

# THE HEART OF AN IRONMAN SOUTH AFRICA

by Elzabe Boshoff & Dr Marietjie Van Der Merwe

**THE HEART OF AN IRONMAN®**  
SOUTH AFRICA

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Elzabe Boshoff & Dr Marietjie Van Der Merwe

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**THE HEART  
OF AN  
IRONMAN  
SOUTH  
AFRICA**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

It seems like an impossible task to find adequate words of praise and thanks for everyone who has assisted us and supported us to make our dream come true. Since the moment we shared our vision, we have been blown away by the enthusiasm, contribution and heart with which people have come on board.

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

Over the past few years, we have been avid supporters of the Spec-Savers Ironman® South Africa event and have made friends and encouraged many others along the way to take on this magnificent race.

During the course of the year, after hearing so many incredibly inspirational tales of how others were inspired to take part in the Spec-Savers Ironman® South Africa event, we realised that great potential existed to document these stories in a book. This book would tell the tale of the heartache that eventually resulted in participants overcoming pain, finally accepting themselves, making life-changing decisions, becoming an athlete (though possibly not yet an Ironman® athlete), or realizing a lifetime dream. It would also feature stories from the S A Triathlon Development team, physically disabled competitors and top professionals such as Raynard Tissink, James Cunnama and Lucie Zelenkova.

The Heart of an Ironman®, will unlock the dreams of many people through sharing the victories, trials, obstacles and disappointments of those who did not succeed the first time. We will consider the different perspectives of each athlete interviewed in this book, as well as the meaning of the spirit of the Ironman® triathlon, to key role-players. As family is key in support, we hope to give a better understanding of the courage and perseverance required to participate in this incredible event. We will also provide newcomers and athletes who are considering competing in either the Spec-Savers Ironman®

South Africa event or the Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa event, with valuable information provided by fellow competitors, and medical and sporting professionals, as to how to overcome obstacles. Lastly, we will provide some practical tools for succeeding in the future.

We reflect on athletes competing for charity, and share the history, the story and motivation behind the involvement with these charities, and the road ahead. We hope to encourage others not just to be inspired, but to get involved. While this is the private initiative of the authors, we have decided that, once costs have been covered, a portion of the profits from this book will go to the ACVV Khayaletu Youth Centre, a home for former street children. The aim is to depict the 'Heart of an Ironman® in South Africa'. What inspired competitors to start training and ultimately complete an Ironman® triathlon challenge? What makes them tick; what inspires them to keep coming back; what have they gained from competing in this race?

All of this will hopefully result in promoting not only the Spec-Savers Ironman® South Africa event triathlon, but the Eastern Cape and its people, while encouraging others to get busy training. The photos and inspirational stories of victory will be presented in a full-colour semi-hardcover book that will be fit to take prize possession on anyone's coffee table! Hopefully it will be the inspiration for a healthy lifestyle, for participation in a South African Ironman® event, and also for a visit to the Eastern Cape to experience the natural beauty, the people and all we have to offer.

This is an expression of our passion for what it takes to compete in this sport, the story behind the competitor, the people of Port Elizabeth, East London and the Eastern Cape at large. The book promises to be inspirational, informative and interactive for all those currently training for an Ironman® triathlon event, as well as those thinking about doing an Ironman® triathlon event.

Ultimately we would love to be able to distribute this book to all past and future Ironman® athletes, as this is our direct target market, but also to anyone interested or involved in sport, business or tourism in the Eastern Cape.

We have received unexpected sponsorship for the professional layout and cover design, as well as marketing assistance from the most wonderful company, Hybrid, Port Elizabeth. From the moment we walked in as strangers, we started swapping stories about the incredible people who compete in Ironman® triathlon events. Soon, we were all crying together and laughing at each other for being so totally overwhelmed by the sheer courage and endurance of these people! THANK YOU, Mark Phillips, Chad Felix, Werner Ingram and every person at HYBRID who worked tirelessly to make our dream a reality! Without you buying into our vision, sharing our passion and providing the expertise for the magnificent layout and design of The Heart of an The Spec-Savers Ironman® South Africa event as well as all supporting marketing materials, we would never have been able to deliver something of this magnitude and quality!

