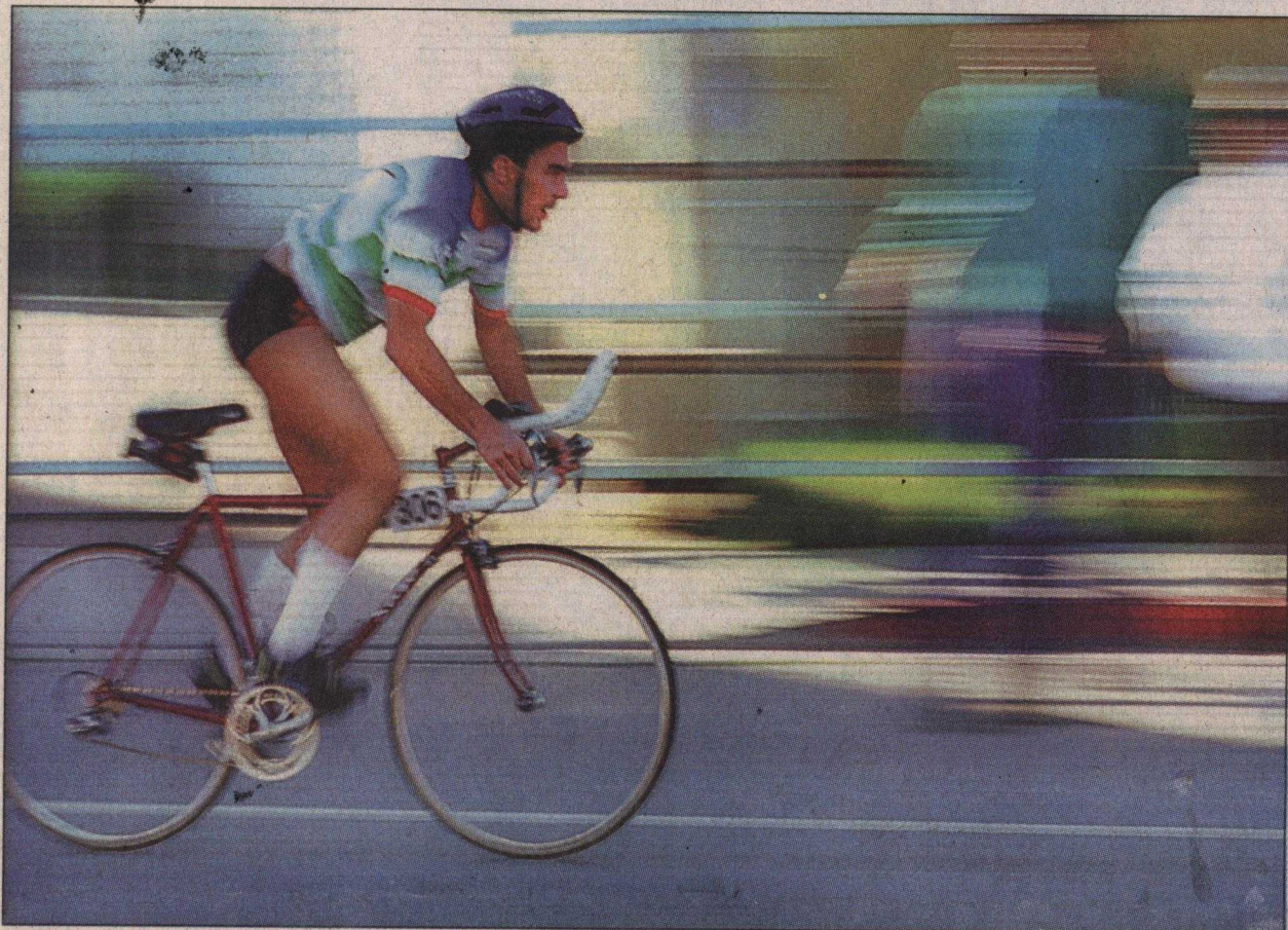


SENTINEL TRIATHLON

IT'S RACE DAY



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Spectators are just a blur to racers cranking out of the transition area during the 1998 Sentinel Triathlon.

Triathlon (Santa Cruz Sentinel) Sentinel Triathlon celebrates 25 years

By **DANIA AKKAD**

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

Today, nearly 1,000 athletes — and their fans — are in Santa Cruz for the 25th run of the Sentinel Triathlon.

Years before energy goo and long before the average person equated Ironman with the grueling sporting event in Hawaii as opposed to, say, a statue in Cleveland, the Sentinel made Rio del Mar — and eventually Santa Cruz — the place to be for folks pursuing what was then the relatively new competition of triathlon.

Twenty five years later, the competition is commonplace, and here in Santa Cruz the event is a local tradition that takes over a good half of the town on race day and is a steadfast fundraiser that's brought in nearly \$1 million for area athletic programs.

And it's a Santa Cruz special that will continue on even as its key sponsor, the Santa Cruz Sentinel, bought in February by the California Newspapers Partnership, moves to Scotts Valley later this fall, said Sentinel Publisher Dave Regan.

Canceling the annual race has "never come up as an option" in discussions with CNP rep-

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■ Pat Gilbert's influence still felt today.

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■ Complete race results and video of the 25th Sentinel Triathlon.

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representatives, Regan said Friday, adding that the choice to shut down the volunteer-run event would be up to the newspaper's publisher, not CNP.

"When I can't get any more good help," said Regan, "then we'll stop."

