



## *Local Legend*

### *Let's swim!*

**Local Legends Michelle Santilhano: Extreme. Period.**

---

### **Roots in a Mountain Landscape of another Hemisphere**



Cape Town, South Africa—where I grew up—is really similar to Northern California, with sunshine, coastal mountains, Mediterranean climate and a strong outdoor culture. Centred around Table Mountain, Cape Town is known for its beautiful beaches and abundant wildlife. I learned to walk in the mountains. From the beginning, being outside was normal, not something special or athletic—it was just life. I usually walked with my father, I think he could see that nature and being in motion was good for me. Even though I was the youngest of three children, my father spent a lot of time giving me the parental care I needed that was distinct from my siblings. He passed away when I was 12 years old. I hope my father knows how our weekend walks initiated my future adventures.

I have a very specific way of learning, it involves repetition and doing things. A lot of the events and racing I do are to train my mind and body for something else I want to do, it's the most effective way for me to learn. My mother is very strong and she worked hard to raise me and my older brother and sister.

She understood how I was wired and made sure that she affirmed my love of the movement and exploring.



I didn't grow up with any obvious natural talent, ability, or skill set. I wasn't the kid who stood out. What I had instead was exposure—to terrain, to movement, to long days outside—and that shaped everything that came later. It's allowed me to feel comfortable outdoors. I still prefer things that are experiential more than book learning or thought experiments. It shapes how I train and prepare. I enter many races as a form of training: to learn the terrain, the format, and the level of support and also to meet people. There have been so many cases where someone I meet introduces me to another event or another group or person that pushes me forward to the next thing or the next dose of learning.

## The Seven Summits: A Decades Long Project

The Seven Summits became a ten-year project during my 20s and 30s. It started as a way to give myself a reason to travel, something concrete to work toward. The Seven Summits refers to the highest mountain on each continent. Climbing them became a lifelong goal for me. I've done them all, except that I didn't summit Everest. I got to about 25,000 feet. I was part of a team, and there were a lot of team dynamics involved, so I didn't summit.

*Editor Note: The elevation of Everest is 29,031.7 feet. Less than 1000 women have summited Everest, and only about 15% of all climbers reached the peak. Above 26,000' the air has only 1/3 the oxygen of sea level which can lead to severe and deadly altitude sickness. Climbers must pass through the Khumbu Icefall, a moving glacier with shifting ice towers (seracs) and deep crevasses. This is often described as one of the most dangerous parts of the climb.*

Everest is still my most difficult "summit," not because of the mountain itself, but because I never reached my goal. That part was out of my control. I actually came down and then went back up again.



One of my favorite memories is Mt. Vinson, in the Ellsworth Mountains of Antarctica. It's not that tall, maybe 16,000+ feet, but it's incredibly remote. We flew in on small planes with skis, then hiked for several days. We summited just before Christmas, around December 23rd. Christmas Day was a total whiteout. A few days later I was back in South Africa, celebrating the millennium on the beach in Cape Town, with Table Mountain overlooking the ocean, lit up with fireworks and music. There are no words for Antarctica. I still feel speechless thinking about it.

I skied Australia's highest peak in winter, Mt. Kosciuszko, using skins on the way up and then skiing down.

Here is a summary of the Seven Summits, each a unique experience:

- Mount Everest (Nepal/China, 29,032 ft) is the ultimate test of endurance, requiring supplemental oxygen and technical ice skills in the "death zone".

- Aconcagua (Argentina, 22,837 ft) is physically demanding due to altitude and wind but is often considered a non-technical "walk-up".
- Denali (USA, 20,310 ft) is arguably the coldest and most physically draining due to the need for self-supported heavy hauling on glaciated terrain.
- Mount Kilimanjaro (Tanzania, 19,341 ft) is the most accessible, a high-altitude trek through five climate zones that requires no technical gear.
- Mount Elbrus (Russia, 18,510 ft) is a glaciated dormant volcano that presents moderate snow and ice climbing challenges, often aided by ski lifts for the approach.
- Mount Vinson (Antarctica, 16,050 ft) is logistically complex and dangerously cold, though the climbing itself is moderate. Finally, the list splits between the "Messner" version, which includes
- Mount Kosciuszko (Australia, 7,310 ft).

## Good Crazyness

Mountaineering is really the bedrock of my athleticism. It teaches subtle life skills: balance, endurance, social skills, love of the outdoors, trusting people you don't know, collaborating with people you don't know, and determination not to give up.