# INDEX

Disclaimer	02
Acknowledgement	04
Foreword	08

---

## 01

Interviews	10
The History of Ironman® Triathlon Worldwide	18
<b>PORT ELIZABETH</b>	24
The History Highlights of Ironman® SA	26
Course description, Rules and Maps	30

---

## 02

<b>LIVING THE LIFESTYLE AS A FAMILY</b>	32
The benefits of sport in children	33
<b>IRONKIDS®</b>	36
<b>IRON GIRL®</b>	34
<b>CORPORATE TRIATHLON</b>	37
<b>CHALLENGE</b>	37

---

## 03

<b>IRONMAN 70.3®</b>	38
History, Statistics & Demographics	39
12 week training programme, Schedule & Tips	40
Race Course and Maps	42

---

## 04

<b>COMPETING FOR A CAUSE</b>	44
Ironman® 4 the Kidz	45
Competing to raise money for charity	47
Denver Burns – Mr SA 2010	50
Rob Connacher	52
Stuart Connacher	54

---

## 05

<b>PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED</b>	56
Francois Jacobs	57
Oswald Kydd	59
Paul Kloppers	60

---

## 06

<b>THE GUTS TO GLORY</b>	62
Liesel van der Westhuizen	63
Andy Croly	64
Richard Morley	65
Melanie Smith	68
Chantelle Rudman	70

---

## 07

<b>FROM ATHLETE TO IRONMAN® ATHLETE</b>	72
Michael Finch	73
Mariette Hatting	74
Kevin Mutlow	76
Alec Riddle	78

# 08

## DEVELOPMENT TEAM 80

- History 81
  - Enoch-Xolani Katu 82
  - Mzwimanene Hanson Singaphi 83
  - Ashwell George 85
- 

# 09

## PROFESSIONAL IRONMAN® ATHLETE 88

- Raynard Tissink 89
  - Lucie Zelenkova 91
  - James Cunnama 93
- 

# 10

## GETTING STARTED 96

- Join a club or training academy 97
  - The Finish Line Story 97
  - Alan Timms 98
  - Family first 101
  - Gear List 101
- 

# 11

## TRAINING PROGRAMMES, TIPS & PITFALLS 102

- 12 Week Training Plan 103
  - Pitfalls to watch out for 105
  - Twelve Steps to Ironman® Success 105
- 

# 12

## SPORT SCIENCE 106

- Training for an Ironman® Triathlon from a  
Physio Perspective: Nicky Roote 107
  - How to avoid injuries: Dr James Vlok 108
- 

# 13

## FUN FACTS BY THE NUMBERS 110

---

# 14

## RACE DAY CHECKLIST 114

---

# 15

## ROLE OF HONOUR 118

- Bibliography 238



FOREWORD



If anyone had asked me what I was letting Spec-Savers in for when I agreed to sponsor the Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa Triathlon so many years ago, I would probably have said at the time, “It feels like the right thing to do for Nelson Mandela Bay.”

Did I comprehend anything about an Ironman® event? No.

Did I understand the amount of organization that was required to host the event? No.

Did I question World Endurance South Africa’s ability to run an event of this size? No.

Was this a normal corporate decision? No.

So what happened on that day? Call it fate, a stroke of luck, a weak moment or a fortuitous incident. Today I say thank goodness we made that rash decision, as it has been an absolute privilege for Spec-Savers to be associated with this event.

There are numerous and wonderful stories that have evolved as the event has grown: from blind and physically handicapped individuals competing and completing the event, to first timers who set themselves personal goals to ‘do an Ironman® triathlon’ and, as a consequence, have had a life-changing experience, to terminally ill individuals who made it one of their life goals, to previously disadvantaged South Africans who have had to overcome their fear of swimming.

What I understand today, is that this event has not only entrenched Nelson Mandela Bay as the proverbial “Ironman City” of Africa, but it has also allowed the participants to challenge themselves, and through that process to make their lives more complete. It is wonderful to be part of the Ironman South Africa Event, and through that process to be able to make a difference for so many people.

Our sponsorship of the Ironman South Africa triathlon, together with our Kids Right to Good Sight project and our Preserving the Planet project with the Wilderness Foundation, completes the corporate heart that we aspire too.

Have I ever regretted for one moment that impulsive decision taken so many years ago to sponsor this event? Absolutely NOT!

If you are vaguely passionate about the Eastern Cape, or being a South African, this book is a ‘Must-Have’. I salute the authors for accepting the challenge to put this coffee table edition together, and through that process raise funds for the ACVV Khayaletu Youth Centre.

They deserve your support.

