



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.

Marion Laffey Fox

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 flies without wings at a recent Iceland Half Marathon.

my dad as a kid, and playing varsity lacrosse at Boston University, were all part of growing up of five girls,” she says. “But my running life actually began when I jumped into the Boston Marathon on famous Heartbreak Hill to help my sister Kitty finish the last 10 miles. Six months later, when I ran the New York City Marathon, I learned about this whole new world out there that I had never known about. That ignited my lifelong love of

running, and eventually became my time to think, my therapy, my time to feel strong.”

Daily runs began to segue into competition of half marathons (13.1 miles), and marathons (26.2 miles). As she won those, she went on to compete in triathlons (one-mile swim, 26-mile bike race, followed by a 6.2-mile run). “Competing in a triathlon required a highly disciplined training schedule which I had to create without the assistance of a coach, because it was a luxury we couldn’t afford,” she says. “So, I based all my early training on magazine articles others had

written, but I had to modify my schedule as a mom who had a part-time job as a decorator and girls’ lacrosse and basketball coach at Green Vale School on Long Island.” After Lee went to the office, and the boys were in school, she ran between five and seven miles, four to five days a week, with one longer day of twelve to thirteen miles.

However, triathlon competitions’ *de rigueur* travel is daunting, and the demand for sophisticated equipment and clothes for three sports, including wet suits and special shoes, is expensive. But as she gradually progressed beyond regional and national championships to become one of the top amateur women in the world, prize money and sponsorships began to change things. Gradually, they helped defray many expenses, and coveted product sponsorships poured in. “Saucony gave me running shoes, Aegis donated bikes, and handlebars came from Vision Tech,” she explains. “Racing wheels from Hed Wheels and wetsuits from Quintana Roo made all the difference in this rarified, highly competitive world.”

As Lee moved up the ladder of elite athletes, she had to balance grueling travel and training schedules with busy family life. Exhausting travel commitments to faraway events in France, England, California and Bermuda, among other places, often made it necessary to leave the boys behind, but her triathlete husband always accompanied her. That gave her comfort, but she said later that her “passion for triathlons and pushing limits, having to win; knowing I could win, also gave me confidence to face life’s other inevitable challenges.” As she and Lee raced together across the globe, they included the boys whenever possible. During those trips, Tim and Cryder developed an appreciation for the rigors of competitive sports, working at the water tables and proudly accompanying their parents to the podium to accept coveted trophies.

In 1994, when she was 36, Lee entered

Saint Anthony’s Triathlon, in St. Petersburg, Florida. Recently dubbed one of the 10 best destination triathlons in the USA, it is a qualifier for the Ironman World Championship in Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii. As she waited for the official results, she remembers being shocked to hear that she had won her age group and beaten all but three of the professional women. When the announcer asked if she wanted a spot in the legendary Ironman competition, her husband jumped up and shouted, “She’ll take it!”

Although she didn’t know it at the time, that defining moment would be pivotal for her career. “It would also teach me about life,” she says, “as well as the physical and emotional strength such a race would require, pushing the boundaries of pain and determination beyond what most would call impossible.”

To prepare for the Ironman—a brutal competition consisting of a 2.4-mile ocean swim, 112-mile bike race and a full 26.2-mile marathon—she worked with coach Hank Lang, who orchestrated her regime, four to seven hours a day, six days a week, building strength, stamina and speed, from May until the race in October. “Some weeks were harder than others as we continued to increase the mileage in all three disciplines. Toward the end of the training, for three weeks in a row, I covered fifteen miles of swimming, three hundred miles of biking, and eighty miles of running,” she says.

On the day of the competition, Lee felt well prepared. But at mile 56 of the 112-mile bicycling segment, she began to doubt whether she would have enough stamina left to complete the marathon that followed. “That moment became a huge life lesson I will never forget. I realized it was not helpful to be confronted by the whole daunting picture, but much better to break it down into doable parts my body could handle—a segment or a number of miles at a time. It became a huge mind game that actually works, and is a technique I would use countless times



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

in the future.”

In that race, she again won her age group and finished 17th overall among the competing women. At the end of the year, 1994, she won The USA Triathlon Federation’s prestigious Amateur Triathlete of the Year award, and decided to officially turn pro and race as a professional. That happened just in time for the 1995 race season and came with additional perks, including the ability to win substantially more prize money. For the next seven years, she travelled the world with her husband and sons as often as they were able. Her crowning moment came in 1997 when she finished 6th overall female in the Hawaii Ironman World Championship.

As she increased her training, she came to realize more life lessons that she would call on repeatedly in stressful situations. When she broke down during a

race or thought she couldn’t make it, she reminded herself that “we are athletes, not machines. Then I was able to work harder to figure out what was happening. Over and over again, I was then able to push the boundaries to overcome.”

In 2008, at age 50, Lee won the first overall female title at the Marathon of the Palm Beaches, and by 2010 had achieved far more than she ever imagined was possible.

However, that year, after her sister’s sudden death, she became aware that her husband, Lee, was not his cheery, energetic self. In addition, he was complaining of leg pain and coughing persistently. As his mysterious illness progressed, conflicting diagnoses ranged from endocarditis to an infected tick bite. When it



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." 