



Lee Cushing DiPietro: Iron Woman

A World-Class Athlete and Symbol of Strength to Others Credits Her Years of Training with Helping Maintain True Grit When Her Family Needed Her Most.

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TO DESCRIBE LEE CUSHING Di Pietro as an elite athlete, is a gross understatement. It totally misses the point. The grand master runner, Ironman, marathoner and triathlete is one of the most important American women athletes. Held in highest esteem by her peers, the long-distance runner is also the wife of Lee (yes, same name) and mother of sons Tim and Cryder, with deep personal resources gleaned from years of

excruciating training, who was able to pool those strengths to help navigate the darkest days of her life.

Those challenges coalesced in 2010, which she describes as her most difficult year, when her life literally began to fall apart. First, her sister Ames Cushing Tollefson tragically lost her life; and soon thereafter husband Lee was diagnosed with cancer. A few months later, when 26-year-old Tim was in a horrifying near-fatal accident, this unbelievable

sequence of events almost brought her down. But, stubbornly, she was able to harness the lessons she had learned during the execution of the most grueling sports on earth, believing they would somehow help her navigate the family through it all.

Today, as she reflects on that year, Lee realizes she had unknowingly been preparing herself to deal with life's obstacles long before they came along. "I was always athletic; throwing a football with

Above: Coming out of the swim the 1994 Ironman World Championships in Kona, Hawaii.

Previous Page: Lee DiPietro ies without wings at a recent Iceland Half Marathon.

Above: Competing in the bicycle race--the 1995 Ironman World Championships in Kona, Hawaii.



Above: The DiPietro family: Lee, Cryder, husband Lee, and Tim (September 2010).

turned out to be a soft tissue sarcoma, nestled around the hamstring on the back of his right leg, Lee recalls a sinking feeling. “I knew I had to reach deep, like I had in the first Ironman when I made it through the choppy dark blue waters off the coast of Kona, the excruciating hours on the bike, and unforgiving hills on the marathon course. If I had gotten through them all, I felt somehow we could get through this too.”

“When we were fighting for my husband’s life,” she says, “we had to steel ourselves each time test results came back. He could choose to give up or regroup and fight. We both knew which course we would take together.” Buoyed by an enormous support group, Lee named herself Nurse McNicey, and initiated a group email to family and friends in 2010 that eventually resulted in her first book, *Against the Wind*, in 2015.

Then, the afternoon before Lee’s surgery, Tim’s catastrophic accident in an off-road four-wheel utility vehicle called a Gator, near Glen Cove, Long

Island tested her mettle to the breaking point. Rushing between Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore, and Nassau University Medical Center, where Tim, with two broken legs, was fighting for his life, required a superhuman effort she will never forget. “I try to share this experience with everybody who needs a dose of hope. You can decide to come through it or you can fold up your tent and then you won’t have a shot at it. I remember the little girls I coached saying, ‘Mrs. Di Pietro, we can’t win this game.’ I said, ‘You are right, if you feel that way, but if you think you can, at least you have a chance.’”

After a dramatic five-hour surgery that successfully removed the large tumor, her husband gradually began to get better and eventually beat the cancer. At the same time, Tim’s young body responded and healed, as rigorous rehab made him stronger. His goal, to ski again, never left his sights. “Last winter he called to ask if we would come up to New Hampshire for a weekend, and he demonstrated that he was totally back in the game,” she joyfully reported.

In 2013, the entire family triumphantly

scaled Mount Kilimanjaro, a feat they considered a pilgrimage and mission, during which they braved freezing temperatures and altitude issues. Husband Lee struggled because he had lost 90% of his hamstring, but on the last leg up to the summit, he was in front. During this highly emotional experience, each member of the family kept a daily journal, and Cryder’s poignant entry touched them all: “There was a reason mom and dad were leading us on this climb, just as they have in life.”

In June 2017, after Lee ran a 10-mile race in Newport, she commented: “This time the field consisted of 65% women. Think about it—women are running the world, and controlling something in their lives. It is hard to do sometimes, but you feel a sense of empowerment. The running family is a great family.”

Presently, she is occupied with a full schedule of speaking engagements about her book and is engaged in talks about a possible movie. The family has now expanded to include Cryder’s wife, Kate, Tim’s wife Gina and their three-year-old son Forrester James, and year-old daughter, Parker Lee DiPietro. As she experiences the pleasures of grandparenting, Lee has plans to insinuate some of her life lessons into the fun. Perhaps the first one will be about organization and unsinkability. “You always have to have a plan, and if something happens, adjust and figure out your next goal. Learn to control what you can control and be calm and well-prepared. Don’t get into someone else’s race. Keep to your plan and run your own race.”

After over 35 years of competitive racing, Lee has run in over 400 races and finished six Ironman triathlons. Today she still competes at a high level and is a local legend on the roads. “Running teaches you to anticipate, to troubleshoot and come up with solutions on the fly. On a spiritual level, for me, running is like being in my own church, doing my own kind of praying.” 