Bryan Dowley  
**Spec-Savers South Africa CEO**

Just when you think you’ve seen it all, Ironman events manage to throw something new your way. It is for this reason that I continue to derive great pleasure and satisfaction from being involved at the very heart of organising this truly special event. The countless hours of preparation and dedication become worth every minute when you hear of the awe-inspiring true-life stories that emerge from each event. Since introducing the the Spec-Savers Ironman® South Africa triathlon event to the Eastern Cape, it has shown tremendous growth, and has emerged as a sporting culture for the thousands who put their bodies through the physical and mental paces required, just to be able to line up at the swim start and be part of something special.

The heart of an Ironman athlete is something that cannot be adequately defined in words. It is the inspirational individual stories and experiences that

truly make up the heart of an Ironman®, and we hope that by reading these testimonies you will be inspired to be part of what is today the quintessential endurance event.

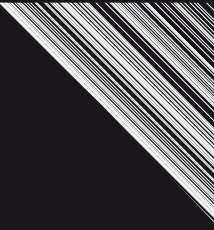
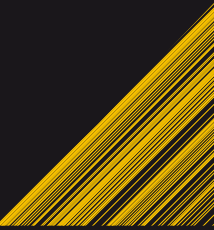
I have been given the privilege of helping to orchestrate this prestigious event. Ironman® athletes will undoubtedly tell you that it is more than just a race. It is a culture and a lifestyle. Being inducted into the Ironman® family by completing the first race, is what these athletes will carry with them always. Spectators who flock to witness the drama and experience the atmosphere, immediately recognise that they are witnessing the raw strength of the human spirit.

A heart-felt thanks should be extended to Bryan Dowley, CEO of Spec-Savers, for believing in a relatively unknown project and making the decision to get on board, back in 2003. Today, that ‘unknown project’ is known by thousands the world over and Bryan’s vision, together with ours, has been realised and continues to grow to unprecedented heights. The success the event so deservedly enjoys today would not have been at all possible without Bryan’s initiative and faith.

To the councillors and mayors of both Nelson Mandela Bay and Buffalo City Municipalities, who have so ably assisted us in bringing the Spec-Savers Ironman® South Africa and Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa events to the cities of Port Elizabeth and East London respectively, a big vote of thanks. Races such as ours, no matter how prestigious, would not exist without a host city, and both municipalities have played massive roles in making the Eastern Cape the Ironman triathlon centre of Africa.

Ironman triathlon is and always will be in the DNA of the Eastern Cape, Ironman athletes and myself. The Ironman triathlon lives up to an ideal that is summed up in the Ironman mantra of ‘ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE®’. And I firmly believe that under no other circumstance have these words ever been more true.

Keith Bowler  
**World Endurance South Africa MD**





01

DIRECTORS

INTERVIEWS:

KEITH BOWLER,

PAUL WOLFF

MANDLA MADWARA



## KEITH BOWLER

THE SPEC-SAVERS IRONMAN® SOUTH AFRICA EVENT MANAGING DIRECTOR

### WHAT WERE YOU DOING BEFORE IRONMAN® EVENTS?

Prior to Ironman Triathlons, I was working as Regional Manager for an investment house, handling the marketing and sales for the Eastern Cape region.

### WHERE DID YOU HEAR ABOUT IRONMAN® EVENTS FOR THE FIRST TIME?

I first heard about Ironman events while organising a Cumes cycle race at Kayalami. Myself and Paul Wolff, whom I had sponsored to be in the team to compete at the Cumes, started talking and the idea came up: Why not bring Ironman events back to South Africa?

### WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO GET INVOLVED WITH IRONMAN® EVENTS?

Paul Wolff and I were sitting around a braai contemplating building a triathlon which was to be called the 'Freedom Challenge'. Paul was to handle structural and logistical duties, while I would handle the event's marketing and sponsorships. At the same time, we had the vision for this fledgling idea to grow into an iconic event and eventually into an Ironman event.

I made contact with World Triathlon Corporation, owners of the world famous Ironman triathlon series who put me in touch with the licensees for South Africa. At that time, our Austrian partners were coming to South Africa to scout for a possible venue. We encouraged them to come to Port Elizabeth and showed them around. We secured the backing of the city as well as title sponsor, Spec-Savers, to bring the event to Port Elizabeth. All this happened in 2003, and only a year later the first Ironman® 70.3® Event took place in 2004 with 475 athletes competing.

### WHAT WAS YOUR INITIAL DREAM FOR THIS IRONMAN® EVENT?

Our initial dream was to build it and see it develop into an iconic event to be held in high esteem both locally and internationally. We wanted it to be the type of event that would raise the bar each passing year, both for participating athletes and for sponsors of the event.

