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## No Vision, No Problem for Ironman Competitor

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Jack Chen

Ask a [triathlete](#) about the challenges of an Ironman competition and that person will likely tick off an exhaustive list of obstacles. Of all the issues cited, eyesight is almost never a hindrance. Unless you ask Jack Chen.

The 36-year-old has been blind since he was 16, but that hasn't stopped him from competing in six triathlons, including last November's [Ironman](#) in Panama City, Fla. When Chen crossed the finish line he was the 13th blind person to complete an Ironman competition -- a 2.4-mile [swim](#), 112-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile run -- since the event began in 1978. What made his performance even more memorable was how he was helped when a last-minute injury sidelined his guide.

"It's part of my personality," Chen said about deciding to participate in an Ironman race. "I wanted to show myself and the world that someone who is visually impaired could do whatever they wanted to do."

Chen, who works as legal counsel in the patent department at Google's New York City office, was born with a congenital defect that marred his vision, then a surgery gone awry permanently blinded him. Rather than avoid the physical activities that became so much tougher with his condition, Chen embraced them.

He began running [marathons](#) in the late '90s and training at [Achilles Track Club International](#) in New York City, where he would eventually meet five-time Ironman veteran Eugene Gurkoff.

In 2009, Gurkoff began taking time from his job as a lawyer to train wheelchair athletes at Achilles, but he ended up working more often with blind athletes. That's when he and Chen were introduced through a mutual friend. Gurkoff was taken aback by Chen's calmness.

"He's really laid back," Gurkoff said. "A lot of triathletes are intense about things. Jack goes with the flow."

By November 2009, Chen signed up for the 2010 Ironman in Florida. He and Gurkoff began training together more often, and by May 2010 they competed in a half Ironman in New Jersey. They worked so well together that Gurkoff was set to be Chen's guide for Ironman Florida. He would ride with Chen on a customized tandem bike, run with Chen using a rope, and swim just ahead of him in a straight line, with Chen squeezing Gurkoff's foot to let him know to speed up or slow down.

Chen and Gurkoff moved their workouts to [Chelsea Piers](#), a training complex along the Hudson River on New York City's West Side. Both gentlemen praised the Chelsea staff for its hospitality; Chen's workouts with their trainers went smooth. His game plan for Ironman was in place -- but then the plan fell apart.

Gurkoff was running one day in New York's Central Park when a freak accident fractured his pelvis in two places. He didn't know the full extent of the injury until a couple days after the accident, but he realized immediately that Chen's race plans would have to change.

"My biggest concern wasn't that he couldn't do the race, but where was he going to find someone to do an Ironman [race] with him on two weeks' notice," Gurkoff said.

Even though Gurkoff determined he could manage the Ironman's swim phase, there was no way he could participate in the bike ride or run. Gurkoff called two triathlete friends -- Joe Marinucci and Ray Camano -- to help Chen.



Jack Chen

Marinucci volunteered for the bike portion even though he had never ridden a tandem bike. He and Chen rode just three miles the day before the race. "Joe was a solid man on the bike all the way," Chen said.

Camano came to Chen's rescue by foot; he had already been training for a marathon and went for a few long-distance runs in the limited time he had to prepare for the Ironman.

"Running is tricky because there is a lot of information the guide needs to communicate, such as direction, road condition and avoiding other runners," Chen said.

By race day, Chen had become a star among the 2,800-plus racers. He was named the Florida Ironman Everyday Hero in an awards ceremony the day before the competition. He received a standing ovation upon receiving the award, setting up a slew of encouragement from fellow racers the following day. "Jack won't go out of his way for attention," said Gurkoff. "He realizes what he does inspires people."

"It was a great way to galvanize all the racers together, to let them know there was a blind competitor," Chen said. "I felt great." He crossed the finish line in 13:45:32.

The Everyday Hero award gives Chen an automatic entrance into the World Championship Ironman race in October in Kona, Hawaii.

Despite the monstrous time commitment of training for another Ironman, Gurkoff and Chen expressed their enthusiasm for working together yet again.

"No way would I miss that opportunity," Gurkoff said.

They both know that Kona will be tougher. The conditions will be much hotter, and the course will run along a more hilly terrain. Temperatures in the Florida race never climbed above 60, but the duo will likely face 80-plus-degree weather with strong headwinds and high humidity in Hawaii.

Chen admitted he's taking it one race at a time, but the relationships he's formed will last beyond his athletic career. "Gene and I are going to be friends for a long time," he said.

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