On expeditions, if six people decide they don't want to go for the summit, the guide has to make a decision. Sometimes you wait through a whiteout for days. Then the question comes again: "Who wants to go back up?" I usually say yes.

There's a whole world of adventure travel out there—and a lot of crazyness. Good crazyness. When people tell me, "You're crazy," I say, "Yes, but I'm a good crazy."

## Endurance Becomes My Superpower



In my family, my brother was the standout academic and national champion. My sister was a beautiful swimmer with flawless form. I didn't have speed, strength, or style, so I developed endurance—I own that.

I'm the youngest in my family. My parents were active mountaineers and hikers, and we went out every weekend. My dad's sister married a seventh-generation South African rancher, several hours outside Cape Town and far from the nearest gas station. From their ranch we'd hike deep into the mountains. That upbringing quietly built my capacity for long days and steady effort. That constant movement outdoors shaped me far more than formal sports ever did. This photo is of me and my grandmother at the ranch.

## Finding My Way to the U.S.



My parents were born in England, so we had British passports. The 1980s in Cape Town was a time of stark contrasts where childhood innocence lived alongside, profound, systemic, injustice. It was impossible to ignore. After high school I took a gap year. I knew I loved traveling and mountaineering, which I'd grown up doing with my family. I wanted a reason to travel, wanting to travel outside South Africa, and find what I could do career-wise. Setting my sights on the Seven Summits gave me reason to leave.

I loved kids, so during my gap year I was a nanny in the UK. I planned to return to South Africa for nursing training, but instead I looked into doing it in the UK. After completing my nursing diploma, I went back to South Africa.

Later, curious about the U.S. model of nursing and nursing education, I challenged the U.S. National Nursing Exam before moving here in 2003. I was 30 years old. A recruiter helped me find a nursing position in the Yuba City–Marysville area and navigate visas and a green card—normally a long process.



I spent two years in Yuba City then moved to the Bay Area in 2007 because I wanted to work at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital. One of the first people I met was Lorraine Sneed. Lorraine hosted me at her house for about a month until I found my own place, based simply on the connection of a swim friend. Meeting Lorraine, of course, led me to Menlo Masters, Team Sheepier and an entire community that has become a source of friendships, inspiration and support. I've always found athletes to be extremely trusting and very generous. These friendships have endured for many years.

Kim Freitas and Lorraine are neighbors and close friends. Kim and Lorraine took me biking and running. Of course, through them I got introduced to the swim and triathlon team.

## The Art of the Two-Minute Nap

Before moving to the US, I had done one triathlon and some long-distance running in South Africa. When I came to the U.S., I was already planning to run Western States 100 mile trail run and began to train and connect with other runners. Trail running was a great combination of my love for movement and my love for the mountains.



*Editor's Note: The Western States 100 is a point-to-point 100 mile ultra running race starting in Olympic Valley and finishing in Auburn. The course features 18,000 feet of climbing and 23,000 feet of descent. Runners begin with a 2,550-foot ascent to Emigrant Pass within the first 4.5 miles. The terrain varies from sometimes-snowy high-altitude trails to deep canyons where temperatures can reach over 100°F. Key logistical milestones include the Rucky Chucky river crossing at mile 78. A runner passes through 20 aid stations to pick up fluids and nutrition.*

The 30 hour time limit clock for Western States starts when you leave Olympic Valley near Tahoe in the morning and ends when you arrive in Auburn and make a final lap on the track at the Placer High School. You take naps when you need to, though many people never sleep. There is a saying in ultrarunning "Beware the chair!". I've become pretty good at taking two-minute naps. Naps are used as a quick reset to avoid mental fog. For an event like this naps are usually very short so you don't go into a deep sleep stage. The race cutoff is 30 hours, so you really need to keep moving. I ran Western States 100 Mile Trail run in 2007 in a time of 28:48:57.

## **Crossing the English Channel**

After finishing the Seven Summits, I asked myself, "What's next?" The answer surprised me: the English Channel.

I've swum since I was a kid. My aunt's ranch in South Africa had a large reservoir, and water safety was essential. We also had a 30-yard pool at home where my mom swam every morning.

My high school had a swim team, but I wasn't on it. There was no pool on my high school campus; we went to the public pool instead. My sister attended a very rigorous all-girls school which had its own pool, but that wasn't the right school for me, so I mostly swam at home or at the public pool.



