

LE Magazine September 2001

PROFILE

Still Going Strong Long-time swimmer, biker, runner excels

Ann Onton often finds herself in a quandary on Saturdays. If there is no scheduled aquatic event—like her cherished 200-yard/meter butterfly— this 57-year-old will be so desperate for a race that she'll have to scan the area for a 5k, 10k or 20k run, or even a triathlon. If none of those options are available, she'll hook up with her cycling club for a 25 to 50 mile ride or opt for a workout with her Masters' Swim Team at the local pool. Much simpler are Sundays, when Ann can satisfy her need to exercise by slipping on her track shoes and running the two miles each way to her neighborhood church.

Of course, sometimes her sporting events take her far away from her hometown of Fairfield, Conn. Last May she was off to Santa Clara, California where she picked up five medals at the National Masters Swim Championships; in July she packed up her bicycle and headed to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to compete in both the triathlon and a three-day swim meet at the National Senior Games.

But, this Connecticut native isn't just juggling her sports passions around. She also has a job. Ann is a biotechnology chemist, working on several complex projects. In her free time, she dabbles in her own landscaping business: planting, mowing, weeding, raking leaves or shoveling snow according to the season, in addition to planting and tending her own highly productive vegetable garden. And, Ann took over her mother's business three years ago, after her mother's death at age 92. "I could sleep 12 hours a night if I had time," Ann says. "But I'm lucky if I get two hours in. One thing I don't need is melatonin!"



Fortunately, she's always had a lot of energy. Ann got the swimming bug early. In fact, she was nine years old when she launched her competitive career by joining a girls' club at the first indoor pool built in nearby Bridgeport. That pool was her only outlet for swimming meets, since back in the 1950s, the local schools didn't offer sports to girls. She was an early standout. "Back then I was good at the same events that I swim now," she recalls. "The butterfly, backstroke and individual medley in the pool and freestyle for long-distance, open water swims in the summer in the ocean and Long Island Sound."

Her college years brought similar inequities for female athletes. Ann attended Purdue, which did not offer a competitive women's inter-collegiate swim team. Instead, the top women swimmers, like Ann, trained with the men's team, setting their sights on national, rather than collegiate, events.

In those years, Ann also played competitive field hockey and basketball, working games in around her regular swimming practices much to the chagrin of her trainers, who cautioned her that running and swimming didn't mix because they tapped different muscles. "I often think of that now that I'm doing triathlons [an endurance event that combines running and swimming with bicycling]," she laughs.

Her interest in vitamins and supplements came about later in life, as the result of her efforts to avoid eating produce that had been doused in pesticides. On a mission to find an organic spray that would clean her apples and tomatoes, she ran across a line of alternative products that appealed to her focus on health. She immediately began to experiment.

Though her current regimen varies depending upon her physical needs at the moment, she regularly uses vitamins A and D and beta carotene, along with high doses of B vitamins, vitamin E and vitamin C ("Why bother about milligrams? You need grams..."). Antioxidants, such as pycnogenol, green tea and other phyto-extracts are also daily essentials. "Before I discovered vitamin C, I was plagued with colds, urinary and ear infections," she says.

As an athlete, Ann pays particular attention to using nutritional supplements to maintain her biochemical "energy cycles," which she likens to the motion of a Ferris wheel. Taking energy-cycle components, such as arginine, ornithine and CoQ10 keeps the body producing energy at maximum rates. "It's like a Ferris wheel because putting in energy components at various points pushes

the wheel around, allowing that energy to come out at other points to fuel the muscles, brain, nerves, etc., or to turn other wheels. The more of the proper materials you put in, the faster the wheels turn and the more energy you put out.”

And Ann likes to go fast. She notes that her swim times are always better if she has been strictly adhering to her nutritional regimen. She gets to test herself three times a week in team training sessions for an hour and a half each time—and two hours on Saturday. These practices are open to all levels, so she’s competing against some “pretty fast young ones with national standings, so it’s really tough.” That level of competition probably helped push her to two world-class finishes at the World Masters Swim Championships in Casa Blanca, Morocco in 1998: a fifth place in the 200-meter backstroke and an eighth place in the 200-meter butterfly, as well as eight U.S. Masters National top-ten swim times last year. Ann arrives at the Y ahead of her scheduled swim practice to log on time on the weight circuit before hitting the pool. Wednesday nights she puts in five to six miles with her running club, and on weekends 25 to 50 miles of bicycling with her bicycle club.

Fortunately—either through luck or through careful attention to her body—Ann has managed to avoid serious injury or illness. In fact, the most pain she’s been in lately came after she “overdosed” on slant-board sit-ups, pulling some abdominal muscles.

When it comes to food, Ann makes sure she ingests only the healthiest by making it herself—not just cooking it. That means grinding the whole grains that go into her homemade bread; planting the seeds and sprouting the sprouts that become the vegetables for her meals, salads and sandwiches; culturing her own yogurt; and juicing her own fruits and vegetables. (In winter, she has citrus fruit delivered by the case directly from the orchards.) She scrupulously avoids eating anything refined, such as white bread, flour, pasta, rice, etc. Then once or— ideally— twice a year, for one week each time, she’ll fast as a way to truly purify her body. She’ll begin with a few days of eating only raw fruits and vegetables, then move on to freshly-prepared juices, and then a day of water alone, before reversing the order and returning to juices, and a day of whole raw fruits and vegetables. “Fasting is a way to clean out the body,” she explains. “It not only burns dead or damaged tissue, which your body later replaces with healthy tissue, but it also releases a lot of accumulated toxins.” Specific juices address specific issues: pineapple, for example, is good for healing; grape is best as an overall cleanser, while beet has cleansing properties that target the liver and intestines. By alternating fruit and vegetable juices throughout the days of her fast, Ann ensures that both acidic and alkaline toxins are dissolved and carried away from her system.

She is careful to pick times of the year that are relatively stress-free for fasting, because the process requires such intense concentration—not to mention constant preparation of juices. Of course, finding a stress-free week or two can be a tricky proposition. Ann recently added to her workload by taking a refresher course on chemical instrumentation, material that she had missed during the time she took off to raise her three children, now all grown and living across the country. Even without taking courses, her day is incredibly taxing. She is now working on several projects, including one on formulating DNA-sequencing gels, and another on making and testing new materials for therapeutic applications to treat such varied diseases as arthritis, cancer and AIDS. These materials deliver the therapeutic agents directly to the target areas in the body, whereas conventional drug-delivery systems attack healthy as well as diseased parts. “We’re a small lab, so it ends up being us against those big pharmaceutical companies. You have to work fast to get your product to market before they do, or before the market demand shifts.”

Maybe those big companies should start worrying. —Twig Mowatt



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