

## THE TRIATHLON OF LIFE

**When Sacred Heart Mission's Brian Millett ran over the finish line after a gruelling 8 hour and 55 minute Melbourne Ironman triathlon in March, the volunteer who just happened to be his "catcher" was someone he knew well.**

Walter had been coming to the Mission for years, and had played cricket and trained for a few triathlons in the Mission's sports and recreation program, run by Brian.

When he first joined the Hearts cricket team in 2008, Walter was sleeping in a disused shed in St Kilda's Catani Gardens. He was eating his meals at the Mission and looking for things to do to fill in his time.

After the cricket season, with his health suffering from being overweight, no vision for the future but mobilised by encouragement from Brian, Walter signed up to train for the Brooks SuperSprint triathlon: a 300 metre swim, 10km ride and 3km run. With only six weeks of training, this was a massive mental and physical task for any first-time participant, but mammoth for someone sleeping rough who had to borrow a bike and rely on donated sporting gear. According to Walter there was one good thing about sleeping rough in Catani Gardens, "I was so close to the start line."

Walter finished the triathlon nine kilograms lighter than when he began training. Since that first event he's gone on to compete in triathlons in Elwood and Brighton, can often be found in the crowd of spectators at triathlon competitions, and continues to work on his fitness with regular bike rides and swimming, although he says he never does enough. A move into community housing and work three days a week on Sacred Heart Mission's op shop truck has brought stability to Walter's life and last year he volunteered at the Melbourne Ironman competition.

The same year Walter did his first triathlon, Brian Millett qualified for the Hawaiian Ironman World Championships. An Ironman triathlon involves a 3.8km swim, 180km bike ride and 42.2km marathon; that's a 226km track in total. Last year he was the fastest in his age group at the Western Australian Ironman.



Brian says he is driven by the massive sense of contentment and achievement participation brings. "It tests every part of your mind and body and the euphoria that is experienced cannot be matched by anything else. I feel lucky to be able to do these activities because many do not have the same opportunities." This is why, when training for the Melbourne Ironman this year, his fifth Ironman triathlon, Brian decided to use his experience to raise money for Reclink; a national charity which helps thousands of people experiencing disadvantage get involved in sports, arts and recreation, and which runs the football and cricket leagues the Mission's teams compete in.

On Sunday 24 March, a wild Sunday which saw the swimming section of the triathlon shortened, Walter put in a marathon volunteering effort as a catcher. Catchers hand out towels and drinks to exhausted athletes when they cross the finish line and help them to the recovery area, or the medical tent if they need assistance. The shift started at 3pm and Walter stayed at his station until 1am when the last participant jogged across the finish line and most other volunteers had gone home.

One of those athletes Walter "caught" was Brian, who recalls, "It was the highlight of the event seeing Walter when I crossed the finish line." Walter put a towel and a medal around Brian's neck which each athlete gets at the end of the race. "I was so weak, the medal felt really heavy," Brian said.

When asked why it was such a good feeling seeing Walter at the end of the race, Brian explains, "When you put your hand up to volunteer it means you have a sense that you are worth something. Most of the people who participate in the Mission's sports and rec program have such low self-esteem, they feel like they have nothing to offer. When you volunteer at an Ironman, you get no real credit, there's no money in it of course, you're anonymous. But you're a part of a community."

When asked whether he could imagine ever doing an Ironman triathlon himself Walter says, "It's not beyond me. I'd need to train a lot more but it's possible." Although back in 2008 Walter was the last person Brian thought would do a triathlon, he now agrees that it is possible.

*Congratulations to Brian for raising \$3,200 for Reclink through donations from family, friends and colleagues.*

*The Mission continues to enter a team in the St Kilda triathlon each year, with five people from our sports and recreation program participating in March. Thanks to Fitness First in St Kilda for giving us the use of their swimming pool for training, and PCYC for the use of their spin bikes and treadmills.*