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NEWS

Ironmanlife: Vigo's Unbelievable Race



Photo of Robert Vigorito and BethAnn Telford by Kevin Mackinnon

Eagleman race director Robert Vigorito embodies everything that is great about Ironman

By Kevin Mackinnon

Here's the problem. Words don't come close to describing Bob (Vigo) Vigorito. If you could somehow store his energy you'd be able to power the eastern seaboard for the rest of the weekend. The guy is so enthusiastic about the sport it's exhausting just watching him at the race site here at Eagleman.

He's pictured here with BethAnn Telford, who's story is so incredible that I'll be doing a column on her later this week. In a nutshell, Telford has been dealing with brain disease since 2005. Despite the fact that she's undergone numerous operations and her kidneys pretty much don't work, she'll be racing here tomorrow and has raised about \$50,000 for brain tumor research in the process.

People like Telford and Mary Ann and Bob Blais are drawn to Vigo because he just cares so darn much. No one has embraced the Blazeman cause and foundation as much as he has. About four years ago Vigo created the Blazeman award here at the Eagleman to honor an athlete who exemplifies the spirit of Jon Blais, who completed the Ironman World Championship in 2005 while suffering with ALS and who's legacy has helped raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for ALS research.

Vigo didn't know it at the time, but he was on the course as the same time as Blais when he was racing in Kona in 2005 He embraced the Blazeman cause and was a huge help in getting the word out about Blais' foundation. In fact, a pathologist from the University of Maryland, Vigo actually harvested Blais' brain after his death for research.

It seems like every cause is that huge for Vigo, though. At the race site here at Eagleman he's just bombarded by athlete after athlete who wants to come and say hello. He knows the story for each and every one of them. He just introduced me to one athlete who's been to every single Eagleman event – race weekend here at Eagleman feels more like a high-school reunion than a race sometimes.

The first Eagleman event took place in 1997, but the race is much older than that. It started way back in 1982 with an event that Fletcher Hanks used to organize called the Oxford Triathlon. Hanks wanted to stop the race in 1992, but Vigo just couldn't imagine it going away. For four years he struggled to keep things going, but just couldn't garner enough interest to make it worthwhile. He begged Ironman to make his event a qualifier, but it didn't happen. Finally, in 1996, he was about to send all 175 athletes registered for the race their money back when he learned that the race would be a Kona qualifier starting the next year.

Since that first Eagleman event in 1997 the race has become one of the standout races in the Ironman – heck, really that should read "the triathlon" – world. The winner's list at Eagleman reads like a who's who of the sport: six-time Ironman world champion Natascha Badmann, two-time world champion Lori Bowden, 2010 Kona champ Mirinda Carfrae, two-time men's champ Tim DeBoom (who is the course record holder), Ironman 70.3 world champ Terenzo Bozzone, Olympian an Ironman champ Joanna Zeiger, Ironman New Zealand champ Samantha Warriner, along with some of the world's premier 70.3 racers including Luke Bell and Chris Legh.

It's one of those events that you have to do to complete your triathlon resume. That's why defending Ironman champ Craig Alexander is here. (He was supposed to be here last year, but was sick and suffering with a broken rib – Vigo understood. Well, sort of – there was some talk of some of Vigo's Italian family making a trip to Australia if Alexander wasn't here this year.)

The pro field is typically second-to-none, but despite the fact that there will be 2,700 athletes racing here tomorrow, Eagleman feels like a much smaller, family-friendly hometown event. The community here in Cambridge – all 24,000 of them – embrace this race and somehow manage to make everyone feel at home.

It all starts from the top, though. That enthusiasm, it starts with Vigo and trickles down to every single volunteer out on the course. It has to – Vigo would have it no other way.

Congrats, Vigo, on everything you do. And thanks.

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