

THE NEXT ACT / LIFE STORIES

THE TRIATHLETE

Sister Madonna Buder, 86

The 'Iron Nun'

HAVING COMPETED IN 45 OF THE GRUELLING RACES THAT COMBINE SWIMMING, RUNNING AND CYCLING, THE AMERICAN IS STILL TRAINING AND COMPETING



will let you in on a little secret: you do much better if you don't think about your age. I will be 87 this July but I try to envisage myself as a child because children don't think about the finish line. They run and run. When they play, it's just pure freedom - the freedom of being.

That little trick has kept me feeling young. It has also helped me compete in 45 Ironman triathlons, which consist of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride and a full marathon of 26.2 miles — all done back to back. I am probably best known for the world record I set in Canada in 2012, when I became the oldest person at that time to complete an Ironman. I was a mere 82. The accompanying celebrity status — the media has dubbed me "the Iron Nun" — often baffles me. First and foremost, I am a servant of God. I decided to become a nun when I was just 14 and entered the convent when I was 23 and running and competing has always been much more about me being the puppet while God pulls my strings. I would never have done any of this physical competition had it not been for God.

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YOU HAVE TO
KEEP MOVING
— TO HAVE A
REASON TO
KEEP MOVING

I started running when I was 48, after being introduced to the sport by a priest who was giving a workshop on the benefits of the sport. I only took it up to see if I could transfer by God's grace my determination to finish a local 8.2-mile run to my brother, so that he would seek help for his alcoholism.

My mother warned me against taking part in that race, and the first few training runs left me with calf

muscles so tight that I broke down in tears. In a moment of distress, I heard God's voice reassure me. It's been a joint effort ever since.

The priest who encouraged me to run in the first place said that I would have to wait about five weeks to start feeling the runner's "high". Thirty years later, I know what the runner's low is but I'm still waiting to feel that high.

One of the mistakes people make when they get older is to have no plan B for when they retire. This is particularly the case with men. You have to have some sort of physical or mental interest to keep you going.

Beyond setting triathlon records, my motivation for doing physical exercise is that it helps me to harmonise my mind, body and soul. Even so, I have only been out on the bicycle a few times this year, in large part because of the weather but also because I am finding it harder to ignore my body. I have had three serious accidents in recent

years, including a fractured pelvis. So I find myself running completely differently now from the early days, when I considered running to be the strongest part of my triathlon. The recent accidents made me lose my bounce, which has forced me to have to relearn how to run. Today, I call my style a sort of strange Hip-Hop shuffle.

Still, the sports company Nike featured me in one of their adverts last year and I am still competing. I have no plans to stop. Between all my work in my community in Spokane, Washington, I still find time to run and to train for swimming and cycling.

When I was a young girl, my mother always told me to act my age. I'm glad I never paid much attention.

This is the latest in a series of profiles of individuals who are redefining later life that will appear in FT Weekend Magazine and at www.nextact.ft.com.

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