

# Competitor Takes on Ironman After Heart Transplant

Competitor takes on Ironman on third anniversary of heart transplant

*The Associated Press*

**KAILUA-KONA, Hawaii**

It's long been said that it takes a lot of heart to tackle the Ironman World Championship.

Kyle Garlett is the first triathlete to try it with someone else's heart.

On Saturday, three years to the day that he received his heart transplant, Garlett will be among nearly 1,800 triathletes lined up along Kailua Bay, eager to get started on the 140.6-mile endurance race that includes a 2.4-mile ocean swim, 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run.

"I really want to finish the race, but it won't define anything about me," said Garlett, 38. "It would put an exclamation on my recovery. Three years ago, I couldn't make it up the stairs. My life could not be more different."

The Los Angeles-based writer and motivational speaker has been diagnosed four times with cancer. He fought off Hodgkin's lymphoma in 1989 as an 18-year-old high school senior, and again in 1991 and 1994. A bone marrow transplant in 1994 damaged his heart.

In 1997, Garlett heard the devastating news again. He had secondary leukemia, triggered by chemotherapy drugs.

"At that point, I'd been fighting for eight years. I really thought I was going to die," he said. "That was the darkest day."

Three years of chemotherapy knocked out the leukemia, but repeated blasts of cancer-fighting drugs wreaked havoc.

In 2000, Garlett's right hip and left shoulder were replaced, and in 2001 he was placed on the heart transplant list. Then, on Oct. 10, 2006, he got the call. A 42-year-old construction worker had died on the job and Garlett was to receive his heart.

"It was such a different feeling from all the previous things," he said. "This time it was like they were repairing me finally."

By then, Garlett had become involved in the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society and its fundraising program Team in Training.

"I knew I wanted to do an event, maybe a marathon" he said. "But I hate running, so I figured I could handle that if I got to swim and bike, too. I really enjoyed that first one in 2007. But Ironman? That's ridiculous."

Cleared by his doctors, Garlett set his sights on one of the world's toughest triathlons, supported by his wife of four years, Carrie, and coach Paul Ruggiero.

While his left shoulder rotation is limited and his right leg now is slightly shorter, Garlett doesn't consider those impediments.

His heart, however, doesn't get signals from his brain about when to kick it up a notch and strenuous stretches on the bike might leave him short of breath, but Garlett said he's just happy to be in Kailua-Kona.

"I feel a little like I'm crashing the party. I don't really look like the rest of these athletes," he said.

While many triathletes chase personal best times or age-group records, Garlett just wants to see the finish line before the 17-hour cutoff time.

"When people ask, I tell them 16 hours, 59 minutes and 59 seconds is just fine," he said. "Anything less is gravy."

Although Ironman is a solitary quest, Garlett will keep one person in mind as he takes on the challenge — the man whose heart beats in his chest.

"I feel him all the time, with every beat," he said.

With two decades of cancer treatments behind him, Garlett is firmly focused on his future.

"The reality is people get cancer, and I just happen to be one of those people," he said. "My philosophy in general is sometimes the tunnel seems long and dark and scary, but if you persevere you will get to the light. People talk about living each day as your last. I hate that philosophy. I prefer to live each day as a first."

---

On the Net:

Kyle Garlett: <http://www.ironmankyle.com>

Ironman World Championship: <http://www.ironman.com>

