

Ryan Willis and Sarah Thomas relax together after the 2011 Manhattan Island Marathon Swim, the first swim Willis crewed for his marathon swimming wife.
Rebecca Maxson



In Sync

A supportive partner can be your biggest asset in achieving your goals

BY ELAINE K. HOWLEY

Drawing a drag on yet another cigarette, Ryan Willis, 30, of Conifer, Colo., looked out across the ink of Lake Memphremagog from the tiny 16-foot aluminum boat he'd been sitting in for 15 hours. It was midnight as he anxiously watched his then-fiancée, Sarah Thomas, 31, stumble up a concrete boat ramp in Newport, Vt. She had swum 25 miles from Magog, Quebec, and had a 10-minute break on land to refuel and slather on more sunblock before wading back into the black water to swim another 25 miles and 15 hours back to Quebec.

Thomas grabbed a handful of baby carrots and plopped down on the concrete, the cool September air chilling her wet skin as she rubbed more Vaseline on the chafe points and mentally prepared for the second half of her epic journey. Willis looked on nervously, concerned that Thomas would get cold if she stayed out of the water for too long.

"I get really nervous the entire time," Willis says of crewing for

Thomas's long marathon swims. "I don't really eat, I just smoke and drink Red Bull. I can't stand it," he says.

But he does stand it because swimming is important to Thomas, and therefore it's important to him too.

Swimming Ate My Spouse

In the world of sport, this recently married couple is rare, not just because Willis can and does crew for Thomas on her very long swims, but also because they seem to have struck just the right balance between her swimming, his fishing, and everything else they do in their busy lives. Not every couple is so lucky.

A 2011 *Wall Street Journal* article, "My Workout Ate My Marriage," made quite a stir in the endurance sports community for highlighting this struggle for balance in the booming world of triathlon. Focusing on the experiences of several Ironman triathletes juggling the various demands of work, family, spouse, sport, and self, the article made mainstream the "Divorce

by Triathlon" concept, where "triathlon widows or widowers" resent the triathlete spouse for all the time spent pursuing an activity that doesn't involve them.

Virtually any spare-time pursuit has the capacity to disrupt an otherwise solid union, but endurance sports seem to cause strife more quickly than less intensive pursuits, largely because of the vast amount of time required to train for a marathon swim or run or an iron-distance triathlon. The personality types these sports tend to attract may also be a contributing factor.

Breaking Down the Break-Up

Mimi Winsberg, M.D., a Menlo Park, Calif.-based psychiatrist and five-time Kona Ironman finisher, has worked extensively with couples struggling with one spouse's dedication to a sport or activity that the other spouse doesn't share. "From what I have often observed, the 'non-training spouse,'" Winsberg's term for the nonathlete, "is usually the first to complain." Typically, the objections stem

from the amount of time spent training and preparing for big endurance events.

No one enjoys feeling like they're playing second fiddle to another love, so resentment, jealousy, anger, and other uncomfortable emotions can arise from a real or perceived imbalance in the amount of time and energy one partner spends training. Unhappiness ensues, and the nontraining spouse starts complaining that the training partner is not committed to the relationship.

"That can lead to a breakdown in connection," Winsberg says. But relationships aren't a one-way street, and oftentimes the training spouse has a separate set of complaints, typically surrounding a need for more freedom to engage in the very activity that is the source of the conflict. This complicated set of arguments can devolve into a serious issue. In some cases, the couple might divorce, but in many others, the pair work hard to figure it out.

In working with these couples, Winsberg says, "it's important to acknowledge up front that it's not the training itself that's causing the breakdown in communication or the breakdown in quality time together. It's other patterns of behavior that go along with the training that may be destructive to the relationship."

The nontraining spouse may have underlying insecurities that are driving the criticism of the training spouse. Or, in some cases, the nonathletes may feel jealous of the time their partners spend with other fit and attractive athletes. In other marriages, a lack of shared experiences can lead to trouble.

The going can get rocky, and to the training spouse, sometimes the choices look bleak: either quit swimming or quit the marriage.

But a strong commitment to an activity doesn't have to drive couples apart; Winsberg says there are several strategies a couple can employ either with the help of a therapist or on their own to address these issues and work to save the relationship. "The key

is to find a way to let each spouse have their needs met and still pursue their passions. It's tricky, but it's doable," Winsberg says.

Making it Work

Every relationship is different, but fundamentally, finding a comfortable balance between each party's needs and wants often comes down to a single word: management. Management of time, management of expectations, and management of open communication.

"If the concern is time together, it may be that the couple needs to sit down and figure out how to spend some quality time together and make that a priority as well as the training," Winsberg says.

