

Gayer pushes past injury to qualify

By Ryne Dennis

All Harvey Gayer needed was for everything to go right for one day in October.

Lord knows that things hadn't gone right for the six months leading up to that day.

They'd gone wrong. Horribly wrong.

Gayer, a Watkinsville resident, has become the face of triathletes in the Athens Area as he leads many to get into shape as an official USA Triathlon Level 1 certified coach.

A licensed psychologist specializing in clinical psychology, Gayer is also the sponsor and coach of TriKidsGeorgia, an Athens-based youth triathlete club.

As much time as he puts into coaching, the Maryland Ironman in October of 2015 was going to be all about Gayer and his training to be one of the best in his age group. Hopefully, if all went well, he would qualify for the ultimate Ironman event — the Kona Ironman World Championships in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii.

"Kona is the, I guess Mecca is the appropriate word," Gayer said. "It's the all-time ultimate [race]. It's where the Ironman started about 28 or 30 years ago and where they decided to start it."

This wasn't going to be his first go-round at the Ironman, he'd been in five before. But the Ironman isn't your standard race, even the best athletes in the world can only do one, maybe two a year. The training is intense. It's long and hard and never ends.

An athlete must prepare for 2.4 miles of swimming followed by 112 miles of biking followed by a complete marathon (26.2

miles). That's 140.6 miles all in one day. One into the other, no break in between.

Gayer trained year-round for an Ironman and he was going to give the Ironman Louisville a shot on Oct. 11, but he decided that Ironman Maryland on Oct. 3 would be a better race for him.

The race was still quite a ways out in April when Gayer was a part of the Tony Serrano 100-mile charity ride that began in Monroe and made its way into Oconee County and through Walton County with a group of dedicated bikers out for a leisurely, but intense, stroll.

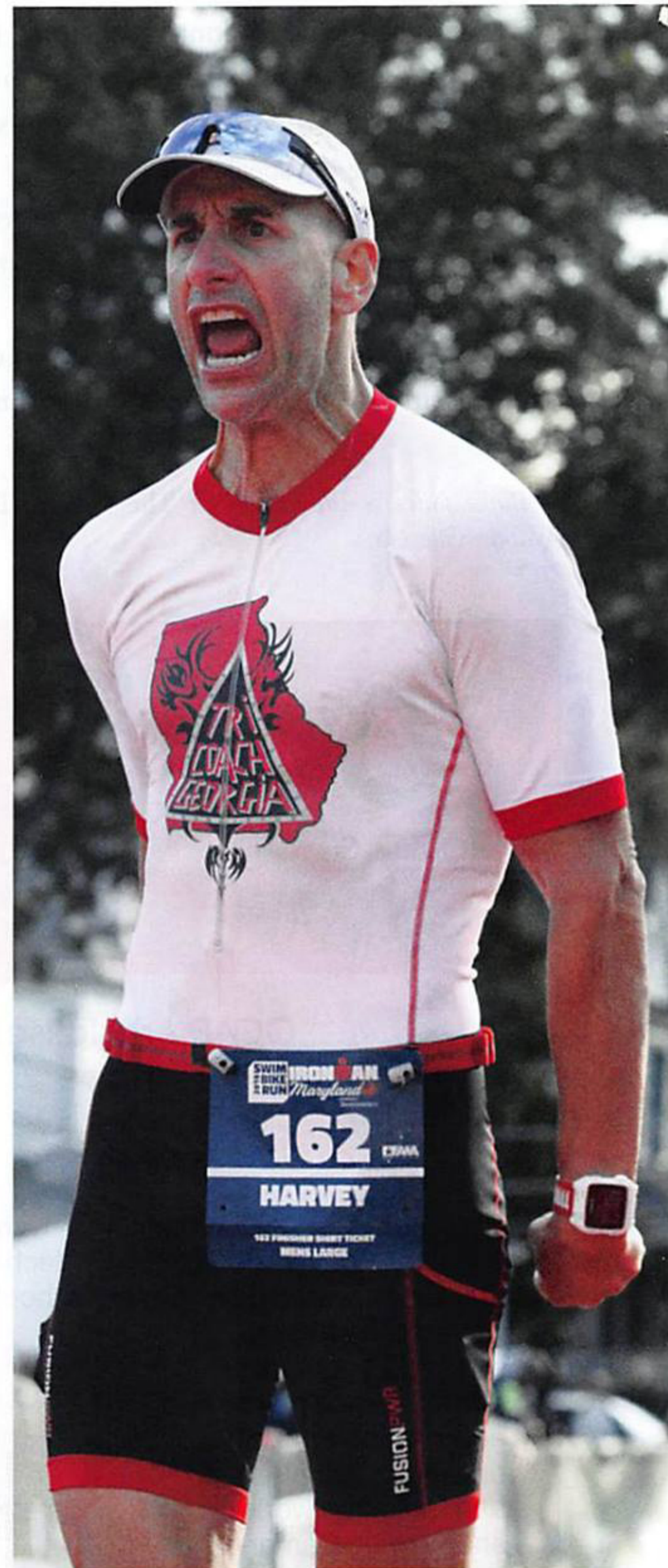
Riding in the front of the pack, Gayer made a move to the right to move back in the pack a little ways. As another rider took control of the pack, an unexpected participant jumped ahead of them. An armadillo ran onto the road and into the tire of the leader. The domino effect was on. Following the first rider's fall came the next and the next. Gayer was eventually found in a ditch alongside Snows Mill Road where he laid unconscious for more than 10 minutes.

