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October 11, 2008 / For immediate release

## Arrival of the fittest

By Richard Salit for *The Providence Journal*

*Barrington, RI* — Their friendship began in the summer of 2005 when she and her family moved to town, arriving before the movers. She had only what she needed — an air mattress to sleep on and her bathing suit, bike and running shoes to do the town's annual sprint-distance triathlon the next day.

That's where Vinu Malik, a local fixture in the endurance sport, couldn't help but notice Lisbeth Kenyon, the newcomer to the quiet bedroom community. Not only did the tall, thin, blond Norwegian blow away the women's field that day, she and her husband were among the top finishers overall.

Three years later and after months of grueling training together, Malik and Kenyon will be the only Rhode Islanders competing in today's Ironman World Championship, in Kona, Hawaii, triathlon's premier event.

"We're not racing each other," Malik, 41, said one recent day while preparing to leave for Hawaii and sitting across from Kenyon in his kitchen.

"That's what you think," Kenyon, 43, teased. When pressed to elaborate, she said, "I have my predictions, but I'll keep them to myself."

Today they'll attempt to swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles and run 26.2 miles — the definition of Ironman distance — just as they have each done many times, including the races where their times qualified them to go to Kona.

But unlike any other Ironman, the World Championship will pit them against the best pro and amateur triathletes in the world — and in Kona's notoriously difficult conditions.

If the wind and ascents don't hurt a runner, the typical 90-degree temperatures and 90-percent humidity will. In one of his five Kona races, Malik became so dehydrated he had to stop for intravenous fluids four times.

Even on a good personal day, and in average conditions, it would take Malik and Kenyon close to 10 hours to cover the distance. Others who attempt Ironman events shoot for a time several hours longer or simply hope to finish.

But Kenyon and Malik are in the top echelon of triathletes. To qualify, Kenyon finished in 9 hours, 41 minutes last year at Ironman Florida, making her the top female amateur in the race. Malik later discovered that her time was the fastest in the world in 2007 among female amateurs of all ages.

"I'll be the first to say Lisbeth is a genetic freak," said Malik, noting that their times in all three events are comparable.



Vinu Malik, right, and Lisbeth Kenyon, practice their cycling in Barrington. Today the two triathletes will swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles and run 26.2 miles in the Ironman World Championship, in Kona, Hawaii. (*The Providence Journal* / Bob Thayer)

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When Malik, who has completed 25 Ironmans, recounts having been to Kona five times since 1995, Kenyon says, “That’s pretty impressive. It’s tough to qualify as a male.”

It sure was for Malik this year. At Ironman Lake Placid, on a raw and rainy day this summer, he had to be among the top dozen finishers among the 400 in his age group. If he didn’t make up a few places during the final segment of the event — the marathon — he wasn’t going to qualify for Kona. He ended up grabbing the last spot by running the final mile in 5:50, a pace that even good runners have a tough time doing for just one mile.

Malik is the founder of FuelBelt, a Warren-based company that caters to runners with its line of belts specially designed to carry water bottles. Kenyon works with her husband, Todd, at their business, Nobadeer Capital Management, in Barrington. Kenyon moved from Kentucky three years ago with three small children. Malik and his wife recently had a baby and are expecting another. But one constant in their lives, through infancies and injuries, has been triathlon.

Kenyon, a high school swimmer, recalls the days after college when her only interest in athletics was working out indoors.

“I just wanted to go to the gym and look good,” she says.

A friend got her and her husband interested in triathlon in 1992 and the couple was immediately hooked.

“It became an instant lifestyle,” Kenyon said.

Since Malik’s Lake Placid performance, the two have known they were both headed to Kona and have been working out together.

“The training is about 20 to 25 hours a week for the past five weeks,” said Malik.

For Kenyon, hard training days meant getting up at 5 a.m. to be at the Bayside YMCA pool by 5:30 for a one-hour swim. She would return home to wake the kids and send them off to school. By 8:30, she’d be off with Malik for bike rides of 80 to 100 miles.

“Then we would get off the bike and immediately run for 40 minutes,” she said. “I’ve never trained harder.”

She’s hoping her efforts will be rewarded, 12 years after her first and only visit to Kona when “the heat got to me.”

“My goal is, number one, to finish this coherent and hopefully smiling. You never know what the day will bring,” she said. “The number two goal is to race it. I would love to podium in my age group.”

Friends and family back home, particularly fellow members of the FuelBelt Race Team, will be tracking them online as the race progresses today.

“Regardless of the training, it’s going to be a tough day,” Kenyon said. •

### **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](http://www.FuelBelt.com).