



"She looked like a normal person," he reflects, thinking she didn't resemble what he thought IRONMAN athletes looked like.

"I remembered a teacher at school in the early 1980s, who would put on funny shorts and a singlet and trot off down the road after school on a run," says Bullen. "I remember him as quite muscly and fit, and I really admired him."

The teacher in the neon shorts was Rick Faulding, the first New Zealander to qualify for the IRONMAN World Championship in Kona and one of the organizers of IRONMAN New Zealand.

"It was Rick who was the inspiration to tell everyone I would do an IRONMAN," explains Bullen.

On his first trip to the pool, Bullen wore running shorts and barely swam 25 meters. Driving to and from the gym, he would light up a couple of cigarettes. "And I thought I was an athlete," he says.

Eventually, small changes led to noticeable progress. He stopped smoking. He traded a mountain bike for a road bike and started doing mini-triathlons after joining one of Hamilton's triathlon clubs. He took lessons from his children's swim instructor.

"All of these were huge steps out of my comfort zone," Bullen says. "If you are an adult and you join a swim squad and you can't swim very well and you are with all these 12-year-old boys and girls who are flying up and down the pool, it is very daunting."

Five years after the overweight and unhealthy smoker announced to family and friends that he would be an IRONMAN, Bullen completed the 2006 IRONMAN New Zealand, collecting his first of ten medals from that event. In between, Bullen competed at the 2013 [IRONMAN 70.3 World Championship](#), represented New Zealand at two ITU Long Distance Triathlon World Championships, and crossed the finish lines at numerous IRONMAN 70.3s. In 2017, Bullen did IRONMAN Wisconsin, and this summer, he raced his 12th IRONMAN Legacy Athlete at [IRONMAN Asia-Pacific Championship Cairns](#).

"My co-worker warned me that you'd get hooked on IRONMAN. She was absolutely correct," says Bullen. "You can do one and be done, but once you do two or three IRONMAN, it becomes a lifestyle."

Driven

Bullen's approach to business mirrors his approach to triathlon. He's all in. "I'm quite driven. I am the sort of person who has to be doing something," he says.

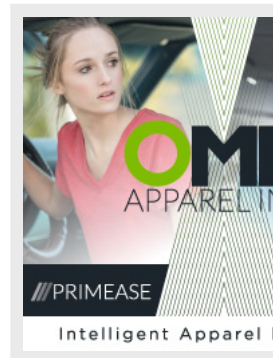
Trained as a pharmacist, Bullen purchased his first pharmacy in 1994. Almost 25 years later, he and his wife Sarah, also a pharmacist, own and operate six pharmacies in three small rural towns within 45 minutes of Hamilton. Bullen regularly works more than 50 hours a week traveling to sites, managing his businesses, and leading 48 employees. Bullen has also served on the boards of local hospitals and charitable trusts and, for several years, was involved with a national needle exchange program.

Bullen admits that growing his business, giving back to the community, and training for an IRONMAN can be demanding and at times overwhelming. At a particularly stressful phase, he talked with Sarah about his doubts about maintaining that level of activity.

"She said I ought to think hard about that. It's what you are. It's who you are. And all the people around you think that's who you are. If you give it away, what are you going to do?"

Bullen hopes that he is an example to his employees of someone who can work hard and train for an IRONMAN. "You can be just a normal person and do an IRONMAN."

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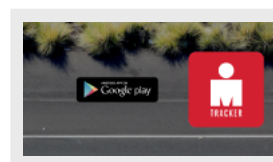
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Bullen is the number-one supporter of his son Liam and daughter Anna's choices to maintain healthy lifestyles. After Liam completed his first triathlon in 2013, Bullen offered a proposal to his son to stay engaged in the sport.

"I made him a deal that whenever he lined up for his first time at a particular distance, I would be on the start line with him—Olympic to IRONMAN," says Bullen, who has since raced alongside Liam at several triathlons, including Liam's first IRONMAN 70.3 in Taupo in 2015.

The deal meant the father and son often were training together, pushing each other in the pool and on the bike. During a recent house renovation, Bullen added a garage dedicated to training. Their bikes and trainers, water bottles and DVDs, medals and memorabilia fill the space as does a framed jersey signed by IRONMAN and IRONMAN 70.3 World Champion Daniela Ryf.

"People around me think it's quite special that Liam and I are doing this sport together," says

Bullen. "I have no doubt that our relationship is stronger for it."

Bullen's training and race day tips also can be applied to adulthood. "I've had punctures, I've had penalties, I've had things go wrong that you don't expect to go wrong," he says. He encourages Liam to live in the moment and go with what's in front of him. "Do the next 15, 30, 60 minutes as good as you can and the day will look after itself."

As promised, Bullen joined Liam as he completed his first IRONMAN in Cairns—also the race where Bullen intended to qualify for Kona.

There was an extra incentive for Bullen to do his best in Cairns: Earlier this year, Liam's name was drawn for one of the 40 Kona slots given out to help celebrate IRONMAN's 40th anniversary.

"Liam understands that to get to Hawaii is a really big thing. He knows a lot of people in Hamilton who have been to Kona, and he really respects them." On track to graduate with a law and accounting degree and launch his career as a corporate lawyer later this year, Liam understands that he may never again get this chance to race Kona.

"The best thing you can ever give your children is a good example, and that's what I have tried to do," says Bullen. "The sense of pride when you complete an IRONMAN in front of your family is amazing, really amazing."

Stay tuned for Quest for Kona to see if Bullen will share that experience with his son this October.

Following a successful debut last year, IRONMAN is again presenting [Quest for Kona](#), a television series that documents the highs and lows of 10 athletes attempting to qualify for the 2018 IRONMAN World Championship this October in Hawaii. Tune in to [Quest for Kona](#) to follow Bullen's qualification journey.

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

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