

The ‘Woodstock of triathlon’ turns 35

By Kari Bodnarchuk
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BRADLEY, Calif. — Ever since the 1990s, Brian Fitzgerald and his triathlon buddies have traveled to the middle of nowhere in California to hang out and race. They come from different areas of the country but they camp in the same spot, tackle the same rugged course, and swap the same race stories around the campfire each night — except maybe the times get faster and the competition fiercer with each retelling. It's tradition, just like Wildflower, a weekend of music and multisport racing that celebrates its 35th anniversary this year.

“It's the one time of year we all get together,” says Fitzgerald, 44, an Amherst resident and founder of Tinkergarten, an outdoor education program for young children. “We sit around and try to solve the world’s problems, and we talk about each other's kids. It's also the only time we have a chance to read magazines, so that’s part of the ritual,” adds Fitzgerald, who has three young children.

A recent addition to their group, Chang So, brings a few bottles of custom-blended wine that he makes on his property in California, complete with labels designed specifically for the group’s Wildflower weekend away. They share their outdoor living quarters with thousands of other athletes, spectators, and visitors, who come from around the world to be a part of this legendary race weekend in early May.

The three-day Wildflower event draws athletes from New England to Alaska, and as far away as Japan and Thailand. It takes place amid the vineyards and parched rolling hills of central California, and in the San Antonio Recreation Area — just over an hour south of San Luis Obispo, 20 miles east of the Pacific Ocean, and halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Here, in an area outside of cell range for most visitors, athletes and other visitors gather to commune, listen to live bands, do yoga, attend bike workshops, cheer on racers, and compete. The weekend includes nine running, standup paddleboard, and triathlon races that draw everyone from kids as young as 8 to triathlon’s top pros.

What sets this iconic event apart from other races — and has earned it the nickname “the Woodstock of triathlon” — is that virtually everyone camps out in tents or RVs. The closest town with a hotel, Paso Robles, lies 45 minutes away. At Wildflower, everyone shares common ground.

“The camaraderie is what makes this race so special, and the camping is what brings it all together,” says triathlon-legend Julie Moss, a former pro racer and Wildflower winner. “Everyone is sitting around in beach chairs sharing this collective experience. Then you go out and do this badass event, and that night you’re back around the campfire sharing stories about the race.”

“You’re racing but you’re also celebrating the multisport lifestyle,” adds another triathlon legend, Bob Babbitt, an Ironman and USA Triathlon hall of fame inductee, and co-founder of the Challenged Athletes Foundation (he also hosts Breakfast with Babbitt at the Boston Marathon each year, interviewing pro runners on his radio show). “You don’t really hang out with people at other races; you pick up your race packet and go back to your hotel. But here, people spend time together. You go down to the lake with your friends, swim around, go out on a boat, talk story down at the dock. So much of the experience is built around that lake.”

The California drought and severely low water levels at Lake San Antonio, in part, forced event-organizer Tri-California to cancel Wildflower in 2017. The event returns this year, May 4-6, with a new partner (Denver-based Motiv Sports), a newly branded name (Wildflower Experience), and new events, including the addition of 5k, 10k, and 10-mile running races, and 2- and 6-mile standup paddleboard races. Athletes can still compete in



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the longstanding — and notoriously brutal — half-iron (70.3-mile) and Olympic-distance triathlons, and the mountain bike and road bike sprint-distance races.

The weekend also includes a full day of free bike clinics for visitors (learn how to quickly change a flat tire, how to best transition in and out of bike shoes, and about nutrition), wine tasting, a beer garden, kayak rentals, a kid zone (with a playground, arts and crafts, and interactive games), and live entertainment by local bands. Or people can go for nature hikes and take part in friendly corn hole competitions.

“In a sport that isn’t really spectator friendly, we had to figure out how to share this sense of community with our kids and friends, how to make Wildflower an inclusive rather than exclusive event,” says Colleen Bousman, race director for Wildflower and president of Tri-California, which was started by Bousman’s father, Terry Davis, in the 1990s. “We wanted families to come join in, have fun, and feel welcome. . . . It’s like ‘Cheers’ — at the core, we just want you to feel at home when you get here.”