"It was like a Tour de France crash," Gayer said. "I fractured my pelvis in two places. I tore some cartilage in my ribs and a week later I started getting swelling in my legs because I was immobilized."

There it was, he thought. The end of this year's dreams of qualifying for Kona.

Gayer was in the hospital, sitting in a bed. Once released he found himself in a wheelchair for a short while.

The lack of training was even more serious than he could've imagined. After train-



After crossing the finish line, Harvey Gayer knew he had just recorded his best time in an Ironman, but he didn't know if it would be enough to qualify for Kona. *Submitted photo*



Harvey Gayer, fourth from right, celebrates his Kona Ironman qualifying time after finishing second in his age group at the Maryland Ironman.
Submitted photo

ing so intensely for so long, once he had to slow down his body didn't know what to do. Blood clots formed in his legs. Gayer was

put on Xarelto, a blood clot medicine seen advertised by pro golfer Arnold Palmer, NASCAR driver Brian Vickers and others.

For four months, Gayer couldn't do anything. After daily training for years, Gayer was helpless.

He tried to get his money back for the Maryland Ironman. These things aren't cheap. Gayer paid around \$700 to enter and then had to pay an extra \$90 on top of that for insurance.

He was told that, because he changed from the Louisville Ironman to the Maryland Ironman, he couldn't get a full refund.

He was looking at only getting \$150 back at most. The \$640 he would be out is a lot of money, even to a doctor of psychology.

Anybody close to Gayer knew that he wasn't going to roll over that easily. He began training on Aug. 1, nearly four

months after the bike incident that found him in a ditch.

He had two months to train. He was going to do what he could, even if it meant that his results weren't what he and others might expect.

"I was thinking, well I'll train just to see if I can get back into it a little," Gayer said. "I'll just go and I'll finish the race and get another medal, a t-shirt and a backpack."

Gayer was up at 3 every morning to run on the Athens Academy track. He'd run 16 to 18 miles each morning before going home to ride a bike for nearly three hours before starting his work day.



Harvey Gayer spent time in a hospital after flipping over on his bike and being found unconscious in a ditch. He would later suffer blood clots in his leg. *Submitted photo*



Harvey Gayer had to spend time in a wheelchair after blood clots formed in his legs following a biking accident. He could not train for three months after the accident. *Submitted photo*

For two months, Gayer never stopped.

“I buckled down from Aug. 1 until basically the end of September, just two months of hell,” Gayer said.

Gayer didn’t focus much on the swimming as it was only 10 percent of the race. He left that to chance when it came to the

race. Gayer ended his training for about a week to taper — allowing the body time to rest before a race — while he and wife Julie made the ride up to Maryland for the race.

Going through North Carolina on Sept. 29, Gayer received a call from his sherpa — the person that helps an Ironman with

equipment — that he didn’t want to get.

Ironman Maryland was cancelled because of Hurricane Joaquin.

There was hope, however, as the event’s coordinators said it could just be postponed, not cancelled.