When I moved to Northern California, I found a coach in Davis, California who had swum the English Channel. He helped me get started on open water swimming while I was living and nursing in Yuba City. I would come down to Aquatic Park in San Francisco for six-hour swims. A lot of my swim development and training for the Channel eventually happened at Menlo Masters. Someone told me in the locker room, “You’ve found the right team if you want to do long stuff.”

I swam the English Channel in 2006. The boat captain tracks you using GPS. You’re just a swimmer in a big, dark ocean—an unidentified object. Swimming the English Channel means dealing with cold water (57-64 F), sensory deprivation, and the monotonous rhythm of swimming alongside a boat. The pilot boat is the swimmer’s lifeline, but also a strictly regulated boundary. You absolutely cannot touch the boat. The pilot boat provides navigation through the world’s busiest shipping lane.

You’re just a swimmer in a big, dark ocean, basically an unidentified object if the ship’s radar could pick you up at all. The swimmer’s crew feeds the swimmer and watches them around the clock. Every sanctioned attempt is monitored by an official observer from the Channel Swimming Association (CSA) or the Channel Swimming & Piloting Federation (CS&PF). The observer sits on the boat to ensure adherence to “Channel Rules”: the swimmer may wear only a standard textile swimsuit (no neoprene), one silicone cap, and goggles. They also verify the swim starts and finishes on dry land. I did the 2006 English Channel swim in 19:08:00. Exactly a year later, in September of 2007 I swam the Catalina Channel in 13:08:35.

I’ve swum the English Channel twice. The second time was with a wetsuit as part of a triathlon called Arch to Arc.

### **Arch to Arc and Asking Why**

*Editor’s Note: The Arch to Arc is an ultra-endurance triathlon connecting London and Paris, considered one of the hardest events in the world. Organized by Enduroman, the continuous point-to-point race requires athletes to run, swim, and cycle approximately 289 miles (465 km), starting at Marble Arch in London and finishing at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.*



Stage 1: The Run (87 Miles) Starting from the Marble Arch in Central London, athletes run 87 miles (140 km) through the city and the Kent countryside to the Dover coast. This stage typically takes 15–30 hours and must be completed within strict cut-off times to catch the pilot boat for the swim. Stage 2: The Swim (21+ Miles) Swim the English Channel from Dover to Calais. Wetsuits allowed. Stage 3: The Bike (181 Miles) Upon reaching the French coast by water, athletes cycle 181 miles (291 km) from Calais, through the rolling hills of Northern France, to the finish line at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The clock finally stops when the athlete touches the monument.

The questionable decision that I'd made before going into this event was that less than a week prior to Arch to Arc I'd finished a 750-mile bike ride in France, Halfway through the Arch to Arc run (Day #1!), I lay down on a sidewalk in London and took a nap. I remember thinking, "What am I doing? Why am I doing this?" Then you get up. You moan and groan a bit, and you keep going.

## Community, Self-Sufficiency, and Outward Bound

*Editor's Note: What Michele doesn't say in this interview is that the pre-Arch to Arc 'bike ride' in France was the long standing Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP), a 1,200km ride from Paris to the Atlantic coast and back, which must be completed in under 90 hours (3.5 days), the ultimate international ride for a category of riders called randonneurs. Randonneuring is a long-distance, self-supported style of non-competitive cycling where riders complete courses of 200 to 1,200+ kilometers within time limits. Randonneurs must carry or purchase their own supplies and navigate via a specific route with checkpoints.*

Kim Freitas introduced me to the local randonneuring community (San Francisco Randonneurs and Santa Cruz Randonneurs). I'd ridden my bike through an Ironman, but I wasn't fully self-sufficient yet. After I got a common roadside flat tire, Kim said, "If you're going to cycle in this area, you'll need to learn to be independent. Let's learn to change a flat tube. There may not be someone to save you." (Editor's Note: True story) Kim and I have done a lot of long rides together, both training rides and organized events. Randonneuring built on my experiences of outdoors self reliance. I learned more about bike maintenance, nutrition and riding in many different conditions as I completed the qualification rides for Paris Brest Paris.

