toned calves in Dallas and Auckland and Johannesburg and Frankfurt.

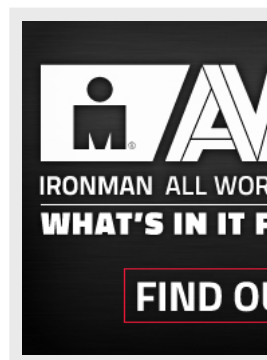
The third oldest race on the IRONMAN circuit today, [IRONMAN Canada](#) has evolved into a rite of passage, along with finishers getting inked, for IRONMAN athletes around the world. From its IRONMAN-sanctioned debut in 1986 in Penticton, British Columbia to its current incarnation among the peaks of Whistler, IRONMAN Canada consistently challenges and awes participants.

[As IRONMAN celebrates the 40th anniversary](#) of its beachfront beginnings, now's a good moment to reflect on the meaning of IRONMAN Canada.

One legacy, two locations

Since its start thirty-three years ago, IRONMAN Canada has set the standard for an all-around tough day in a stunning natural landscape, first the desert-like Okanagan Valley and, for the past five years, the Coast Mountains of British Columbia.

"I see the legacy of IRONMAN Canada," says Lisa Bentley, an 11-time IRONMAN Champion whose podium-topping performances in Penticton in 2003, 2004, and 2007 contribute to her status as an IRONMAN



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legend. "The best triathletes in the world raced and won IRONMAN Canada Penticton. The historians of our sport raced and won IRONMAN Canada Penticton. You cannot say that about other events."

"Yes, IRONMAN Canada has history," continues Bentley. "It was the launching pad for Graham and Sue Fraser when they owned it and then went on to create IRONMAN North America which spurred a multitude of new IRONMAN events in the USA. Without IRONMAN Canada, IRONMAN North America would not have happened and that means that IRONMAN Arizona, IRONMAN Lake Placid, etc., would have never been born."

IRONMAN Canada's legacy is not only evident upon IRONMAN and triathlon in general, but also in the individual lives of thousands of IRONMAN athletes.

Saying she celebrated the most career turning points at IRONMAN Canada than any other event, Bentley describes an experience common to many, especially Canadian triathletes, who race IRONMAN Canada. IRONMAN Canada was her first IRONMAN (This was the 1997 race when she learned that running the first half of the marathon too fast meant running the second half twenty minutes slower.) IRONMAN Canada was in her home country. It was the first race that required her mind to elevate her body, a practice Bentley further explored in her book [An Unlikely Champion](#). IRONMAN Canada was the first time Bentley's parents saw her race.

"The race was groundbreaking for me," says fellow Canadian, professional triathlete Rachel McBride, who placed third in Whistler in 2017 and calls the race a national icon. "Not only did I land on the podium, but I realized the significant gains I had made in my swim/bike combo and then setting a new bike course record. It's pretty cool to be a part of IRONMAN Canada history."

Today, IRONMAN Canada is the kind of race that is ranked as [the third toughest IRONMAN race in the world today](#) and [the fifth highest in overall satisfaction](#), according to the latest IRONMAN athlete awards. "IRONMAN Canada provides an honest and challenging course that gives athletes an extra sense of accomplishment," says professional triathlete Justin Daerr who raced IRONMAN Canada five times, three at Penticton and two at Whistler where he finished third in 2015.

That fundamental combination of challenge and reward appealed to professional triathlete Trevor Wurtele who claimed victory at IRONMAN Canada in 2013, the year the race was first held in Whistler, and finished among the top five in 2014 and 2016. "Without a doubt, my win in 2013 is one of my best results as a triathlete," says Wurtele, who trained a solid four weeks on the course before the race.

With Whistler joining [Mont-Tremblant](#), Quebec, as the only locations for IRONMAN races in Canada, and the only West Coast race besides [IRONMAN Santa Rosa](#), Wurtele highlights the contemporary significance of IRONMAN Canada. "Without a doubt, having an IRONMAN event in Western Canada helps drive the popularity of long distance triathlon." Bentley agrees: "IRONMAN Canada in Penticton and now in Whistler is good for IRONMAN in Canada and great for Canadian triathletes."



Penticton and Whistler

"I think of IRONMAN Canada Penticton as pure triathlon," says Bentley. "The race organizers did not have to sketch out a course as a series of out and backs and highway riding. The course fits the location and it is one of the rare courses which is 180 km without loops."

