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These residents are made of iron:

Two Barrington residents are the only Rhode Islanders racing in this year's Ironman Hawaii

By Cindy VanSchalkwyk for *EastBayRI.com*

Barrington, RI — Only two people from Rhode Island will be racing in Ironman Hawaii this year, and they are both from Barrington.

For Vinu Malik, 41, and Lisbeth Kenyon, 43, Hawaii will not be a relaxed vision of palm trees and white sands. The Ironman course winds across miles of black lava fields under searing hot sunshine, and rises up thousands of feet in elevation.

"They're grueling conditions. It's a tortuous course past lava fields, no shade. It's not the Hawaii you think about with all the palm trees and the lush green," Mr. Malik said.

Ironman Hawaii — this year scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 11 — is for those who have trained hard and well. Less than one percent of triathletes ever qualify to race Ironman Hawaii. Ms. Kenyon has competed in Ironman Hawaii once before, and Mr. Malik, five times. Despite the difficulty of the competition and the terrain, the competitors said the race is something they look forward to.

"It is fun. Training is the hard part. When you've put in the training, race day should be a lot of fun," Ms. Kenyon said.

Even though Ms. Kenyon views the day as enjoyable in its own way, she does not downplay the difficulty of the course. She said during the bike portion of the course wind gusts can surprise you.

"I did the race in '96 and I literally saw this woman being blown off her bike from a crosswind," she said.

Just to qualify for Ironman Hawaii is an accomplishment. Mr. Malik qualified at a Lake Placid Ironman and July, and Ms. Kenyon in November at Ironman Florida. Ms. Kenyon also holds a record for the world's fastest time in her age group at a qualifying event.

Mr. Malik said triathlons have replaced marathons as the fastest growing endurance sport in the country. An Ironman competition includes a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a 26.2-mile run.



Lisbeth Kenyon (left) and Vinu Malik, both Barrington residents, will compete in this year's Ironman Hawaii triathlon.
(EastBayRI.com / Christine Hochkeppel)

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Meeting

Ms. Kenyon and her husband Todd, also a triathlete, met Mr. Malik the same day they moved into town six years ago. While waiting for their furniture to arrive from Kentucky, they ran, biked, and swam in the Bayside YMCA Triathlon.

“We were waiting for a moving van but had our bikes on our cars,” Ms. Kenyon said.

It was the first time they had met Mr. Malik, but not the first time they had heard about him and his dedication to triathlons.

Mr. Malik influenced Ms. Kenyon and her husband to move to Barrington even before the couple had met Mr. Malik. They read an article in Triathlete magazine in which Mr. Malik said how great Barrington was for training, including the Bay, and small adjacent towns great for biking and running.

“Todd flew there and checked it out. So we packed up stuff and quit jobs,” Ms. Kenyon said.

“Todd is a big windsurfer. He used to be a marine biologist. He needed to come closer to the coast.”

Mr. Malik and Ms. Kenyon frequently train together. They said it is easier to stay motivated when training with others.

For the intensive part of their training Mr. Malik and Ms. Kenyon often are on their own, but for base training they are frequently joined by others, including Mr. Kenyon. There is a group, the FuelBelt Race Team, that meets on Thursday nights and runs in town. The group includes Barrington High School students and people of all ages from the East Bay, Seekonk and the West Bay, Mr. Malik said.

At its most intense, training shoots up to around 20 hours a week running, biking, swimming. The two or three weeks before race day the pace lets up a little so athletes will be ready but not overtaxed. It’s a team effort with others helping them to reach their peak performance. A key training partner, Peter Russo, from Rumford, is both friend and trainer, who pushes both Mr. Malik and Ms. Kenyon to their limits.

“He pushes us so hard I’ve used very bad language, but then you appreciate it later,” Ms. Kenyon said.

Scott Molina, a coach and friend to Mr. Malik, crafted their training programs. Mr. Molina won the Ironman Hawaii competition in 1988.

“Scott lives in New Zealand, and he’s coming back to race as an amateur (rather than a pro) this year. He tells us how to put the mileage in,” Mr. Malik said.



Vinu Malik and Lisbeth Kenyon pedal through a recent morning workout.
(EastBayRI.com / Christine Hochkeppel)

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Finding the time to train is always a challenge. Both competitors are involved in companies they own or companies owned by their spouses, plus they each have children. The Kenyons have three children ranging in age from six to 10. The Maliks have a daughter who is one and a half, with another child due in December. Training sometimes means sacrificing sleep.

“There’s a lot of getting up at 5 a.m. You can get in a hour and a half workout before you even have to wake up your kids,” Ms. Kenyon said.

Strong Support

Both Mr. Malik and Ms. Kenyon said it would not be possible to train for an Ironman competition, particularly Ironman Hawaii, without the support of their spouses and family.

Ms. Kenyon said she and her husband will take turns training for a competition, so that neither of them have to put in the largest amount of hours training at the same time.

Deep into training, some things have to slide.

“During that time you have to have support from your family. The grocery shopping isn’t as it should be. You forget a birthday party or two,” Ms. Kenyon said.

Both have trained for triathlons for years; Ms. Kenyon since 1992, and Mr. Malik since 1986.

“We’re passionate about our hobbies. I can’t do this without (Ann’s) support. She gets behind it, thank God,” Mr. Malik said.

When the competitors do have spare time, they each like to spend time with their families. Mr. Malik travels extensively with his family. Ms. Kenyon enjoys reading books, especially authors from her native Norway.

Sponsorship Support

Ms. Kenyon is sponsored by several companies, including Power Bar, which well known in the fitness world, and her husband’s company, TTBikefit. Both competitors said nutrition is an essential part of training and race day.

Mr. Malik’s wife, Ann, said there is always a good supply on hand of the kind of nutrition needed to fuel an athlete.

“These guys all have cabinets full of stuff. All their drinks and supplements and bottles,” Ms. Malik said.

To carry drinks like Gatorade and gel nutrition packs, or whatever else is needed on the course, both competitors rely on FuelBelt, a company started from scratch 11 years ago by Mr. Malik, and now known throughout the fitness world. The line includes waist packs to hold anything necessary for racers to keep hydrated, plus items like visors and even dog gear. FuelBelt’s reputation has grown to the extent it is now endorsed on containers of powdered Gatorade. •

About FuelBelt, Inc.

FuelBelt, Inc. is the world leader in hydration belts and accessories. Founded in 1998 by 6-time Ironman World Championship participant, Vinu Malik, FuelBelt continues to evolve to serve the needs of athletes, from runners to cyclists, to competitive triathletes such as Ironman World Champions Craig Alexander and Chrissie Wellington. FuelBelts have been used to break world records, personal bests, and have even been used at the Olympic world stage, where every effort and every second counts. For more information, please visit www.FuelBelt.com.