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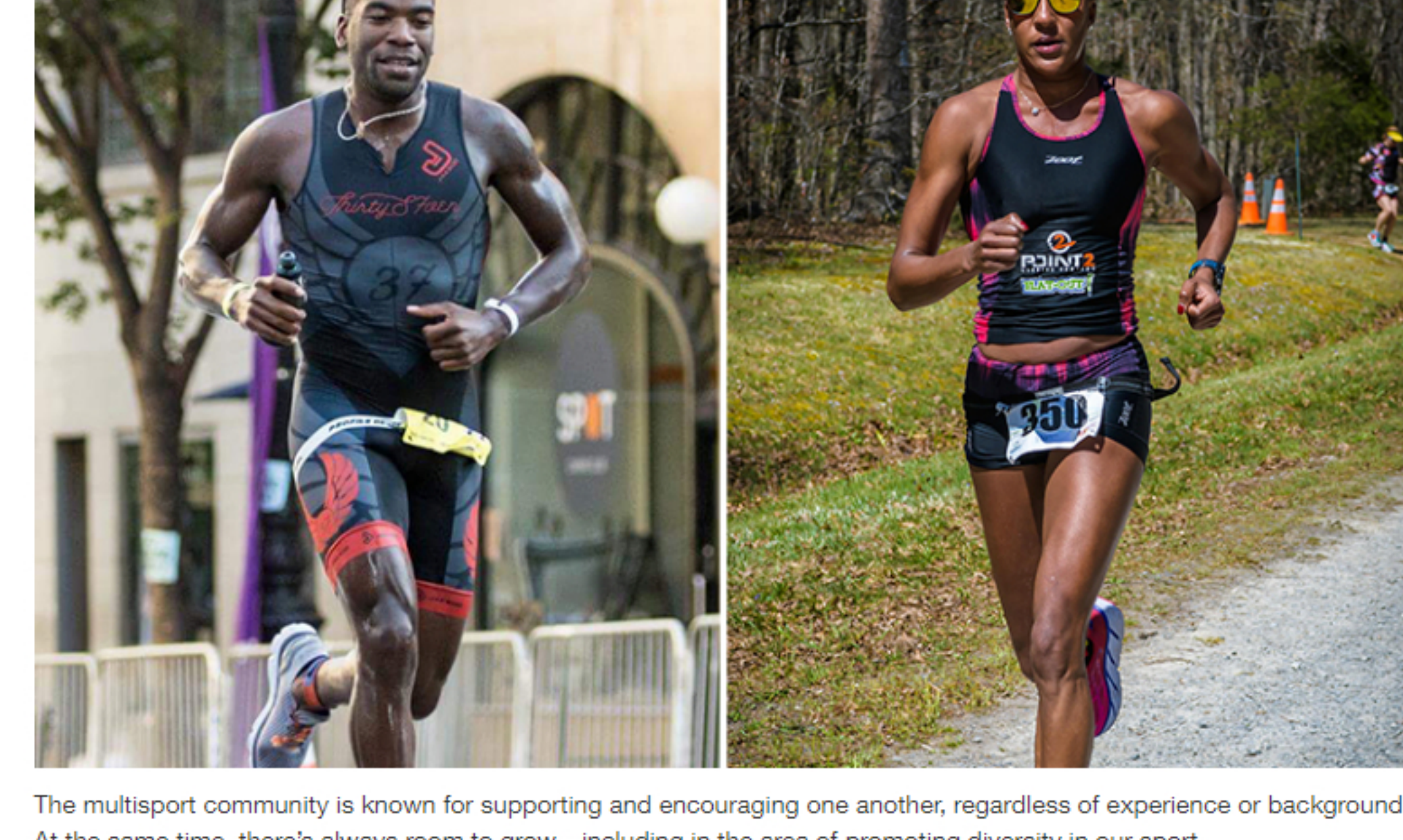
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# Multisport Milestones, Part 1: Leading the Way in Cultural Diversity

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BY HOLLY JOHNSON | FEB. 08, 2019, 1:09 P.M. (ET)