Highlights of the Penticton course included swimming in the southern end of Okanagan Lake, climbing notorious 11-kilometer Richter Pass followed by seven kilometers of downhill screamers, and the run finish on Lakeshore Drive through celebratory downtown Penticton. Bentley adds that when you raced IRONMAN Canada then, you got to know the region - its vineyards, mountains, desert and lakes - something not possible at other events at that time.

Jen Arnett, a Penticton-based professional triathlete who has raced IRONMAN Canada at its two locations, says of Penticton, "I love the course here. It is beautiful, and challenging." Those same reasons motivated Arnett to race in the new location when IRONMAN Canada moved to Whistler. She was not disappointed,

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taking second place last year and third in 2015. "Whistler is an amazing course, and I enjoyed everything about it: the course, venue, race organization, and volunteers."

Popularly known for skiing on the namesake and Blackcomb Mountains, the town of Whistler ascended to international fame during its successful hosting of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. The global audience took notice not only of Whistler's world-class snow sports and services but also its summer activities, confirming Whistler as a year-round destination.

The Olympic legacy is integrated into IRONMAN Canada race weekend with events, like crossing the finish line, staged on the Olympic Plaza. "Racing in a former Olympic venue has a special feel to it," says Daerr. "It makes you feel like you get to experience a part of sports history."

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IRONMAN Canada today

Until 1998, IRONMAN Canada was the sole official IRONMAN race in North America. Now, despite triathletes picking from 13 IRONMAN races in North America and 40 around the world, Canada's oldest long-distance swim-bike-run annually sells out. In 2017, approximately 2,900 athletes (racing both IRONMAN and [IRONMAN 70.3 Canada](#)) from 33 countries joined the IRONMAN Canada community, and the race sold out this year too.

With its mountain vistas, wildlife sightings (yes, bears are known to wander the course), and international ski village setting, IRONMAN Canada, says McBride, is one of the most beautiful and challenging courses on the circuit today.

"Everything about Whistler makes for a great venue," adds Wurtele. "First and foremost are the mountainous surroundings." Daerr echoes Wurtele about the significance of IRONMAN Canada's mountains, finding them motivating. "This is one of the few bike courses on the circuit that really challenges all aspects of your cycling ability, from climbing and descending to steady state riding on the flats."



This year, after exiting from the Alta Lake, athletes will embark on a new, three-loop course through Callaghan and Whistler Valleys. "This should also give WAY more spectator support around the Whistler village area," explains Wurtele. "In previous years, we've disappeared for 100+km of the bike. Now, looping back around that area twice per 60km loop should make it a bit more interesting for spectators and family."

The IRONMAN Canada champion also loves how the Valley Trail run course passes through the Olympic Village. "It makes for a great atmosphere and gives your support crew and family something to do while you're out at the far reaches of the course."

"It is surprisingly spectator friendly," says Arnett. "You've got no shortage of cheers and positive vibes."



Become part of the IRONMAN Canada heritage

Bentley views IRONMAN Canada as part of the heritage of IRONMAN and is pleased that the race continues in Whistler. For age-groupers wanting to be part of IRONMAN Canada's present-day story, pros offer the following tips.

'As with any IRONMAN event, if you're considering doing the race, it's worth knowing that it's going to be a major time commitment to get yourself physically ready for the event,' says Wurtele. 'If you have a family, make sure they're on board with your goals.'

"My biggest piece of advice would be to be patient," says Arnett about the three climbs up Callahan to be introduced in 2018. She predicts that the temptation will be strong to hit hard the first climb out of transition. "It's easy to get caught up with other riders and deviate from the plan you know you need to execute to have the best race possible."

McBride adds not to let the bike's big climbs and speedy descents prevent you from eating and hydrating. 'Make sure to keep taking in nutrition or pay for it on the gorgeous run!'

This year, [Subaru IRONMAN Canada](#) will be held on Sunday, July 29th with athletes competing for 40 qualifying slots for 2018 IRONMAN World Championship.

David Landers is a freelance writer with a passion for endurance sports and travel. He lives in Vancouver, B.C.

TAGS: [Canada 70.3](#), [Canada](#), [40 Years](#)

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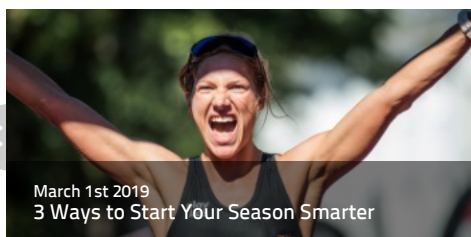
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