The long-term dream was to see the race being sold out – and we're very much on track in that regard.

### WHERE DO YOU SEE IRONMAN® EVENTS IN FIVE YEARS AND 10 YEARS RESPECTIVELY?

We envision these Ironman events expanding to reach the maximum capacity, selling out a year ahead, as other Ironman® races around the world do. The

Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa event has met with tremendous success and has developed a new breed of triathlete participating in the sport. The maximum number of participants allowed at most Ironman triathlons is 2 200 but with the Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa event being able to accommodate wave starts, this has allowed for greater growth. The Spec-Savers Ironman® South Africa event is still, however, the flagship event and is the most prestigious race in Africa for which to gain entry.

#### **WHAT IS YOUR HIGH POINT, IF YOU THINK BACK OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS?**

The greatest high point I have experienced is the crowd support for the events year after year, as well as witnessing the growth in participation of both the Spec-Savers Ironman® South Africa and the Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa events.

#### **WHY DID YOU CHOOSE PORT ELIZABETH FOR THE IRONMAN® EVENT AND EAST LONDON FOR IRONMAN® 70.3®? WHY THE EASTERN CAPE?**

We're passionate about the Eastern Cape, so it was natural to consider Port Elizabeth as a venue for the Ironman® event. It was also our vision to keep Ironman® triathlon, as far as possible, unique to the Eastern Cape. Hence, we decided to host the Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa event in East London. We believe that the events have the ability to compete with the best in the country, and showcase the Eastern Cape as a premium sporting destination, capable of hosting big events.

#### **HOW HAS THE BUSINESS ASPECT GROWN IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS IN SOUTH AFRICA?**

In 2003 we started with three individuals: myself, Paul and a secretary, Sandri. Today we have six permanent staff and six contracted staff who handle all aspects of the events, planning a year in advance for each event.

#### **ARE YOU OR WERE YOU EVER AN ACTIVE SPORTSMAN?**

I was an active sportsman, passionate about rugby and sports in general.

#### **THE MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION THAT I AM SURE YOU ARE ASKED OFTEN IS: WOULD YOU EVER WANT TO DO THE IRONMAN® TRIATHLON YOURSELF?**

One very touching aspect of the race is the fantastic stories to emerge from each event. Watching individuals break new boundaries, overcome various obstacles, and cross the line to become an Ironman® athlete is truly awe-inspiring. I am inspired too by the athletes that compete. While it is impossible for me to do an Ironman® event in South Africa, I hope to do an Ironman® or Ironman® 70.3® event elsewhere in the world in years to come.

#### **HOW DO YOU BALANCE FAMILY LIFE AND CLEARLY NOT AN EIGHT-TO-FIVE JOB?**

My children, Callyn and Courtney, have grown up with our vision of Ironman® events, and have supported me in the time that I commit to the events. Courtney has competed in many IronKids® races.

#### **YOU HAVE A TREMENDOUSLY DEDICATED, MOTIVATED AND CARING TEAM – WHAT IS YOUR SECRET? WHY ARE YOU ALL SO PASSIONATE? IS IT BECAUSE OF THE INSPIRATIONAL STORIES AND PEOPLE YOU MEET, OR IS THAT ONLY A COMPONENT?**

The most important aspect is that our staff is selected for the passion they have for the events and the Ironman® brand. Each staff member takes ownership of their portfolio and their enthusiasm is simply a by-product. World Endurance South Africa staff lives the brand.

#### **ARE YOU ORIGINALLY FROM PORT ELIZABETH?**

I was born in Umtali, Zimbabwe, and moved to South Africa at the age of 18. I travelled all over the country before eventually settling in Port Elizabeth.

#### **WHAT DOES THE SPIRIT OF IRONMAN® TRIATHLON MEAN TO YOU?**

The spirit of Ironman® triathlon all boils down to the Ironman® mantra, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE®. I have indeed been fortunate to witness this phenomenon on many occasions and, although I have experienced it many times, each new time evokes an indescribable feeling, that you only get when you witness it for yourself.

## **MANDLA MADWARA**

DIRECTOR OF TRIANGLE EVENTS SOUTH AFRICA

#### **WHEN DID YOU FIRST HEAR ABOUT IRONMAN® EVENTS?**

I was introduced to Ironman® events in 2004 by Keith's friend, Graeme Lacey, and subsequently received a full briefing from Keith. I was asked to sell the hosting of the event to then Mayor Mr Noeba Faku.