This is something that Thomas and Willis have worked on. Thomas carefully plans her swim schedule to keep the balance. "I would rather go swim all the time, but I make a schedule at the beginning of the week."

In addition to spending time together, Winsberg says couples

5 Steps to a Stronger Partnership

Our busy lives and schedules can take a toll on our most important relationships, especially if one partner is pursuing a big athletic goal and the other isn't. Mimi Winsberg, M.D., a psychiatrist and triathlete, recommends trying the following five strategies if you're struggling to find harmony at home.

1. Engage in frequent and open communication. Start from an open and honest place and allow both parties to express the issues as they see them. Simply listening to your partner and being empathetic to his or her point of view can solve some problems outright.
2. Take a time-out. Winsberg says that if one spouse quickly gets emotional over the issue, take a break and try again later. "Write down bullet points and come back to it more calmly."
3. Work from the inside out. Start from a place of introspection and determine what your own needs are. "Instead of telling the other spouse what you do or don't want them to do, it's important to start out with your own needs," and then ask how you can meet

your partner's needs, Winsberg says. "Some couples come to it from that perspective, and it's a really good departure point."

4. Share the process and success. "Usually, when you're with someone, you want what's best for them. You want them to pursue their passions and you want them to meet their goals," Winsberg says. Use this philosophy to create a win-win situation. "Instead of thinking about what [the training] is taking away, think about how to share the process and their successes with them," Winsberg says.
5. See a therapist. If the issues are too deep and you find yourself at an impasse, consider couples therapy to work through the problem. "If the couple notices that one party is reflexively saying 'no' and taking a rigid stance, that's where seeing a therapist can be helpful in bringing the real anxieties and insecurities to the surface," she says. These issues may actually have little to do with the time involved in training; training may simply be the trigger or symptom of a deeper issue.



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should seek shared experiences—the glue that binds close couples. Winsberg suggests planning a trip around a big athletic event. Arrive a few days early or stay a few days after and see the sights, check out museums, “and do things the nontraining spouse wants to do and that you both enjoy,” she says.

In some lucky situations, training can actually provide an opportunity to create shared experiences; Thomas and Willis are outdoorsy people who enjoy camping, which allows them the opportunity to combine their favorite activities.

“This summer, we figured out a good system. There’s a lake I can swim in without much supervision—I just drag one of those orange buoys—and it’s one of Ryan’s favorite finishing spots. We go camp and I can swim and he can fish.” Everybody wins.

Managing expectations is another key to the complicated puzzle, and Winsberg says, “The training spouse needs to be realistic about the amount of time involved in the day’s effort. If you say ‘I have a 3-hour swim today,’ you need to figure in commute time to get to where that swim is going to be. You have to figure in the shower, time to eat, maybe have a nap, and then you’ll be able to give after that. I think oftentimes there’s this unrealistic communication about how much time is involved, and that can breed a lot of resentment in the nontraining spouse.”

A balanced relationship requires couples to openly and

honestly communicate with one another. “It’s also a matter of empathy,” Winsberg says. “I think it’s really important to try to say yes to your partner.” She recommends couples have a rule where rather than reflexively saying no to a request, spouses should first ask “Is this important to you?” “If the other spouse says, ‘Yes, it’s important to me,’ then the answer’s always yes.”

She also suggests that spouses “try to remember what you really respect about your spouse. If you think about what you respect about them, it’s easier to see their point of view and share their goals.” This enables each spouse to be more supportive of the other’s goals, pursuits, motivations, and needs.

Happily Ever After

All of the foregoing strategies and suggestions require honest effort, and that can be difficult. Winsberg says that in some cases, couples do choose to move on, but others work it out. For some couples, managing their recurring issues becomes critical to maintaining the relationship. “Not all issues will be solvable,” Winsberg says.

Compromise, flexibility, patience, and of course love are all important factors in finding the balance that will allow each partner in a union to become the best person he or she can be.

“‘Til death do us part’ is a very tall order. So clearly, it’ll require some flexibility along the way,” Winsberg says, noting there are a lot of ways to

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make a marriage work. “People make long-distance marriages work, marriages with busy careers, marriages with lots of children. Training is no different from any of those stresses. It’s a matter of continuing to respect the other person’s passions and giving them some freedom to be themselves within the marriage.”

This is certainly what’s worked for Thomas and Willis. “Some people might find it selfish that I spend so much time

on a hobby that takes a lot out of me physically, mentally, and financially. I’m so lucky that Ryan just understands my innate need to be who I am. I think realizing that in myself makes it easier for me to allow him to be who he is,” Thomas says. “We’ve had a few fights, I’m not going to lie. For my part, I try to listen and plan to make sure he’s getting to do what he wants. Patience is the most important element to keeping the balance.” **S**

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