Often athletes that play sports in college acquire knowledge about self care. This awareness and knowledge lays the foundation for their sports longevity and lifestyle as adults. I didn't get that experience through organized sports teams or programs. For me, Outward Bound was fundamental to becoming a multi-sport athlete. I did my first Outward Bound course in South Africa. In my senior year of high school, I got to do Outward Bound through a scholarship that was offered to students. There weren't other kids from my class there; maybe I was the only one who responded! It was in South Africa, and had a different name, but was essentially Outward Bound. I eventually did two more courses in the U.K.



Outward Bound taught me about healthy nutrition. We'd hike all night, then learn a skill during the day. Hiking, orienteering, navigation, wilderness first aid, camp set up and building fires were part of the training. We would get these hearty farmhouse meals and the instructor would say, "You need to eat this because of the nutrition. You can't do what you want to do unless you eat, and fuel your body." Outward Bound at that time had a lot of military influence, similar to basic training. This photo is in the Grand Canyon with Cindy Akard on a Team Sheeper adventure.

*Editor's Note: Outward Bound is a global non-profit educational organization founded in 1941 by educator Kurt Hahn, designed to cultivate resilience, leadership, and compassion in youth through rigorous outdoor expeditions. The Outward Bound program began in Aberdovey, Wales, during WWII to train young sailors to survive the harsh conditions of the North Atlantic. Hahn noticed that older sailors survived not because of fitness, but because of inner strength and confidence. Students are taught that they are "crew, not passengers". During outings, youth take ownership of navigation, cooking, and decision-making. This shift forces them to understand that their individual actions directly impact the group's survival and success.*

## Motivation Changes Over Time

At first, my motivation came from within myself. Sport offered a clear and honest measure of effort. It helped me define myself within my family and among my friends, it was a way to test limits of my speed, strength, or endurance. Progress was easier to see than in other areas. The feedback was simple: the clock, the distance, the feeling of effort. Improvement brought excitement, The work itself was sufficient reason to continue.

Over time, my experiences widened. My internal motivation was strengthened by training partners, coaches, and role models. I saw how others navigated setbacks, plateaus, and long seasons of unremarkable effort. It was always easier for me to do things with other people, it's one reason I enter races and events and 'train through' them. I like meeting people and comparing notes on what they've done and what brings them out.

Now my focus is integration. With aging, motivation becomes less about expansion and more about alignment. The goal is to integrate change in a way that allows continued participation in the things that matter. I admire athletes who continue well into their seventies and beyond, moving with efficiency and quiet confidence. They demonstrate that longevity is built on consistency and attention, not intensity alone. The key is to keep moving every day, to remain attentive to mechanics, and to respect the body's signals without judgment.

My curiosity has become more physiological. I actively work on recovery. I try to ask myself, "How is my body responding? What does it need today? What can be sustained over time?" I don't always see the patterns, that's partially a job for my coach, but I want to stay in touch with these questions.

My goal now is to optimize the machine I have. There is appreciation for what it can do today, and respect for what it has done before. Memory provides perspective, and it colors my expectations of myself. Of course, I want to go as far and as fast as I did in the past, while knowing it cannot be done in every case. The effort remains the same. What continues, is the desire to participate fully—to move, to adapt, and to remain engaged in the life that sport has made possible.

## Injury and Clawing Back

In August 2024, about 30 miles into a 200-mile trail run in the Cascades of Washington state, my quad muscle separated. My leg made a popping sound that was both audible and physical. I didn't know if I'd had a cardiac event, torn the muscle, or broken my femur. I just knew I was on the ground. What I understood clearly was that my body had failed in a way I had never experienced

before. What caused the failure is really a grey area. The injury was rare and my muscles required surgical reattachment. No amount of mental effort was going to repair the torn tissue.

After surgery my leg was completely immobilized. The first phase of recovery was defined by stillness. Progress was measured in small steps—bending the knee a few degrees, contracting the muscle without movement, standing with balance restored. Isometric contractions, assisted range of motion, and careful circulation became the foundation.

I'm generally quite impatient. I believed I could accelerate the healing through many modalities and my mindset. Western medicine saved my leg. I also value Eastern approaches and used everything.

When something happens like my leg, well, yes, surgery is needed. Western medicine saved my life and my leg. Thank you God. But what does the East do? The wisdom of the East? I went to a Holistic Health Center. I saw a sports doc there. It was tendon healing homeopathic, Chinese medicine stuff. You have to compliment Western medicine. You can't just think Western has it all, because we don't.



