



More Than Just a Race:

Lake View Triathlete Making his Mark One Arm Stroke,

Imagine going for a 1.2-mile open-water swim in choppy water as you fight for space and the perfect stroke. No time to rest when you exit the water, as you sprint for your bike, remove your swim cap, goggles, and wet suit and replace that with your bib, bike helmet and shoes as a 56-mile bike ride awaits. And then, if you're not physically or mentally exhausted at this point, dismount from your bike and lace up your running shoes as there is now a half marathon standing between you and the finish line. As well-conditioned as Mike Vanacora is after more than a decade of competing, there are certainly some moments during a half triathlon – or an Ironman triathlon, when the distances highlighted above are doubled – when his body and mind are telling him to stop.

But by digging deep and finding a way to push during those pivotal moments, what has resulted is not just a number of impressive race finishes for the Lake View resident, Vanacora is delivering a message about the value of hard work and being passionate about achieving your goals that he and his wife Katrina can communicate to their two young sons.

While in high school in Minnesota, Vanacora played football,

baseball, basketball, and competed in swimming, but he "was always really a swimmer." He got burnt out playing sports after high school and quit athletics altogether before joining the club swimming team while attending the University of Minnesota where he graduated with a bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering.

Biking was always a fun activity, so Vanacora one day spontaneously purchased a carbon fiber bike which – like many of us who have the best intentions when at the sporting goods store – just sat in his garage collecting dust for many years until he realized he was massively out of shape and needed to get active.

"Triathlon sounded fun so I gave it a shot and quickly got addicted to it," he said.

It was 6 a.m. on Sunday, Aug. 28, 2011, at Monroe Harbor when then-26-year-old Mike Vanacora set off on his first triathlon, the Lifetime Chicago Triathlon. Vanacora finished the sprint triathlon course – which consisted of a 750-meter swim, 13.6-mile bike ride, and a 3.1-mile run – in 1:30.26.3, good for 167th



One Pedal Stroke, One Step at a Time

by Matt Beardmore

photos by Maija Martin Photography

overall. Certainly not a bad debut effort, but it was clearly a learning experience for the novice triathlete.

"Given I was a swimmer I came out of the water very fast and got passed by everyone after that!" Mike said.

Since then, Mike Vanacora has made his mark – and delivered a number of top-10 finishes – in dozens of triathlons across the Midwest and in all corners of the country. He has also competed at the Mont-Tremblant Ironman in Québec, Canada, the Half Ironman World Championships in Nice, France, the Half Ironman in Puerto Rico, and this past August, Vanacora finished 10th (4:09.39) in the Male 35-39 division at the IRONMAN 70.3 World Championship in Lahti, Finland. He said it might be the proudest he has ever been of a race result.

"It was my best performance in a world championships race," Vanacora said. "I executed very well and battled with a couple of people back and forth for a strong run to finish it out. It was unexpected after a rough summer of training due to some illness."

Vanacora's training schedule is, as you might expect given the demands of his sport, extremely intense and time consuming. He logs 20-plus training hours per week during the peak season and still more than 15 hours each week in the offseason. Every day Vanacora will train in at least two of the triathlon disciplines (swimming, biking, or running) to go along with some weight training.

Despite this level of commitment, he admits "there is always that moment when it becomes so painful to push to the level needed to try and be at your best. In the Ironmans there is always a few points where you just want to quit and you need to talk yourself into continuing."

Triathlons can certainly be a lonely road at times, but Vanacora has formed numerous friendships from a supportive triathlon community and receives a big lift from his tri-team, Every Man Jack, which is made up of 80 athletes across the U.S. and Canada.

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The support Vanacora receives back at home cannot be overstated as his wife and their sons are what helps him stay motivated. Team Vanacora starts with his wife Katrina, whom he met at a new hire conference nearly 15 years ago.

"I need to really emphasize Katrina is a saint here," Mike said. "It takes a team and she is the number 1 person involved – even her parents and my parents play a role when traveling for race or other things."

Katrina understands the commitment involved in her husband's training as before their sons Colin (5) and Benjamin (3) were born, she also started getting into triathlons, mostly sprint and Olympic distances and completed one half Ironman.

"Training time is a bit harder to come by now, so I focus more on running races like the 10k this past weekend," she said. "My



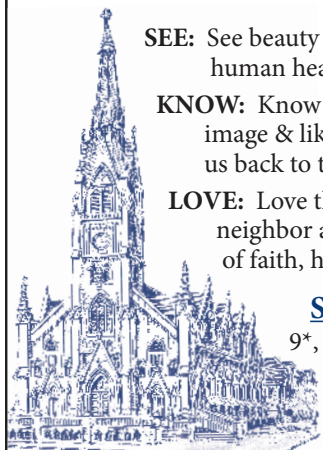
goal is to sign up and train for the Chicago marathon the year I'm turning 40."

Michael is also approaching the Big 4-0, but he has no desire to slow down.

"I honestly hope I can keep competing for a long time – it's the beauty of the age groups," he said. "Right now I can still compete to win overall but eventually I can just compete against those my age. My bucket list race is the Norseman Ironman in Norway. It's a wild race in a fjord and up and over a mountain, maybe one of the hardest in the world." Whether or not he ever gets to experience that race, what means more to Mike Vanacora is the example he is helping set for his sons and for them to be there when he crosses the finish line, no matter how long that takes him to get there.

"My favorite moments have been when Colin and Benjamin have been there – it becomes so much more special," he said. "For example, Colin crossed the line in first place with me in Grand Rapids this year (Vanacora won the 2023 Grand Rapids, Michigan, Triathlon in 4:11.40 – nearly nine minutes ahead of the next finisher). I hope it shows them the value in having a passion and working hard. It's starting to show in their interests already."

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