#### **WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO GET INVOLVED WITH IRONMAN® EVENTS?**

Firstly, the concept appealed to me, as I found it to be unique and appealing. Port Elizabeth did not have professional soccer and rugby teams to attract crowds, and I saw Ironman® events as the perfect 'substitute'. I had an opportunity to consult one-to-one with former Mayor Faku, who loved the idea on the spot, and we have never looked back since. We then engaged in the process of negotiating a contract with the city, and of course legal experts assisted both





parties, to structure the basis and the responsibilities to make the event a success.

**ARE YOU INVOLVED FULL-TIME WITH THE SPEC-SAVERS IRONMAN® 70.3® SOUTH AFRICA? WHAT IS YOUR ROLE OR DESIGNATION?**

I became involved with Keith, Paul, Stefan, Helge and Georg in 2004 and together we crafted vision, mission, growth strategy, shop, etc. It was therefore exciting to witness the first race and experience the plans unfolding before my eyes.

My job as Director of World Endurance South Africa (WESA), is to manage relationships between politicians and WESA, as well as to manage political and VIP protocol during the event. I also deal with behind-the-scenes political challenges that face the event.

**DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCE AT THE FIRST IRONMAN® 70.3® TRIATHLON HELD IN PORT ELIZABETH IN 2004.**

I was full of goosebumps when I witnessed the first event unfolding, blessed with perfect weather and crowds. I could not believe my eyes before the swim start when I watched the athletes in cute swimsuits ready to get into the water. The swim start is very spectacular. When the athletes finally hit the water they look like sardines swimming far out into the sea, as they followed the swim route.

**YOU LIVE THE BRAND AND YOU ARE KNOWN FOR YOUR PASSION AND LOYALTY. WHAT INSPIRED THIS?**

What inspires me is my love for the city, to start with; to be part of making the city successful fulfils my vision. The cherry on top is the professionalism of the organisers, the passion of the volunteers and the commitment of the WESA staff. We are also very lucky to have a committed sponsor who has tremendous love for the city: Mr Dowley epitomises this passion for the city. The various hosts in Port Elizabeth and East London were also fully committed and behind us.

**YOU ARE THE CEO OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRIATHLON DEVELOPMENT TEAM. TELL US HOW THIS CAME ABOUT AND WHAT YOUR DREAM IS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM.**

One of the highlights was the first participation by Black athletes, some of whom had never swum until they were taught by Paul and Helge. We had to organise sponsors to buy bicycles, and swim and race clothing and equipment. I approached one of my friends, Mr Thembu Matunda, a local quantity surveyor and the owner of BTKM, who did not hesitate to put his money on the table. The development team has grown in leaps and bounds in spite of the funding being a limiting factor.

**WHAT ARE THE HIGHLIGHTS, IF YOU THINK BACK OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS?**

I think the high point is to see the growth of the Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa event in terms of the number of athletes, the improvement in the quality of the race, and to witness the spirit of entrepreneurship. The people of Nelson Mandela Bay have grown to embrace the race and have begun to protect it jealously – it is amazing! One day Helge was crossing the road to board the VIP bus to Old Cash Store in Sardinia Bay, and I was standing behind him, when he unintentionally pushed an elderly woman to allow himself space to cross the road. The woman pushed him back and commented that she was not about to be pushed around when she had gone to all the trouble to wake up early in the morning to witness the race. When Helge tried to explain who he was and what his intentions were, the woman replied that she did not care who he was, she was there to watch the race – period!

I smiled and said to myself, “Yes! That is the spirit of Port Elizabeth people and their passion.”

**YOU ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT THE EASTERN CAPE. WHAT MAKES PORT ELIZABETH SO SPECIAL FOR THE SPEC-SAVERS IRONMAN® SOUTH AFRICA EVENT AND EAST LONDON FOR THE THE SPEC-SAVERS IRONMAN® 70.3® SOUTH AFRICA EVENT? WHY THE EASTERN CAPE?**

The Eastern Cape deserves to be on the world map of sports and tourism because of the natural beauty and the friendly people that the athletes have come to admire. The two cities are compact and easy to manage as far as the race course and traffic control is concerned, when roads are closed. People can see from their houses, and the beach-front crowds add to the ambience.

**HOW HAS THE BUSINESS ASPECT GROWN IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS IN SOUTH AFRICA?**

The growth of the business side can be attributed to vision, planning, risk management and making mistakes, but continuing to review our weaknesses. We have also involved professionals to review the business critically from all angles, i.e. finance, the brand, marketing and so on.

