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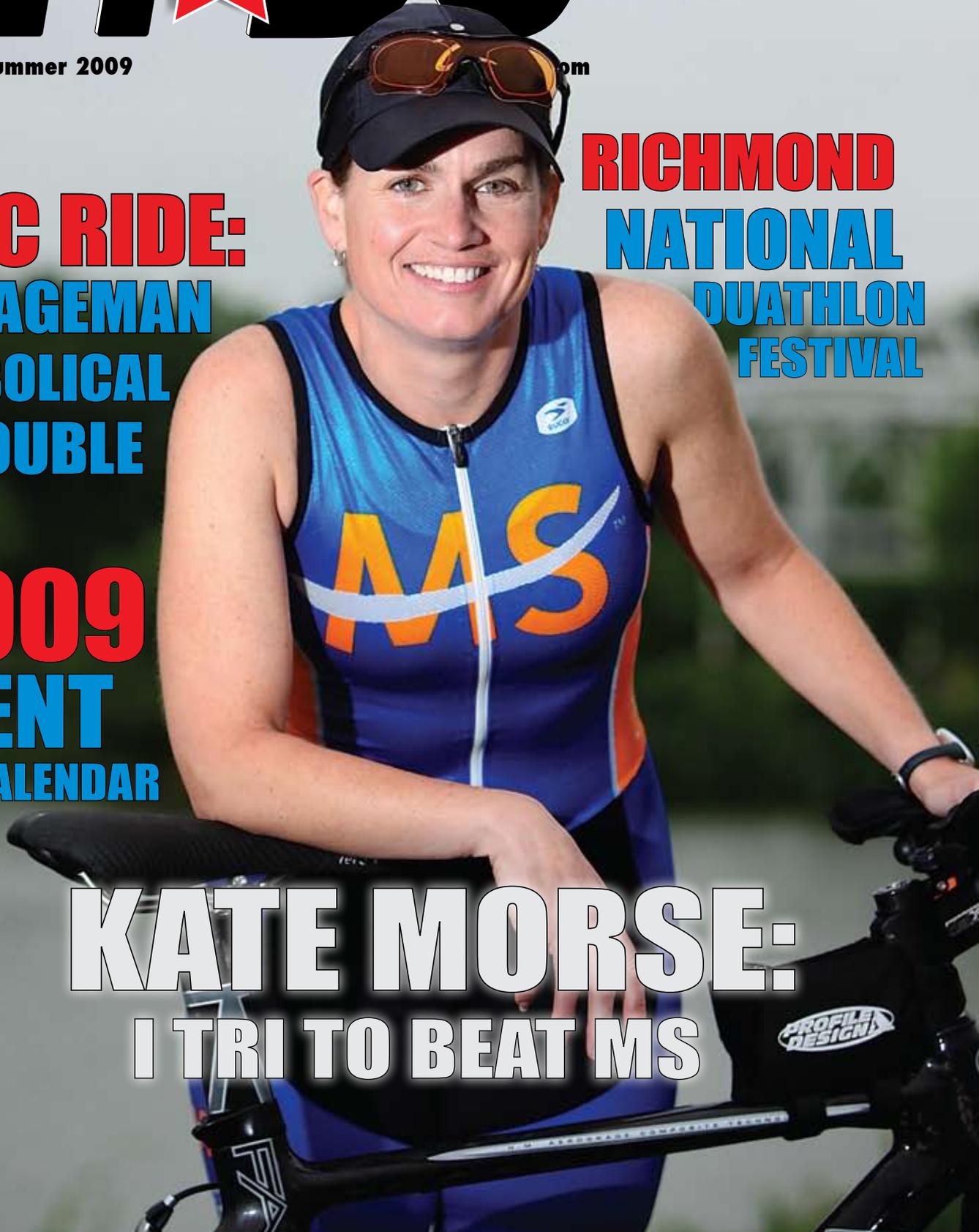
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KATE MORSE:
I TRI TO BEAT MS



MS STRIKE OUT

One Triathlete's Story of Her Battles on & off the Course with Multiple Sclerosis

by Kate Morse

From the day I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), I focused my competitive nature on three goals: staying as active as possible; beating MS; and finding a cure. More importantly, I want to encourage others living with MS to stay active too. Not everyone with MS will complete a triathlon but, if I have my way, they'll be more active.

Each triathlete has his or her own reasons to compete in triathlons. My competitive nature is what led me to multisport; I came to the sport after years of competitive running in high school and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. My then-boyfriend-now-husband had raced bicycles in high school and college and put me on my first road bike. Soon swimming followed. I was hooked on multisport. Little did I know what my "racecourse" would look like.

The Diagnosis

Even while I was enjoying competing in tris, I knew something was wrong with me physically. In September 2001, my speech was slurred and I sounded intoxicated; within days, my speech was unintelligible, to the point that a co-worker had to call my doctor to explain who I was and why I was calling. After a CT Scan, a MRI, several blood tests, and one very painful spinal tap, MS was "ruled out." A doctor prescribed antibiotics for Lyme disease and told me to follow up with another MRI in six months. After a few days, my speech improved. I was content to ignore other minor symptoms.

A few months later, I moved to Washington, D.C., and had to convince my new doctor to send me for the recommended follow-up MRI. She was not concerned about my slurred speech and never called to discuss my MRI results. Once again, I chose to ignore my concerns.

