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Norfolk native had a broken back and shattered ribs. But it couldn't keep him from the Ironman.

By Arleen Spenceley
Correspondent
Oct 17, 2017



Courtesy photo

Mark Hoffman recovers after breaking his back and shattering ribs in a bicycle crash during a training run. Hoffman is a triathlete and recovered enough to compete in the recent Ironman World Championship in Hawaii.

Mark Hoffman worried his parents would panic when they learned he broke his back and shattered ribs in a bicycle crash.

So, he said he was fine.

But in his bed at a shock trauma center in Charlotte, the triathlete wondered if he'd lost the chance to compete in the 2017 Ironman World Championship. He'd qualified for the event after years of training.

“(It’s) the Holy Grail of triathlons,” Hoffman said.

He made it – with a little help from his friends.

The 35-year-old is a Norfolk native who moved to Charlotte in 2008 as a financial planner.

Hoffman eventually lost interest in his desk job, but discovered a fondness for fitness. When he visited his parents at Thanksgiving, he ran the Turkey Trot 10K at Mount Trashmore. It reminded him that it's "challenging but rewarding" to push his limits.

When a boss invited him to run a half-marathon, he agreed. The day before the race, he changed his mind: he'd run the full marathon instead. He crawled across the finish line with cramps in every muscle.

"You never really know what you're capable of until you try your hardest," Hoffman said.

He worked up to Ironman triathlons, which require athletes to swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles and run a marathon, which is 26.2 miles. He also left financial planning for an entry level job at a bike shop.

Hoffman worked his way up to servicing and selling bicycles. Outside of work, he continued to ride them. And he decided to try to qualify for the 2017 Ironman World Championship, which is held annually in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii.

"You only qualify (for Kona) once, perhaps, ... in your lifetime," said his mother, Kathleen.

He made it by 68 seconds – the last competitor to do so – at a qualifying race in Chattanooga last year.

"Every day since then was like waking up to a dream," Mark Hoffman said.

Until the day of the crash.

On May 30, Hoffman rode with 50 cyclists in a regular evening training ride at a Charlotte industrial park. The race started at 6, after most of the park's motor vehicle traffic cleared.

"About 7 p.m., we came around the only sharp corner and found a tractor-trailer in the middle of the road," Hoffman said. "Several of us crashed."

He was the most severely injured.

He flew over his bike's handlebars and hit his head on the street and the truck.

"I saw him under the truck when I came around the corner," said Matt Capps, 35, a friend and fellow cyclist. "I could see him moving, so I knew he was alive."

But Hoffman knew instantly he was badly hurt.

"Not since breaking my femur (at age 13 in a Norfolk Collegiate soccer game) had I experienced anything along those lines of sensations."

He never lost consciousness.

"Which is just incredible, when you see his helmet," said his father, George, a retired surgeon. "Looks like somebody took a sledgehammer and chopped it into pieces."

Within three minutes, first responders arrived.

“And that was somewhat of a humbling experience,” Mark Hoffman said. “You came out to have fun, you’re leaving on a stretcher.”

A laceration on his head required staples. He broke some ribs. He suspected that he’d also hurt his back. The hospital confirmed it.

He had broken three thoracic vertebrae – which, “given a choice (are) the best vertebrae to fracture,” said Kathleen Hoffman, a retired nurse. Breaking the vertebrae above or below them could have caused paralysis, she said.

She and her husband, who live in West Ghent, were ready for bed when they got a call from the shock trauma center.

“As many times as I emphasized that they did not have to drive from Virginia to Charlotte, that’s exactly what they did,” Mark Hoffman said.

Before they arrived, friends stayed with him at the hospital. Some of them overheard a conversation he had with a nurse. They learned Hoffman didn’t have health insurance.

He’d just opened his own bike shop and hadn’t finished the paperwork to apply for health insurance.

Without telling him, his friends decided they’d help him pay the medical bills. By the time the hospital discharged him three days after the crash, more than 300 people, including strangers, had contributed \$20,000 through [gofundme.com](https://www.gofundme.com).

“Everybody came together in a way that I never could have imagined and still get choked up to think of,” Hoffman said.

When he got home, neither he nor his parents, who stayed with him for three weeks, had to cook – friends and strangers prepared and delivered their meals.

“We know there’s good people in the world ... but I didn’t know there were so many who were willing to do so much,” George Hoffman said. “It really was remarkable, and that’s the real story.”

But while he recovered, Mark Hoffman wondered: could he get well enough to compete at the world championship?

He trained as soon as he could, just in case.

“After he got his back brace off, which he wore about seven weeks, he was cycling and swimming,” Kathleen Hoffman said. “Running on the hard pavement was very painful, so that came along later.”

Nine weeks after the crash, her son decided he would compete at Kona.


He traveled there Oct. 9 and his family cheered him on in the championship five days later.

He completed the competition in 11 hours and four minutes, the 1,067th of 2,221 athletes to cross the finish line.

And he treated it like any other race.

“You hope for the best and you give it everything you’ve got.”

arleen spenceley

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