**THE MILLION-DOLLAR QUESTION THAT I AM SURE YOU ARE OFTEN ASKED IS: WOULD YOU EVER WANT TO DO THE IRONMAN® YOURSELF?**

Yes, I would like to do the Ironman® event myself, if I could overcome my phobia of the sea. I enjoy swimming in the pool where I have control, but I find the sea intimidating.

### **WHAT GIVES YOU THE GREATEST SATISFACTION IN LIFE, AND IN THE IRONMAN® EVENT?**

What gives me satisfaction in life is to see a successful business crafted from scratch, winning! I admire the spirit of entrepreneurship. When carefully put into action, it will always succeed – ask Richard Branson. I derive satisfaction from being part of a professional team in WESA, to be able to stage such a huge international event that has an African context and flavour, and that is respected all over the world, but embraced by our own local citizens. Hola! Hola! The Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa event!

### **HOW DO YOU BALANCE FAMILY LIFE AND CLEARLY NOT AN EIGHT-TO-FIVE JOB?**

I put in extra hours between family and business, and I make sure that I have leisure as well. What is this life if we do not enjoy it? What drives my passion is to see the fruits of the freedom that we sacrificed our youth for, being enjoyed by all South Africans: Black or White, rich or poor. I am well-travelled and I am inspired when I see another nation winning due to hard work, and because they invest in education and support new business.

### **WHAT DOES THE SPIRIT OF IRONMAN® TRIATHLON MEAN TO YOU?**

I have been in exile, where I lived in Tanzania, and studied in Czechoslovakia and Glasgow in Scotland. There is nothing that beats home, so I am happy to be back in Port Elizabeth. The spirit of Ironman® triathlon runs deep in my blood.

## **PAUL WOLFF**

THE SPEC-SAVERS IRONMAN® SOUTH AFRICA EVENT RACE DIRECTOR & HEAD OF DEVELOPMENT TEAM

An interview as the Race Director.

*This book will show that the Ironman® triathlon is achievable for anyone who decides that they will accept a challenge to reform their way of life. There are very few people who cannot do this. I have personally coached someone who weighed 145 kg and two years later finished an Ironman® triathlon weighing 90 kg.*

### **HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN INVOLVED WITH IRONMAN® TRIATHLONS?**

I've been involved with Ironman® triathlons for eight years, which originated at a braai at my house one night. Keith Bowler and I decided to see if we could bring Ironman® events back to S A. We started a race called the Nelson Mandela Bay Freedom Challenge. I was going to handle the structural and logistical challenges, while Keith Bowler and Mandla Madwara would take care of the event management and marketing. At the time, the city of Port Elizabeth and Spec-Savers were to be small sponsors, along with the company that Mandla worked for named 'Freedom Enterprises', who had the rights to build the Nelson Mandela Statue at the harbour.

During the application for the Ironman® event licence, we were told that an Austrian company by the name of Triangle owned the licence. After inviting them to S A, they were so impressed with what we had achieved that we set up a company together.

Stefan from the Austrian company then went to the Ironman® World Championship in Hawaii and negotiated a Ironman® 70.3® race (now called the Spec-Savers Ironman®70.3® South Africa) for March the following year. This was already October. We organised this first race with our Austrian partners with both Keith and I still doing our normal jobs. I had a Biokinetics practice and Keith was Regional Manager of a major asset management company and Mandla worked for Freedom Enterprises. After the first Ironman® event that took place in Port Elizabeth, I was supposed to continue with Triangle Events South Africa on a part-time basis for six months, and Keith was to continue his employment as regional manager for another year. Within one month after the Spec-Savers Ironman® 70.3® South Africa, both Keith and I were employed at Triangle Events South Africa on a full-time basis, with a secretary. Mandla was to remain at his place of employment and continue his work as director for Triangle Events South Africa.

### **WHY IS BUFFALO CITY SO WELL SUITED TO DO THE SPEC-SAVERS IRONMAN® 70.3® SOUTH AFRICA EVENT?**

We are able to close a dual carriage-way, and we are able to host a large number of athletes, as they start in waves.

### **WHY IS PORT ELIZABETH SUCH A GOOD VENUE TO HOST THE SPEC-SAVERS IRONMAN® SOUTH AFRICA EVENT?**

The most dangerous part is a mass start in the sea, and the bay is safe from weather changes as the water is not deep. It also lends itself to crowd support, and the three cycle and run legs have the athletes passing the waiting crowds on the beach regularly.