Ten days after the surgery, I asked if I could swim with a pull buoy. Getting the OK allowed me to return to movement without damaging the repair. I was warned to be careful getting in and out of the pool. Those transitions were the most vulnerable moments. I still did my 10K swim that month as part of the Menlo Master year-rounder challenge (10,000 yards in one day each month). A pull buoy isolated my upper body, it also gave the injured leg time to rest and heal.

Cryotherapy helped manage inflammation. My coach worked with me through it all, including through surgery.

I could still do upper body strength stuff. And I did four weeks, six days a week, of cryotherapy. I went into a kind of fridge that was negative 100 degrees. Your whole body is in there for five minutes, then you come out and you're shaking like a leaf for another five minutes. Your body vasoconstricts and then vasodilates massively so you have all the fresh blood and oxygen coming in.

About two months from the surgery, I began strength work with the smallest possible loads—re-establishing neuromuscular communication before pursuing more load. I walked the mile and a half to the appointment and the mile and a half back home. I walked a lot. I needed to teach my muscles to fire again and to mobilize scar tissue. I worked on a lot of stability exercises to get back my balance and joint awareness.

## Coaching as Restraint

My coach provided constant guidance, mostly holding me back. Each day I assessed swelling, symmetry, fatigue, and response. The question was always: "What could I do today?" Since the surgery in the summer of 2024, I've completed Ironman California, walked 100 miles in 48 hours, and logged hundreds of miles hiking. I can see my body adapts to consistent stress and sufficient recovery. I am still building back.

Some challenges I would like to do may or may not happen—like the Iditarod Trail Invitational in Alaska that I have wanted to do for years. It's self-supported, brutally cold, and humbling. I'm going to start training next year, building up winter training skills. Iditarod is actually the name of the trail. There's the Iditarod event with the dogs, and then there's the Iditarod Trail Invitational. You can ski it, bike it or run it. You have big, fat snow tires on your bike, like the bikes all these kids now have. No electric bikes, of course! Everything just freezes at minus 20 degrees with 60 mile-an-hour winds. You need to self-support. They offer a 150 mile, and a 300 mile distance. I did Arrowhead in northern Minnesota in February several years ago. I went to the Iditarod training camp last year (2025) and it didn't go well. I got a form of cold shock. I have struggled with cold adaptation in

training, so there are still a lot of unknowns. Have I given up on that? We'll see. I believe the body, with the right training, can adapt to almost anything.

*Editor's Note: The [Arrowhead 135](#) is a human-powered 135-mile winter ultra-marathon held annually in late January across Northern Minnesota, running from International Falls to Tower. Participants bicycle, ski, or run the groomed snowmobile trail in extreme temperatures; they must carry or pull all mandatory survival gear including a sleeping bag and food. There is a 60 hour time limit.*

## Coaching as Structure

I was reading a book called "Training Essentials for Ultra-Distance Trail Runners," by Jason Koop and decided to call the author to learn more about the training program. Through Jason I got connected to my current coach, Anne Tisdell, of Carmichael Training Systems. Carmichael was primarily a cycling training organization and now they do a lot of ultra distance trail running coaching. I've worked with Anne for almost 3 years now.



My coach, Anne, builds my training plans remotely. We meet over Zoom and I can talk to her about many things beyond the training. When sports are so integrated into our lives, everything is connected: work schedule, sleeping, stressors of every kind, even commuting, the weather and the interactions I have with work colleagues. It is important that I share all these things with her. She takes it all in and then builds or adjusts my program.

I follow the program that Anne writes for me. Right now I'm running six days a week.

You'll see me on the trails of Portola Valley working on uphill and downhill running. I'm planning to return to the event in the Cascades of Washington where I was injured in 2024. That feels important.

## The Ends of the Earth, Again



In December 2025, I returned to Antarctica where I participated in what was the first organized swim/bike/run triathlon on the continent. This has been facilitated by a triathlon team member, Dave Mandelkern, who has worked with the race director / travel coordinator to organize the plane, logistics and events. Dave's goal has been to complete a triathlon on every continent. This was his last one. He had a shoulder injury that prevented him from training until just before we left on the Antarctic trip. Fortunately, Dave was successful in completing his seventh continental triathlon.

The Antarctic triathlon consisted of a short ocean swim (400m) in 7-mm wetsuits, a 13 mile bike loop on the ice, and a 3.1 mile run. There were several events that were part of this 'expedition' so within a three day period I also completed a half marathon and a marathon.