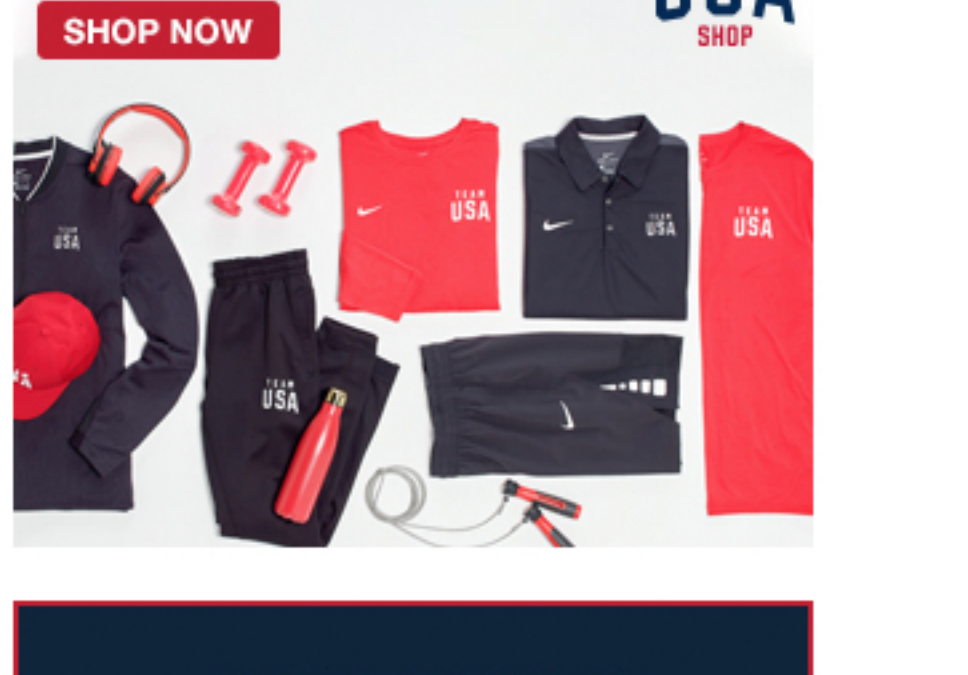


The multisport community is known for supporting and encouraging one another, regardless of experience or background. At the same time, there's always room to grow—including in the area of promoting diversity in our sport.

Throughout the month of February, the United States acknowledges African-American achievements and contributions to the culture. To join this celebration of racial diversity and open a conversation on the subject, USA Triathlon interviewed several athlete-leaders who are making an impact in the multisport community. This two-part article series highlights their experiences and perspectives as African Americans participating in multisport.

Today's article features Max Fennell, the first African-American triathlete to turn pro, and elite triathlete Sika Henry.

Read Part 2 in the series [here](#).



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## What drew you to multisport?

**MAX:** I fell into it. I was trying to become a professional soccer player, but I injured myself. I was working at a coffee shop, limping around and wondering, "What am I going to do now? Maybe I'll do this triathlon thing." I grew up in the Philadelphia area, and there's a very rich and long triathlon history and community on the East Coast. I was aware of triathlon, but never considered it until then. A gentleman from Philadelphia lent me his old bike to do my first race. I won my age group, and I got hooked. At the end of that year, I thought maybe I had the ability to go pro. I earned my pro card two years later, in 2014.

**SIKA:** I don't remember a time when I wasn't actively participating in sports. I played just about every sport you can think of. I settled on swimming in high school, and then I fell in love with track and field in college (high jump). I actually have the Tufts University collegiate record in the indoor and outdoor 4 x 400m relay. I also have the third-highest jump in school history (indoor track & field). After college, I started running longer distances as a means to stay in shape. I had always wanted to try a triathlon. In the summer of 2013, I saw there was a local sprint (Tidewater Triathlon). I only had two weeks to prepare, so I bought a mountain bike, got membership to my local pool, and searched triathlon-specific workouts online. I probably came in last, but I had so much fun! I loved the variety in training that is required of triathlon. It became a lifestyle.

## What is it like to compete in a sport where the majority of athletes are Caucasian?

**SIKA:** To be candid, I've found that my upbringing has made me uniquely prepared for this sport. Being the only African-American athlete on my high school swim team for years, and going to an all-girl Catholic high school with no diversity, made my transition to this sport easier. However, for a person who hasn't grown up in an environment like that, triathlon can feel very lonely or isolated. There is something comforting in seeing someone who looks like you in a room of strangers. I think it's human nature to gravitate toward familiarity. No one wants to feel out of place. I think this is why diversity and inclusion are so important.



## What do you feel is an important topic to highlight regarding racial diversity in triathlon?

**MAX:** First, representation. As the first pro black triathlete, I've had people from Africa reach out to me. They want me to race in Africa because it's important to them to see a professional triathlete coming out of the water with the white guys.

Sponsorship is also important. I've been very fortunate to have it. It's important that sponsors identify up-and-coming minority talent and bring them onto the roster and give them that platform. I know race directors are putting a lot of emphasis on minority inclusion. Wherever I've wanted to race, that opportunity has always been there. When those up-and-coming kids are coming, make sure they have opportunity, too.

I wear a Stanford hat because I swim with their Masters team. It's my Instagram picture because it's archetypical — this brown-skinned person is at Stanford. But when people actually get to see me or other minority athletes [like Simone Manuel] swimming there, it invokes something different. Or maybe you see them in a USA Triathlon kit, and they're swimming at the Olympic Training Center. That's a powerful image. It inspires young people to not just become that, but to become something better than that.

## What can be done to encourage minority participation?

**MAX:** There are a lot of things moving in the right direction. My passion is to develop elite participation in the sport, so I think the next thing is highlighting the benefits of the lifestyle. Even if you're working a day job and want to become a pro, there's a lot of added benefit of being a pro while you still have your day job.

**SIKA:** I would love to see African Americans competing at an elite level in the pro ranks, but first and foremost I would love to see the current 0.5 percent participation rate grow. It would be great to tune into the IRONMAN World Championship television broadcast and see athletes who look like me, or show up to a half IRONMAN event and not be one of the only two African-American women racing.