To my surprise, in February 2004, I was diagnosed with MS, a month before I was planning to run my first marathon. I hadn't trained well in weeks: my balance was off, I kept tripping during runs, and I was losing vision in one eye. While it occurred to me that this episode could be linked to the one in 2001, I tried to ignore it. When my training stalled, I accepted that I had to find a new doctor. Prior to my first meeting with

the new doctor, I retrieved the MRI report that compared the old MRI films with the more recent one. The report read, "Consistent with the progress of the disease." But there was no explanation – what disease? What did this statement mean? My new doctor referred me to a neurologist.

As I described my symptoms and experiences to the neurologist, she stopped me when I said MS had been "ruled out." She explained with no test for MS, a person is diagnosed through the elimination of other diseases. After reviewing my



What is Multiple Sclerosis?

Multiple sclerosis (or MS) is a chronic, often disabling disease that attacks the central nervous system (CNS), which is made up of the brain, spinal cord, and optic nerves. Symptoms may be mild, such as numbness in the limbs, or severe, such as paralysis or loss of vision. The progress, severity, and specific symptoms of MS are unpredictable and vary from one person to another. Today, new treatments and advances in research are giving new hope to people affected by the disease.

Source: National MS Society, <http://www.nationalmssociety.org>

file, she calmly stated, “You have MS.” [I was absolutely dumbfounded. I was a healthy woman who was just having a little training trouble. How did I end up diagnosed with MS?

Learning to Race With MS

I started researching MS online and became frustrated when the advice to be active was followed with, “Walk to the mailbox each day.” Walk to the mailbox? I am a runner! I am training for a marathon! I am a triathlete! I postponed my first marathon, but ran the Marine Corps Marathon later that year with MS Society’s National Capitol Chapter the Marathon Strides Against MS team. It was miserable: the weather was hot and I walked most of the second half, but I finished, swearing it would be my last. But then, I had a unique opportunity to run the Boston Marathon and be coached by Karen Smyers, seven-time U.S.A. Triathlon Elite National Champion and winner of the Hawaiian Ironman World Championship. With her guidance, I trained and ran the 2007 and 2008 Boston Marathons with the Central New England Chapter of the MS Society. I felt good enough to squeeze in the 2007 Marine Corps marathon too.

Racing With Gratitude

I am thankful for every race in which I am able to compete. Mark Allen said it best: Race with gratitude. “In the heat of competition it’s easy to get stuck on what is not going well, which causes you to lose sight of how lucky you are to be able to race... Find that place within yourself that is grateful to be alive and fit enough to even consider undertaking a triathlon.” With MS, my understanding of how lucky I am to be able to race is immeasurable. I am just as grateful for great training days as I am for difficult training days and races, when everything is a struggle. Recovering from training or a race reminds me that I can compete when others living with MS may not be able to.

I am lucky to have crossed the finish line of multiple marathons, road races, Bike MS events, and triathlons. I signed up for my first Ironman 70.3 while watching Ironman Kona. Watching John Blaze, [a triathlete who suffered from and rose awareness for ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease),] and the athletes he has motivated to barrel roll across countless finish lines inspired my husband and me to race while raising awareness about MS. I completed Ironman 70.3 Providence with the Strike Out MS logo emblazoned across my chest.



Photo: Nelson Morse



Photo: Dan Hicok

In my effort to raise awareness about MS, this will be my second year racing in Strike Out MS gear. Last season, others joined our cause and now also compete in Strike Out MS tri gear. Fellow racers offer words of encouragement when they learn I am racing for myself and for others living with MS. If you have raced, you know how a stranger’s uplifting words keep you moving.

Most days, no one can tell that I live with MS; I can almost ignore it myself. While I have not had many new exacerbations since my diagnosis, I experience temporary relapses when severely stressed, overheated, or hungry. Numb hands and feet serve as a quick reminder to slow down, drink fluids, or eat. Proper training, rest, and nutrition are essential for every athlete, but the margin for error is smaller with MS.

Everyone who stands at the start line has overcome adversity or fear. I stand at the start line with a deeply personal understanding that our time being able-bodied is a fleeting gift. When the day comes that I can no longer step to the start, I will know that I have eked every step and pedal stroke out of life.

To learn more about MS, visit the National MS Society: <http://www.nationalmssociety.org/about-multiple-sclerosis/index.aspx>



Photo: Nelson Morse

Important Facts

- MS is a chronic, unpredictable neurological disease that affects the central nervous system.
- Different people are likely to experience very different symptoms.
- MS is different from muscular dystrophy (MD), which is a group of disorders that cause progressive and irreversible wasting away of muscle tissue. Although MD has some symptoms in common with MS—such as weakness and problems with walking—MD affects the muscles directly while MS affects the central nervous system.
- MS is not contagious and is not directly inherited.
- Most people with MS have a normal or near-normal life expectancy.
- The majority of people with MS do not become severely disabled.
- There are now FDA-approved medications that have been shown to reduce the number of relapses and “modify” or slow down the underlying course of MS.
- People who are diagnosed with a clinically isolated syndrome (CIS) have had one episode of neurologic damage that is similar to the damage that occurs in MS, but they have not yet met the criteria for a definite diagnosis of MS.

Source: National MS Society
<http://www.nationalmssociety.org>