## Swimming as a Recovery Tool



At the moment, swimming is cross-training—three times a week, not hard. I use swimming as an active recovery from running and other cross training. In February I do the 50K (February Fitness Challenge). Anaerobic training becomes more important as you get older, so doing 50K of swimming in a month doesn't have a lot of dividends for me. I don't think it improves my stroke; it makes me tired and then my form breaks down. I'm becoming more aware of training with a fatigue load, the value is diminishing.

I don't have records from swim meets. I love the challenges that Tim designs for the team that create variety and a good reason to get to the pool. The structure of workouts and the checklist aspect of team challenges is something that really works for me. Personally, the key is finding the balance between the need to do something because a challenge exists and how it fits in with my overall goals. I definitely overdo it sometimes. It is very hard for me to not do these challenges.

I enjoy exploring and I use my adventures to that purpose. That's why I'll do a bizarre triathlon in Antarctica or across the US. I'm not that A-plus athlete. Yes, I'm fairly competitive, but not to the point of thinking, "I've got to win or I'm not going to race." For the longest time finishing was winning for me, and participating was great. I think Tim and the triathlon culture taught me, "Oh, there's a podium, and you better be on it."—Or...you can be on it...you could be on it." But that took a long time.

## Creating Healthy Work Boundaries, My New Frontier

I work as a pediatrics nurse at Kaiser Hospital Santa Clara now. I've just signed on to take a regular schedule—every Thursday and Friday afternoon. We'll see how it works out. I'm also a full-time faculty member at Samuel Merritt, which is a health science university with a College of Nursing and four campuses. The headquarters are in Oakland. I'm trying to reduce the juggling of these two professional demands. Since coming to the States I completed my B.S, MS and Doctorate in Nursing Practice. As health care evolves, it is important that there be nurses with advance practice education and training.

At Samuel Merritt, I teach nursing courses and set up my student's practical clinical experience rotations in different hospitals. Dealing with student issues beyond their academics is a big part of the job. I do get a lot of reward from supporting students. I was a non-traditional student myself, so I feel I understand students who have not taken a straight path through higher education or who have come here from another country and educational background. Nevertheless, the student's issues sometimes cross the work hours boundaries I want to set for myself. This sets off a cascade of consequences in my already overcommitted schedule.

In recent years, I have been nursing on a contract basis and given priority to the teaching. I've recently realized that I'm a nurse first and an educator second. Education is so all-consuming, and I'm done with that! I'm going to do the minimum requirement. I told my boss I have a hard stop on Thursdays and Fridays at 2pm.

Aside from the ongoing dilemma of how to do both jobs and train properly, I like both of my jobs and the way they complement each other. Clinical nursing focuses on direct, hands-on patient care in medical settings to improve health outcomes, while teaching (education) focuses on giving knowledge and developing skills of future nurses. I just need to manage the hours and the toll of

long shifts. Setting work boundaries and getting enough sleep are both areas I'm working on diligently.

## Standing on Shoulders

There was Title Nine, but why haven't we made more progress with women in sport, even now? For amateurs like me, the post-Title IX landscape has been a massive success for participation, boasting enormous growth in high school sports. Yet there are still significant gaps in funding, media coverage, and leadership equity at all levels of sports. While opportunities have expanded, systemic inequalities persist and women's sports still operate under male-dominated models that do not allow them to fully thrive.

*Editor's Note: In 1971, before Title IX passed, only 1% of college athletic budgets went to women's sports programs. At the high school level, male athletes outnumbered female athletes 12.5 to 1. Title IX was signed into law on June 23, 1972 by President Richard Nixon. According to Billie Jean King, "Title IX remains the only law that grants women any kind of equality in America"*



I've been able to race the Triathlon World Championships in Kona, Hawaii, in 2023 as a women's only race. The event featured a unique, supportive, and empowering energy compared to mixed races, allowing for focused competition in a respectful environment. 1,600+ athletes from 70+ countries contributed to a "women lifting women" theme. We still have work to do in women's sport. At the Women's Triathlon World Championship I felt that this focus on women's racing, along with the professionalism and seriousness of women athletes can begin to change attitudes and make women in sports more visible.

