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Mr. Tough Guy

Ken Welsh's career was running on empty until he turned running, biking and swimming into a career

STORY BY **KATY RYAN** | PHOTO BY **KENNY JOHNSON**



FAST FACTS ▶

- ▶ Ken Welsh
- ▶ Owner of Midwest Triathlon Coaching
- ▶ Company profile: Midwest Triathlon Coaching (MTC) is a one-man operation dedicated to getting clients prepared for triathlons. Since the 2007 season MTC athletes have raced in more than 15 Ironman competitions and 45 Half Ironman competitions. Welsh has aided 21 athletes in completing their first-ever Half Ironman.

by finishing 10th in his age group at that year's Ironman Canada event. "They even put a little article about me in the magazine," he recalls.

But it wasn't just his co-workers who were taking notice of Welsh's success; as it turns out, there aren't a lot of Kona-qualified athletes in the Kansas City area. Soon people were asking him to help them train for triathlons.

In late 2006 Welsh had a handful of pupils paying him to help them prepare for a full Ironman in Wisconsin. "Every one of them did really, really well," he says. "And I thought, *Not only do I have the aptitude to do this on my own, I can also help other people.*"

It was about that time that Welsh had another setback in his sales career when a couple of big sales fell through. "I was beating my head against a wall," he says.

ed to do," he recalls. "I bounced from job to job. It was frustrating."

Meanwhile he kept competing in triathlons—something he has been doing since the early 1990s when his brother-in-law introduced him to the sport that combines a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run. "He kind of goaded me into it," Welsh recalls. "[He said,] 'What do you think, Mr. Tough Guy? Do you think you can handle it?'"

Welsh, who was born and raised in Canada, had recently finished a tour of duty with the Canadian armed forces and, consequently, knew plenty about being tough. So he signed up for a small triathlon in Bellingham, Washington. "I was thinking, *How hard can it be?*" Welsh says. "And of course it kicked my butt."

But he liked the challenge, so Welsh stuck

with it. He ran a few more races, eventually building up to a full Ironman. "The day after the race, [I was thinking,] *I'm doing this again,*" he says. "*This is awesome.*"

And it wasn't long before Welsh was pretty awesome himself. In 2002—while still working for *KC Magazine*—he qualified for the prestigious Kona Ironman

When Ken Welsh lost his job as publisher of *KC Magazine* due to a corporate buyout, part of his severance package included career counseling. But that's not what landed him where he is today—working his dream job and making more money than ever before. Welsh had his ticket to success all along.

"It was just like what you read in the business books," he says, thinking back to the genesis of his company. "Find what you're most passionate about, and make that your job."

As simple as that sounds, Welsh admits it took him a while to find a way to turn his passion into profitability—after all, most people pay to participate in triathlons, not the other way around.

That's why Welsh spent the first several years after his severance following

Welsh: "I remember thinking, *I wish I could find a job I'm as good at as I am at triathloning.* It finally hit me in the head: *Why not put the two things together?*"

the counselor's advice and trying to rebuild his career. As a magazine publisher, Welsh's years of experience and strengths were in management and sales. So he went through several sales jobs, but none of them really took hold.

"I was hopping around, bouncing around, trying to find something I want-

"I remember thinking, *I wish I could find a job I'm as good at as I am at triathloning*. It finally hit me in the head: *Why not put the two things together?*"

"I'd always been entrepreneurial," Welsh continues. "But I'd never had my own company. So it was a little scary."

Fortunately he didn't have much to lose at the time. "I was on straight commission at my sales job then, and not much was coming in," Welsh says. I figured whatever I do can't be much worse than this."

So Welsh had a friend of his design a logo for the new company, **Midwest Triathlon Coaching**, and another friend set up a Web site—both at a reduced rate. Though he was eager to get started, Welsh says he took his time on these initial steps because he knew the Web site would be critical to the success of his business.

The design for the site grew directly out of Welsh's business plan, which he used to sketch out the various pages. Once the initial concept was in place, Welsh turned things over to his friend who turned out a functional site that Welsh could manage himself.

"One of my pet peeves is when Web sites are out of date," Welsh says. "If you're going to have outdated material out there, you might as well not have anything at all."

The entrepreneur also did some homework on search engines, most notably

Google. "Most people don't click through a bunch of pages on Google to find something," he explains. "They usually click on something on the first page."

To ensure that Midwest Triathlon Coaching made its way to the top of the pile when Web surfers went looking for a KC-based triathlon coach, Welsh employed two main strategies.

First, he was very deliberate about the verbiage used on the site. (For instance, he changed the word "coaching" to "coach" whenever possible, because the latter is a more common search term.)

The second strategy was to find owners of other Web sites (like cycle shops and triathlon associations) and ask them to link to Midwest Triathlon Coaching's site. The more links he generated, the more credibility Welsh established with Google, lifting his site higher in the search results.

Once the site was finally ready, Welsh turned his sights on the **USA Triathlon Association** (USATA) certification, something he knew would bring him further credibility. He got the certification by attending a three-day educational clinic at a cost of \$525.

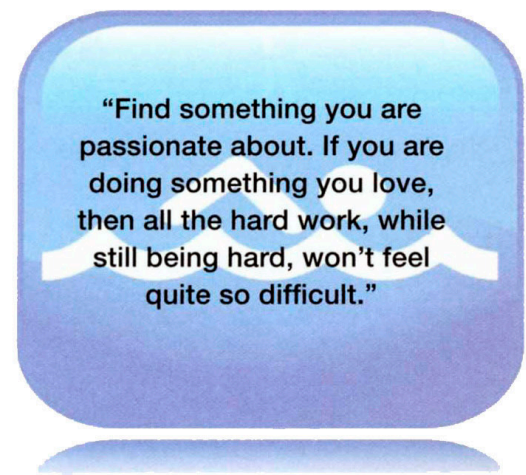
Now able to look fondly back at those early days, Welsh compares starting a business to becoming a triathlete: "There's a learning curve in both," he

says. "When you get into triathloning, you don't know what you're doing or how to do it—same thing with [owning a] business. But both have a lot of resources to help you figure it out. And in both cases it takes a heck of a lot of hard work and long hours."

By approaching his business with the same level of intensity he exerts in his sport, the entrepreneur has grown Midwest Triathlon Coaching quickly using a straightforward process. When an interested party contacts him, Welsh meets that person at a coffee shop or conducts a phone interview where he gets background information about them, including athletic abilities and expectations. He then reviews an overall annual training plan with them, then assigns a weekly training schedule and tracks their progress. In 2008 Welsh went from coaching six athletes to 25, and this year he peaked at 38 pupils.

Since he started the business his rates have increased fourfold without any sign of sticker shock from clients. And with the only overhead being a laptop, a **Blackberry** and a cell phone, those profits are going straight into Welsh's pocket—a pocket you'll usually find in a pair of shorts, accompanied by a t-shirt and flip-flops. Calling all the shots clearly has its perks. **KCB**

WELSH'S TIPS FOR ENTREPRENEURS ▶



"Find something you are passionate about. If you are doing something you love, then all the hard work, while still being hard, won't feel quite so difficult."



"A great idea is only great if you can easily explain it to others through effective marketing."



"Have a simple, effective Web site that you can edit without the aid of a programmer."