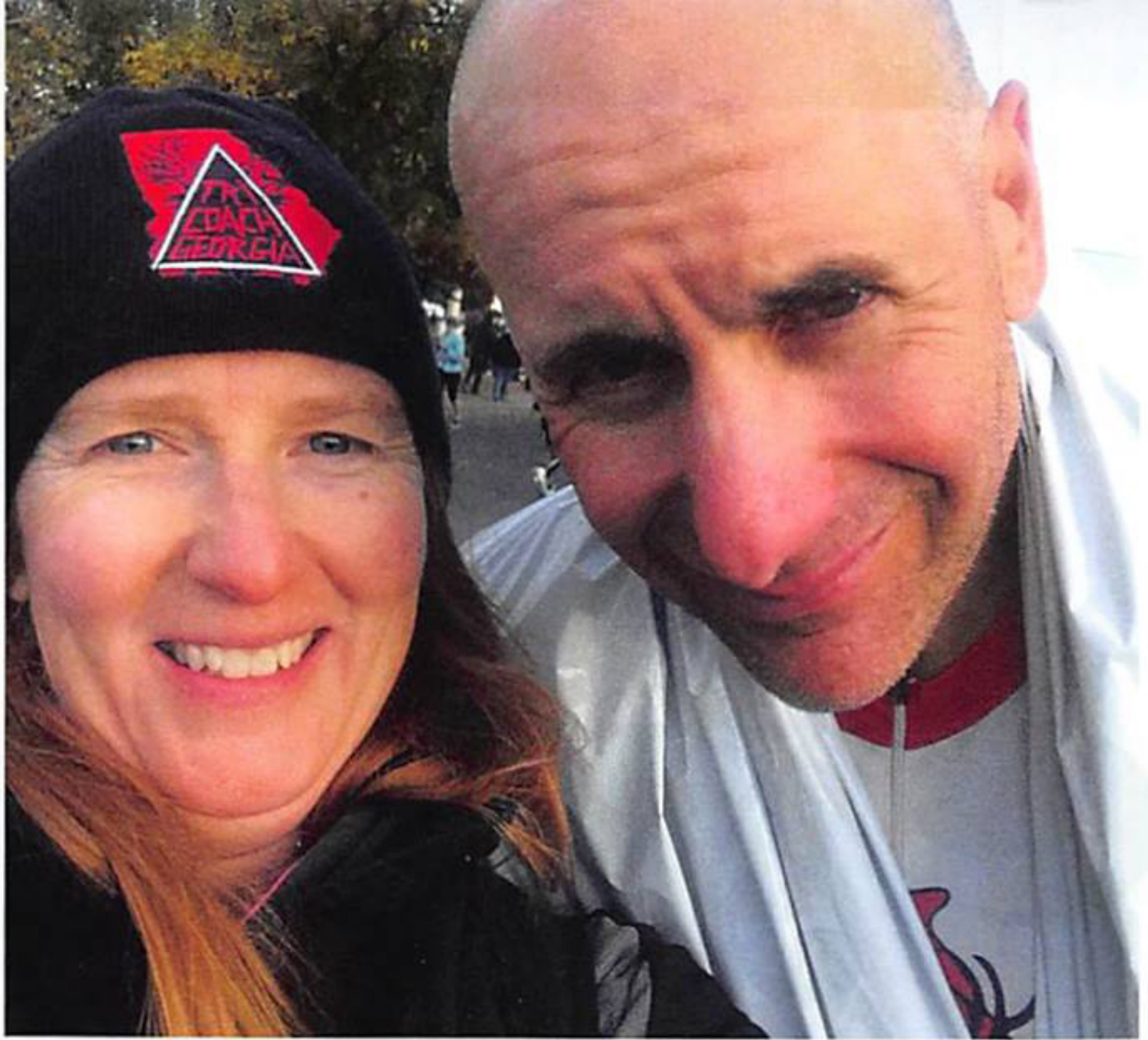
But they never postponed Ironman. They rarely cancelled them at all, but when they did that was it, no makeup.

This one was different. They pushed the race back two weeks. It threw everyone off.

“Everybody has these recipes for success, but there’s no recipe now because we’re off the map,” Gayer said. “Nobody’s ever had a race where you’ve had to double-taper two weeks.”

Gayer trained for a week before tapering again.

He gets to the starting line of the race when organizers announce that the swim would be shortened to a half-swim because the tides are still choppy. They only have half the volunteers. The kayakers in the water couldn’t take the pounding for too long.



Harvey Gayer, right, finished 14th overall and second in his age group to qualify for the 2016 Kona race in Hawaii, the Mecca of all Ironman events. *Submitted photo*

“I’m dancing a jig because I’m not a great swimmer and I haven’t swam much,” Gayer said. “They told us to come back at 7:30 that morning and they were going to start the race then.”

Gayer might have been the only one happy with the decision.

People find it as a right of passage to compete in an Ironman. They want the tattoo that has the Ironman “M” logo, they don’t want it tainted. After enough complaints were heard, the Maryland Ironman decided to have a two-mile swim.

“I went from being on top of the world to back to thinking I was just going to have my normal day,” Gayer said.

The race went off on Oct. 17 shortly after 7:45 a.m.

Gayer had a great swim, came out of the water around 50th overall.

He hopped on his bike and started making up ground. He got off of his bike around 20th overall and then hit the marathon where he started

picking off a few here and there. Along the route he passed someone in his age group. He knew that was good. His time of 9 hours, 23 minutes surpassed his best of 10:31 from the 2010 Ironman Florida.

Gayer finished 14th of 2,613 participants. He was second in his age group, but nobody knew how many qualified for the October 2016 Kona. Qualifying is based on the number of participants in each age group.

After the figures were tallied, the top-five in the 45-49 age group qualified for the Mecca. Gayer qualified for the Kona. For one day, at least, everything went right.

“To have the magical day after all of that and the injury and all, people didn’t think, and I didn’t think, it would be possible,” Gayer said. “There is not a single more important goal to triathletes. That’s the ultimate goal is to reach Kona.”



Ryne Dennis is the sports editor for The Oconee Enterprise newspaper in Watkinsville, Ga.