

Critical moment

February 6, 1982



WHEN JULIE MOSS COMPETED IN THE Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii in 1982, most people had never heard of that sport. Endurance racing hardly existed as a term, yet alone an industry. Even the popular New York Marathon drew only 14,308 runners in 1982, 85 percent of them men.

Julie Moss changed all that – by collapsing 10 yards from the finish line in Hawaii. In first place, she fell. As she crawled toward the finish another woman passed her and claimed the title. ABC happened to be filming it, less as sport than as carnival act: what kind of freaks run 26.2 miles after biking 112 miles and swimming 2.4 miles in the ocean? ABC’s footage, combined with a bystander’s photo of her crab walking toward the finish line – reduced to a quadruped – captivated the world, becoming the first image of triathlon most people ever witnessed.

Yet instead of killing the young sport, Moss’s struggle ignited massive interest. It helped that, in spite of her obvious pain in that iconic photo, she was smiling. Recalling the photo recently, she said, “I’m smiling at the idea of finishing.”

AN AGONIZING FINISH
As a contestant in the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii in 1982, Julie Moss was in the lead when she collapsed a mere 10 yards from the finish line, relinquishing first place to another runner. “My only option was to stay down and crawl,” she wrote in 2003. Her struggle, captured in this photo, helped spark a tidal wave of interest in endurance events.

Her crawl to second place, more so than any first-place finishes, helped propel triathlon’s Olympic debut in 2000. And the effect went beyond triathlon. Moss, a 23-year-old graduate student and amateur athlete, planted a flag for all women. At the time of that 1982 race, the International Olympic Committee had never staged a women’s marathon in the games, doubting the ability of women to safely endure 26.2 miles. In US distance races today, women outnumber men.

Ironman now operates more than 140 triathlons globally. Andrew Messick, chief executive of Ironman’s parent, World Triathlon, attributes that growth to the qualities displayed by Moss. “People who really are successful aren’t blessed with phenomenal ability but above-average determination. Grit is the thing that matters.”

Thirty-five years after her famous crawl, Moss this spring finished an Ironman triathlon nearly half an hour faster than she did back in 1982. At age 58, she says, “I’m the best athlete I’ve been in my life.”

KEVIN HELLIKER is Editor-in-Chief of the *Brunswick Review*, based in Brunswick’s New York office.