## Crew and Why Hard Things Matter

The people you surround yourself with matter a lot. I often need a crew to support me for long events. The people you surround yourself with aren't just supporters—they need to function as an external extension of your willpower. Your brain's cognitive functions falter under extreme fatigue, so you need a crew that essentially becomes your prefrontal cortex, making critical decisions when you can no longer do math or remember to eat.



Kim Freitas, Jenna Holden, Cindy Akard, Doug Fujii and Cory Luellen were team members that served on my crew on a 200 mile run in Tahoe in June of 2024. For over 100 hours the crew members took shifts pacing in sections ranging from 13-20 miles, meeting me at aid stations to reload my pack, tend to my damaged feet and keep me moving forward. They slept in vans with me, ate lots of chicken noodle soup and listened to my dream stories when I tried to keep myself awake on the trails. As Kim says, "crew's job is to reduce friction around every decision and transition, so the runner can focus solely on moving forward."

The crew chief (Kim Freitas) is the assertive person that will nudge you out of the aid station chair when your mind is finding reasons to stay. The crew chief tracks the runner's progress, condition, and schedule while coordinating the rest of the team. This person communicates with aide station volunteers, works out the pace chart and pacer assignments, and looks after overall operations. The crew chief filters information to the athlete and keeps the operation calm and orderly. Kim met me at every aid station around the clock for 100 hours. Each team member found the role best suited to

them. Kim constantly checked on each member of the team, especially me. She made dinner for the crew too. It mattered a lot that we all knew each other from the swim team, triathlon team and other adventures. There was a very high level of trust between me and the crew and between the crew members. They were locked in and solid, start to finish.

The gear handler (Jenna Holden) managed my stuff and, believe me, there is a lot of stuff. Clothing, shoes, headlamps, batteries, blister kits, nutrition supplies, and weather layers all passed through her hands. Jenna anticipated changes before I asked—fresh socks, warmer layers before nightfall, a headlamp swap before batteries fade. Jenna repacked my daypack many times so I had everything I needed for each section, perfectly anticipating the weather and swapping out lots of food that couldn't go down. Efficiency matters at every stop; so a well-organized gear handler like Jenna can turn a chaotic aid station into a quick, smooth transition.

The crew logician (Cindy Akard) worked out the race schedule and made sure that the crew got to each aid station on time with the right supplies, she kept track of the vehicles, who was in them and travel time to each aid station. Cindy monitored my pace against course cutoff times, elevation profiles, and expected arrival times compared to the pre-race schedule that the crew chief prepared. In long events, conditions rarely unfold exactly as predicted, so the logician constantly recalculates—anticipating when the runner might deviate from the expected. Cindy ensured that I stayed within a sustainable physiological window. She deftly managed the chessboard of all the moving pieces.



The pacers (Doug, Kim, Cory and Jen Rishel) served as pacers and on-trail therapists; they listened, observed, talked, sang, reminded me to eat and made sure I got through the event safely. When they joined me for each race section their role was partly practical—keeping a steady pace, navigating, and watching for signs of fatigue or confusion. But pacing is also psychological. Jen Rishel literally held my hand for several miles during part of a dark, cold section. As I ran and hiked from aid station to aid station, Cory was very light on his feet and was the quiet soul I needed. Doug paced for over 10 miles on a badly twisted ankle and never said a word to me about his discomfort. I do a lot of self-talk during these events, using mantras and remembering stories from the past. I'm social so I get a big boost from interacting with other people during these events. It gives me energy. I often have the feeling of peace that I am safe and people know that I am out there.

In June of 2024, I completed the Tahoe 200 Mile Endurance Run in 2024 with a time of 100 hours, 53 minutes, and 9 seconds. I was 54 years old.

Hard events build confidence for life. I'm convinced of that. I'm honored to know the people in Menlo Masters and Team Sheep who demonstrate this everyday and carry this confidence into all aspects of their life: work, family and community. I'm not sure where my adventuring and nursing life will take me, but I feel very grateful for all the people that have been woven into my life up until now.

Editor's Note: Frances Reneau interviewed Michele. Kim Freitas edited the transcript.

## About Local Legends

Menlo Masters is gathering and sharing stories of extraordinary individuals on the team. We hope these narratives will connect us with each other and inspire us to swim often.

If you know a swimmer who has some stories, please send an email to Tasha Capen, Menlo Master Team Manager [tasha@menlomasters.com](mailto:tasha@menlomasters.com)

**Menlo Swim & Sport [menloswim.com](http://menloswim.com)**