

Sharpless lives by a part of helping people accomplish their dreams. "There is really nothing else like it. Being a facilitator and seeing their hard work manifest into this life-changing event. I am so lucky."

Her business has catapulted due to her success as an athlete, which includes a 2nd place overall finish at Ironman Florida in 2006. "A great athlete doesn't necessarily make a great coach and vice versa, but there's something to be said for talk the talk and walk the walk. I've done enough things as an athlete myself for people to see that I practice what I preach."

A previous client, Chris Engels, chose to train with Carole due to her incredible reputation as a coach, person and triathlete. Engels declares, "Sharpe is a dynamic individual whose personal success...has given her knowledge to not only coach a person, but also connect with that individual on a level that transcends the sport."

Sharpless' own first coach was Ian Murray, a well-known tri coach who often works with celebrities. At their first training session, Sharpless was all nerves. "I remember being in his garage getting ready to ride," she says. "I was feeling really self-conscious and really embarrassed. I made some comment to Ian like, 'I must look like such a dork to you' and he said, 'No you look like an athlete to me.' It's a comment I will always remember."

It's hard to imagine that Sharpless was ever in bad physical shape. But, back in 1994, her weight had gotten out of control. "The big in-your-face moment for me was when I couldn't even get my overalls on," she recalls. "I was spiraling down in a web of unhappiness."

Sharpless had been struggling with depression for a long time. Losing her mom to cancer when she was only 15 took a toll. "I had a hard time coping with all of the changes that occurred in my life," Sharpless says. "I was searching for some sort of purpose but just couldn't seem to find it. I kept asking myself 'what am I supposed to be doing?' Then, all of a sudden I weighed 220 pounds."

Sharpless felt she'd become ridiculous. "I was 26 years old living the life of someone who should be in a home [just needed to do something about it]." The one thing Sharpless knew how to do was swimming, so she joined a master's swim team in Santa Monica. She suddenly found herself in the land of triathletes.

One triathlete in particular was an Ironman and training for his third race at Kona. "I thought he was a crackpot," Sharpless says. Still, he inspired her to try her first sprint a year later.

Sharpless says, "After I finished, that was it. I felt like everyone else does when they do a triathlon - the best ever! That's where it all started."

But it wasn't until 2001, when Sharpless watched Ironman Florida in person, that the light bulb went on. "That's when I knew I wanted to do that insane event," she explains. "I saw all these people crying, puking, being themselves, and I thought 'Wow! That's fantastic. I have to do this.'"

At the race, Sharpless witnessed the triumph of the human spirit. "It happens all at once, but in particular Ironman. There are people there who are blind, on one leg, are 70 years old, and kids holding signs saying 'Go Dad!' All people want to do is finish." For Sharpless, Ironman was a perfect metaphor for her own life in which she was just trying to get moving.

"If you told me 10 years ago I would be a professional athlete, I would have told you to get off the pipe," she jokes. "On some level I feel it's crazy but on another level it really does make sense when I think of my personality, lifestyle and temperament. It makes sense to me that this is the path that I am on. Otherwise, I would be in a bar or prison."

At her first Ironman in Lake Placid in 2002, Sharpless admits she had no idea what she was doing. "It was a dismal experience, which made some sense given the type of training I had done." With encouragement and advice from Wendy Ingraham, a highly accomplished Ironman with five top place finishes, Sharpless was able to elevate her performance for her next races. She went on to race Lake Placid again, then Wisconsin, Florida, and Hawaii.

She is most proud of her Wisconsin finish in 2004. During the swim, Sharpless contracted a parasite. It took several hours to move through her. "When I hit the run it was all gung-ho," remembers Sharpless. "I was trying on the concrete in the middle of the road. Weeds were coming on to help. Everyone was saying 'You need to pull out.' But I couldn't do it."

Sharpless had spent her own athletics racing that day. She had an example to set. "The spirit of Ironman is you finish. You get out whatever adversity you are facing and you just do it," she says. Her marathon took six and a half hours. She was in terrible pain the entire time, but she finished.

Sharpless, at 35, believes she has a few years left as a professional. "There's a certain amount of youth that is required to sustain this high level. I am cognizant of the fact that my body will fall apart before my spirit."

But before she retires, Sharpless would love to add an Ironman first place finish to her achievements. "I don't know how realistic I thought that was until recently," she admits. "But I've started to believe in myself a little more in terms of that possibility."

Sharpless knows that triathlon helped pull her off the couch, out of depression, and away from a very unhealthy lifestyle. For others who might face similar issues, she suggests picking an achievable but challenging, active goal, such as a 5K race, a tennis match, the Broad Canal 3 day. "Register for it, have a trainer or training partner, and hold yourself accountable," Sharpless recommends.

Sharpless has watched her own clients go through a metamorphosis during Ironman training. Some of it is physical, but the majority of it is emotional. "I see people not as sure of themselves increase their self-esteem, become more joyous," she says. "They finish Ironman and they are changed. There is a definitive line between the self they were and the self they have become."

Current Sharpless client, Karen Fallon, says she had struggled with body image and self-confidence for the past 25 years, but the training has changed that. "This experience has brought my confidence and belief in myself to a new height," says Fallon. "I can not express in words what it has done for me!"

Sharpless explains that Ironman truly changes your life. "I see people become better mothers and fathers, better at work, better people. It's great that people get physically stronger and healthier, but, most importantly, it's who's inside that gets better too."

So what will Sharpless do when her professional triathlete days are over? "Everything in my life that I have ever planned has never happened," says Sharpless. "So to some degree I'm kind of letting life happen. Things have a way of leading to other things that you don't even know about. I will see what life brings me."

www.carole-sharpless.com/home.html



CAROLE SHARPLESS

A Former Couch Potato Turns Professional Coach

When I arrive to meet Carole Sharpless, professional triathlete and coach, at Frankie's restaurant in Roswell, GA, I find her well into a stack of loaded nachos. "This is just a starter," she assures me. "Look, I'm not a twig. I'm not a 130-pound athlete. I am going to eat." Nachos are the perfect post-workout meal if you have just finished a challenging six-hour training ride.

In her 4th year as an Ironman Coach, Sharpless has become a very visible presence in the Southeast. "I talk with, and, hopefully help, various athletes of all shapes and sizes," she says.

Sharpless started her business in 2003 as a figure with race entry fees. When she went pro in 2004, she figured coaching was the only position that would afford flexibility and a relatively steady income. It actually requires much more of her than anticipated in terms of the hours, she says. "But it is incredibly rewarding. I couldn't imagine doing anything else right now."