People can't participate in something they don't know exists, so I have tried to be very open and honest about my triathlon journey. It's scary to publicly state that my goal is to become the first African-American woman to turn pro. It is also scary to share the highs and lows of training and racing on my blog. But my quest to turn pro has brought attention to the sport. If I achieve my goal, I think it will bring even more attention. When I receive messages like "I signed up for swim lessons because of the article you wrote" or "I've decided to do my first triathlon because of your blog," I feel grateful, honored, and encouraged to keep sharing my story.

I think others can help support these efforts of making the sport more diverse by utilizing social media. Share stories, encourage others, and if you are in a position to help those in need, give back. I wouldn't be where I am without the generosity of others. I am incredibly thankful for my sponsors In & Out Express Care, Zoot Sports, HOKA One One, and Point 2 Running Company.

## What would you say to a younger athlete who has that desire to pursue the sport but is lacking support?

**MAX:** If you're lacking support, figure out what your vision is, and what your definition of success is — whether it's to finish a race, buy a wetsuit or go pro. Then you've just got to persevere. We've all been in a race or training when you hit the wall and needed encouragement. Endurance sports are about assistance, coming alongside each other. Be willing to ask for help and support.

For me personally, the triathlon community has been very supportive from day one. A lot of my friends have come from the triathlon community. This journey has happened because of hundreds of people willing to help me out, guide me, hear my story. I do the training and show up for the races, but it's always been a huge community, industry effort.



## What are some key things you'd like the USA Triathlon audience to understand about Black History Month in general, and as it relates to multisport?

**SIKA:** It's not fun to talk about or acknowledge the fact that sports have been a battleground for racial and gender equity for years. My grandfather once said that he never dreamed he'd see blacks participate in professional sports. He was talented enough to play in the NFL, but due to segregation he never got the chance to make that dream a reality. Times have changed, but the lingering effects of segregation are still felt today.

Ten years ago, we didn't have Black Triathletes Association, International Association of Black Triathletes, a black pro triathlete, or a presence in triathlon media. I'm hopeful that over the next decade we will see even more positive changes due to initiatives like Hampton University adding a women's collegiate team, and the topic of diversity being addressed publicly.

**MAX:** That it's never really been significantly emphasized in American culture. Regarding multisport, a lot of people don't know about black triathletes who have made their mark. For example, Bernard Lyles was a Kona athlete. He was one of the largest voices in the triathlon community. Larry Lewis raced IRONMAN Lake Placid 20 years consecutively since the first race, and to this point, only missed it the year his wife passed away from cancer. These were some of the first guys out there racing, competing.

## What advice do you have for approaching discussions about racial diversity?

**MAX:** My coach and I have these conversations all the time. His response is, "I can't fully understand where you're coming from or the situation you're going through, but I'm going to do my best to try to understand." It's going to be tough. If you don't know what might offend people, you don't know and that's fine. It's a conversation. Just let people know you want to dialogue, to understand. There are situations we [black triathletes] deal with that you wouldn't recognize. There are a lot of layers to what it is that we go through, the trials and tribulations we face in society and in sport. Yes, there's baggage, we want to represent—but we don't want to feel like we're representing second-class citizens.

**SIKA:** I wish there was a "best" way to bring it up. Racial discussions are never easy because of the historical context behind the conversation. I honestly think the most important thing is that you are interested and want to know more, and these topics are being addressed.

*NEXT WEEK: Insights from Team USA Age Group Triathlete coach Alma Dagensburg, International Association of Black Triathletes CEO Dr. Tekemia Dorsey, and USA Triathlon certified coach Tony Rich*

**MAX FENNELL** is a professional triathlete and entrepreneur based out of Silicon Valley. Max is primarily a short-course specialist who currently trains under Dave Liotta and with the Stanford Masters swim team.  
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**SIKA HENRY** is a competitive triathlete, two-time marathon winner, and a former collegiate high jumper. Sika graduated from Tufts University with a degree in Economics. She currently lives in Newport News, Virginia, where she is an analyst for Ferguson Enterprises. Sika enjoys racing the IRONMAN 70.3 distance with a goal of turning pro. She is passionate about increasing diversity within the sport of triathlon, and enjoys sharing her journey on her blog, <http://why-run.blogspot.com/>.

Instagram: @sikaheury  
Website: <http://www.sikaheury.com/>

## Comments

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**Michael Reed**  
The triathlon community, as a whole, should celebrate these two remarkable individuals. They are courageous and gracious. Their impact will help our sport, our communities, and our world. Thank you for writing and publishing this article.  
Like · Reply · 4 · 6w

**Carolyn Sanders**  
Thanks USA Triathlon for celebrating diversity in Triathlon!  
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**Tarsha R. Jacobs**  
Thank you so much for this article. As a new African-American triathlete, this is so encouraging.  
Like · Reply · 3 · 6w

**David Chase**  
What a great article. This is going on my save list. Hope to see you at Eagleman this year Sika.  
Like · Reply · 1 · 5w

**Sika Henry**  
I'll see you in Cambridge in a few months 😊 Happy Training!  
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