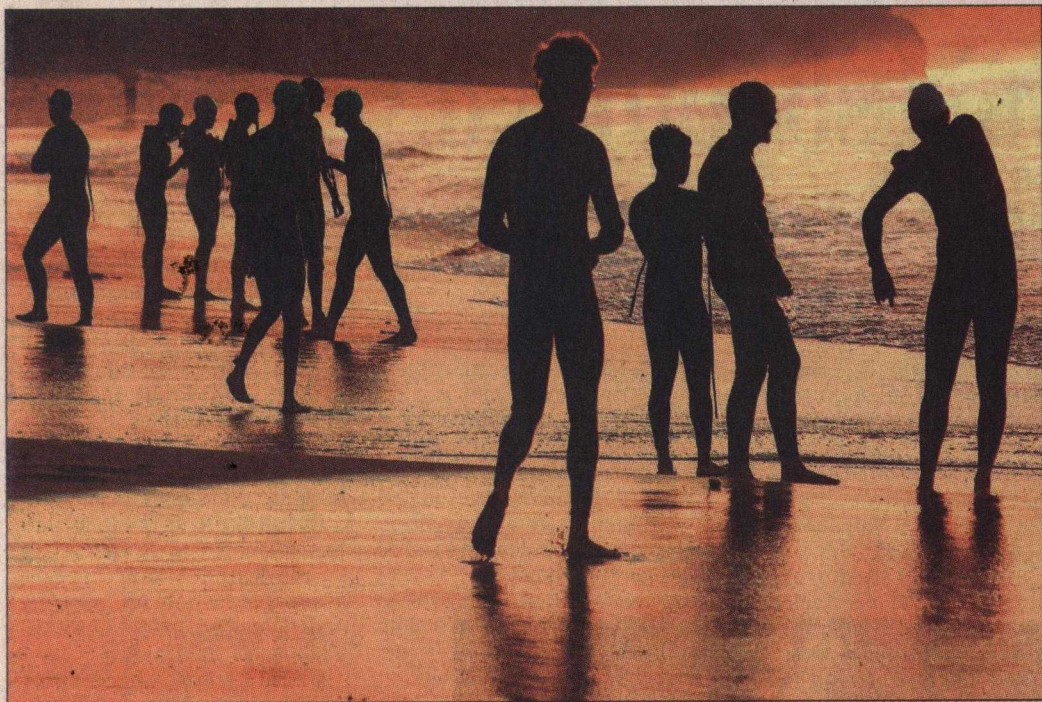
Like any triathlon, the Sentinel includes a swim, bike ride and run, each at a relatively long distance. But unlike the average race, the local course traces some of the most beautiful seaside scenery in the country.

"We have the best venue and that's what makes



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

The Mark Abbott Lighthouse plays the role of picturesque backdrop to runners along West Cliff Drive nearing the end of the 2006 Sentinel Triathlon.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

Sentinel Triathlon competitors are silhouetted by the sunrise as they gather on the Main Beach Sunday before the 2006 race.

Triathlon

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it a really good race. And the fact that we have a small-town feel to it. That's what makes it popular," said race director Kem Akol, who raced in the Sentinel until 1990 when he became a volunteer. "People mark it on their calendars."

Athletes round the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf for a one-mile swim, cycle 40-kilometers up Highway 1 to Davenport and back, and run along a six-mile stretch of West Cliff — all activities that might, by themselves, prove strenuous enough for the fittest of non-couch potatoes in a 24-hour fitness kind of world.

But in 1983 when the Sentinel started, the three-pronged relay might have seemed daunting. Then, an official triathlon was a rarity in California, said Kevin Woodward, a former Sentinel reporter and one of the race's founders.

Early races drew swimmers, bikers, runners and even Olympians, but not a whole lot of athletes who had done all three, one after another, against a clock, Woodward said.

"It's not like people trained all year round for triathlons. You had swimmers maybe that ran a little," he said.

Many people came just willing to give the Sentinel a shot, with or without fancy equipment.

"You should have seen some of the bikes in the earlier races. It was pretty ridiculous. Just old Schwinn three-speeds. Ten-speeds were the biggest," he said.

Over the years, the race grew from a couple hundred mavericks to nearly 1,000 folks, many of them professional triathletes, who will crowd Main Beach in colorful swim caps for the beginning of the race this morning.

Multi-generational family teams have competed alongside racers in costume and handicap athletes who have wowed the crowds.

And then there was 2001, the year the race started with a Civil War cannon.

"I've always thought that big



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Victor Plata wins the 1999 Sentinel Triathlon.

races deserve big guns," said Akol, who has competed 26 Ironmen.

This gun, however, was a little too big: It generated more than 400 911 calls from as far away as Scotts Valley, he said.

"Since then, we've done muskets," Akol said.

Said Woodward, "There are stories everywhere in the race. The ones that aren't told are just as amazing as the ones that are."

And while the race might seem an insane task to the hundreds of fans, including Woodward and Regan, who gather annually at Main Beach and West Cliff to cheer on athletes, the event — one of the oldest charity triathlons in the state — has very real benefits for local athletic programs.

To earn money from the event, 20 volunteers from each program, including student athletes and their coaches, join fans and athletes on race day and help make sure the race runs smoothly.

Proceeds are donated to Santa Cruz County High School athletic programs, UC Santa Cruz's swim program, Cabrillo College athletic programs, the Santa Cruz Track Club and the Santa Cruz Triathlon Association.

"The success is really due to the local support. It's the local people," said Woodward.

And 25 years later, when there are hundreds of triathlon options, the annual migration to the Sentinel continues.

"[They] just keep coming back because it's fun," Woodward said. "They don't get prize money anymore, so they come back because they like it."

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