

# Getting in the swim

*Santa Triathlon  
to Race (Santa Cruz  
Sentinel)*



Photos by Bill Lovejoy

Competitors on the main beach charge the water for the swim around the Municipal Wharf during Sunday's triathlon.

## The lonely long race of the disabled runner

By JOHN ROBINSON  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — It was lonely on the way to Davenport. The chain on his bicycle had come off and the wind was coming up. With his one good hand he struggled to get the chain back on his bike and keep riding.

The other racers had long since returned to town to start on the last leg of the race. They would soon be finishing with the crowds cheering.

By the time Jesse Shank would get back, the staging area would be dismantled and workers would be sweeping the trash and picking up discarded numbers. He hoped that someone would still be around to watch his bicycle while he started running.

For the second year in a row Shank finished last in the Sentinel Triathlon.

For the second year in a row he also won.

The Sentinel Triathlon, run Sunday morning, was a three-part race consisting of a mile swim around the Municipal Wharf, a 23-mile bicycle ride to Davenport and back and 10-kilometer run along West Cliff Drive.

Shank is disabled and his achievement in finishing the competition seems more

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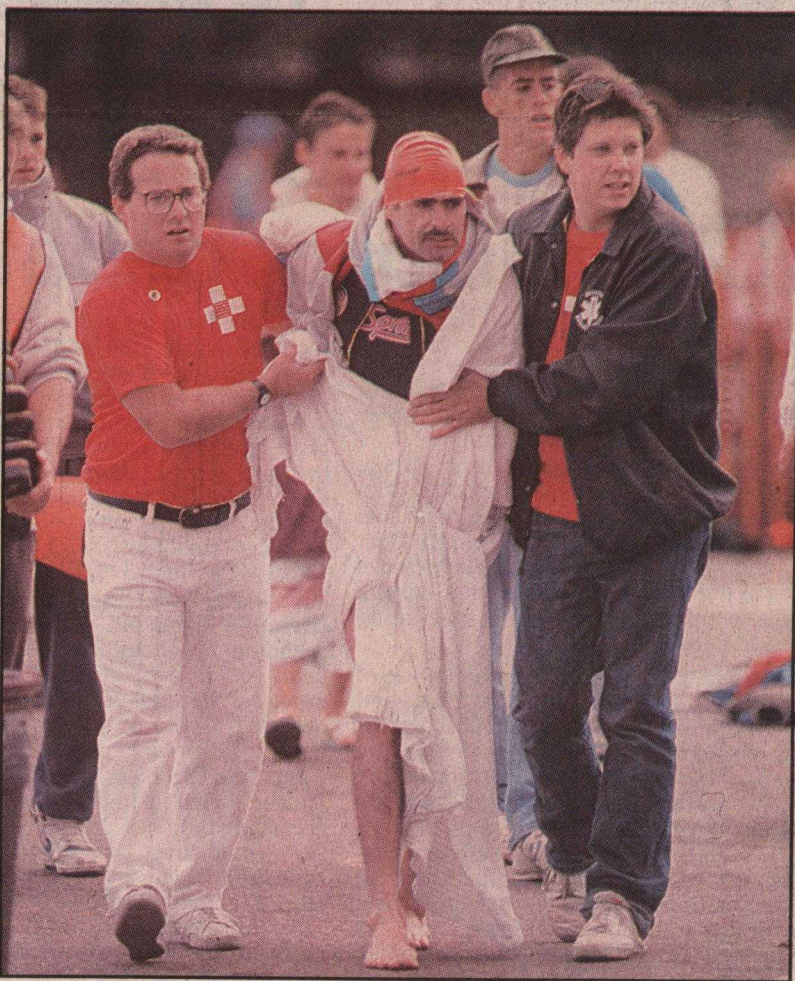
impressive than that of the winners. When Shank, now 28, was 14 he was shot in the head in an accident he declines to talk about. The wound left his left arm paralyzed, his left leg partially paralyzed and his coordination impaired.

"Before (the accident) I was in sports. I did surfing and had a motorcycle," he said. "I don't want to give up everything. I can't compete as well as I did, but I can still compete ... People think I'm crazy. I don't think I'm crazy — it's an achievement."

Last week, bystanders called an ambulance after seeing him struggle out of the water during a training swim around the wharf. Shank told the ambulance crew that he didn't need help. They told him he did.

"My arms and legs were shaking — like they always do. I can't control them very well and they (bystanders) called an ambulance," he said. "I told the ambulance people I was practicing. They took my temperature and took me to warm me up. They said I was too thin (for ocean swimming)."

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John Hawkes, left, and Lance Miller assist Jesse Shank after completing the 1-mile swim in Sunday's triathlon.

## Triathlon/ A real achievement

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The day before the triathlon, he swam around the wharf again. This time however, he became entangled with a jellyfish which left leg red welts along the side of his trunk.

Undaunted, he was ready to compete Sunday.

Triathlons are grueling tests of endurance for the most fit athletes and it was not easy for Shank.

Out of more than a thousand swimmers he was the last to circle the wharf. He emerged suffering from hypothermia after more than an hour in the water.

Race officials led him to an ambulance to warm up but Shank said, "I don't want an ambulance — I want my bicycle."

Shank's main worry was not whether he could continue but finding someone to help him tie his shoes — a difficult task using one hand.

Unlike the top athletes who ride custom-made racing bicycles that cost thousands of dollars, Shank was riding an old Peugeot with one brake and gear shifts in the middle. By the time he started the ride, racers were already returning in a mad dash from Davenport.

Shank rode alone, straining up the hills far from any competitors or cheering crowds.

"It does get lonely. I have to confess," he said of riding so far behind the pack. "I just think about beating the event."

Unlike last year, when the race staging facilities were dismantled and gone by the time he finished the ride, this year Shank was able to get some fruit and water before setting off on the final run — the greatest challenge of the race.

"When I'm swimming, I know the Dream Inn looks far away, but I

didn't know it could look so far away on land. It was nice when it started getting closer and closer," he said of the run.

When Shank finished the race, he found, however, that his backpack with his clothes and custom-made wetsuit had been stolen. The same thing happened last year.

The triathlon committee is looking into buying him a new wetsuit.

It took Shank five hours to finish the race, two hours faster than last year. The top competitors finished in under two hours.

"I don't feel disabled but I don't have any trouble with the fact that I am. That's other people's problems," he said.

There were no celebrations or friends waiting at the finish for Shank. When he was done, he got back on his bicycle and rode home, an unheralded winner.