



# How Ironman Athletes Train in Charlotte

by *Ann Gibson* *Charlotte, NC* August 28, 2017



What are the chances that two Charlotte-area triathletes from the same team qualify for the Ironman World Championship in the same year?

"Fairly rare," says Jen Keith, a Charlotte native who has competed in the sport since 2009. And Keith should know. The fifth-grade teacher has qualified for this year's [Ironman World Championship](#) in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, along with her EPT Racing teammate Karen Wood.

As they prepare to swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles, and run 26.2 miles on October 14, we've asked these elite Charlotte athletes to reflect on their journey to the championship race. With no

hesitation, both women credit their achievements to three things: expert coaching, excellent local training programs and facilities, and Charlotte-area support.

"We're so lucky to have such a thriving triathlon community," says Keith. "There are great places for elite athletes to train and great opportunities for beginners and novices." We asked these two remarkable women to describe how they've earned their place among the world's most accomplished triathletes, and how others can plug into the multisport scene in Charlotte.

## **Competitive Spirit & Rock Star Coaches**

Having worked as group exercise instructors, Keith and Wood have long been dedicated to fitness. So, neither of them hesitated when friends suggested signing up for a triathlon. Keith's first race was a half Ironman, which is not a distance she'd recommend for beginners. Wood started with one shorter tri and rapidly progressed to half and full Ironman distances. Both women now coach alongside their coach and [Epoch Performance Therapy](#) teammate Steve Hall.

"A coach is an invaluable tool, whether you are experienced or brand new to the sport," says Wood. She and Keith credit Hall with taking them to the next level. "Steve takes time to invest in each athlete. He's my first resource as far as how my training goes," says Keith. Hall has coached three Ironman 70.3 World Championship qualifiers and, with Keith and Wood, two Ironman World Championship qualifiers. His focused commitment to a small group of athletes achieves results.

"Steve made the difference in terms of my training, making me stronger, more resilient, and really teaching me how to race," says Wood. "I think any triathlete that does the Ironman distance thinks it would be awesome to go to Kona, but it never occurred to me that I could actually accomplish that goal. It was Steve who had to sit me down and say, 'This is what we're going to focus on for you.'" "

## **Swim Training**



Keith and Wood use [Training Peaks](#), a platform that allows them to upload workouts from their Garmin GPS, map out training schedules, and get feedback across web and mobile devices. The bulk of their swim training takes place at [Mecklenburg Swim Association](#)(MSA) with masters swim coach Patty Waldron.

"Patty is phenomenal," says Wood. "She prepares triathletes to race, whether it's short course or long course. Her workouts are all-encompassing for all manner of athletes, no matter what they're training for." MSA has indoor facilities in Marvin and off Sardis Road, near Charlotte Christian School. Open-water training takes place at Lake Wylie's Nivens Creek Landing and at the Lake Norman YMCA's supported open-water swims, held twice a month during triathlon season.

## **Bike Training**

While Keith and Wood do long training rides on weekends on the rural roads of Union County, they also train indoors with [HIT Cycling](#), a mobile cycling studio with classes at Performance Therapy and MSA.

"HIT Cycling caters workouts to you to build power and endurance for results you're looking for on race day," says Wood. "HIT has made me a much stronger cyclist. I'll go indoors even when I could ride outdoors to have a HIT-coached workout."

## Training to Run



Convenience is key when it comes to training for the run. Both Wood and Keith seek out hills like the ups and downs of Providence Rd., and [Charlotte area greenways](#), like Four Mile Creek Greenway in Matthews. Both women recommend running on asphalt rather than sidewalks, and they prefer the camaraderie of group runs for motivation. In addition, they say that a lighted is indispensable for early morning and evening training. Closer to uptown, the Booty Loop can be a valuable resource for brick workouts (combined bike/run training).

## Nutrition Advice

"Nutrition is a huge component of triathlon," says Keith. "The kids at school laugh at me because I eat an apple and 12 almonds every day for a snack. I feel like I'm teaching them the value of fueling your body well so you can perform to your highest ability."

Keith and Wood both endorse eating clean, natural foods, and pre-planning nutritious meals and snacks throughout the week. They find natural and organic selections everywhere, from the local grocery store to Aldi markets. "It doesn't necessarily have to be a high-end store," says Wood, explaining that you just need to find stores with brands that avoid additives and high fructose corn syrup." Keith stresses that daily nutrition is different from products for racing. "Day in, day

out products are what keep you healthy, injury free, and training, instead of bogged down, worn out, and tired.”

## Recovery



Keith says rest and recovery are often overlooked but integral to training and racing. "I feel like I spend just as much time trying to recover as I do training," she says. Keith and Wood agree that there's never enough rest and recovery time, especially while training for an Ironman and maintaining home and work responsibilities, but epsom salt baths, foam rolling, early bedtimes, and purposeful workouts help. "It's a lot of hours, but quality is certainly more important than quantity," says Wood. "You don't want to be out there just running yourself down. Each session has a specific focus and purpose."

Wood offers this advice: "Don't let yourself be limited by the word 'can't.' As soon as we put that road block up, it becomes truth. If you know your 'why'—why you want to do this—then you can absolutely do it."

Keith recommends getting plugged into the triathlon resources Charlotte has to offer. "Our area is lucky to have athletes to train and race with that are of such a high caliber," she says. "It's easy to jump in through a masters program at the YMCA, Swim MAC, or the Mecklenburg Aquatics

Center. At cycling classes like HIT, you can train in the studio when you may not be able to keep pace on a road ride. The local area has tons of great races to start your triathlon career.”



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