Wildflower started as a music festival in the early 1980s, a laid-back bluegrass festival that ran when the wildflowers blanketed the surrounding countryside in this Monterey County park. The event's first triathlon — a relatively new and largely unknown sport — showed up here in 1983, when Davis, then a park employee, organized the race to help boost early season visitation in the park. Less than 85 participants showed up. Davis, undeterred, continued offering the half-iron race.

Race entries steadily grew throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, and by 2006, 8,000 participants showed up to compete, most camping out and enjoying the festival vibe. The number of entrants went down with the economy and then California hit a period of drought that finally ended last year.

Even with the fluctuation of numbers, Wildflower still maintains its status as one of the sport’s most iconic (many

say “bucket list”) events, right up there with the Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii; Challenge Roth in Germany; and Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon. It offers the buzz and excitement of a big-scale event, in a more mellow and relaxed setting.

“Triathlon used to be organic and rooty and family-oriented,” says former pro racer Scott Tinley, a seventh-generation Californian who grew up surfing and racing, and who started competing at Wildflower in the 1980s. “There’s a lot of branding and homogenization now. I’m not going to say that the sport has lost its soul, but there are fewer events that remind you of the essence of what helped it to grow. Wildflower had that, and it still has that.”

Adds six-time Wildflower long-course champion Jesse Thomas, “It’s an homage to a simpler time in the sport. Over the eight or nine years I’ve been racing professionally, the gear has gotten more technologically advanced, people are spending more on where they’re going to stay or go, and prices have gone up tenfold. Wildflower is this enormous crazy-competitive event, but it reminds me of a local Saturday race. You’re in the dirt, camping next to your friends and competitors. No one is getting the ideal treatment or staying in a 5-star hotel. It’s a crazy-tough but fun environment and everyone is in it together.”

Walk up the Stairway of Champions, a long cement stairway next to the transition area, and you’ll see how many top pros have tackled this brutal course or even launched their race careers at Wildflower — people such as Paula Newby-Fraser, an eight-time Ironman World Champion and a five-time Wildflower winner, Heather Jackson of Exeter, N.H., who will compete again this year, and Thomas, who was relatively unknown on the triathlon scene when he won his first half-iron race here in 2011.

“We even have retired elites coming back who want to help out and announce, because it holds a special place in their hearts,” says Bousman.

In fact, Moss, often remembered for her epic crawl across the finish line in the 1982 Kona Ironman race, has served as Wildflower’s race announcer for the past 15 years, and will return again this year.

“I became known in the sport of triathlon not for winning a race, but for getting to the finish line,” says Moss, whose new book, “Crawl of Fame,” comes out this fall and chronicles her experience in triathlon over the past 36 years. “I saw a complete shift in me from being an athlete focusing on the front of the race to being

A racer crosses the finish line at the Wildflower triathlon in central California. Triathletes take the plunge on the first leg of the race. A competitor on the cycling part of the route.

an announcer embracing the people at the back of the race. For first-time athletes, those who have faced amazing challenges, and people who are just pushing hard, it’s all about getting to the finish line.”

The presence of many collegiate teams and supporters over the years has helped inject energy and passion into the event. Wildflower hosts the National Collegiate Championships, and many lively and passionate supporters cheer on everyone from first-timers to pros (one remote aid station on the run course was known for its naked supporters — maybe adding to the Woodstock mystique).

The Olympic and half-iron races take competitors on a hilly bike course — the half-iron

race includes a brutal climb up a hill called Nasty Grade at mile 41 — and along a super dusty and hilly route that challenges even the toughest and strongest runners. Toward the end, it loops people through one of the venue’s campgrounds, Redondo Vista, right past tents and RVs where supporters cheer on competitors.

“They have the most interesting aid stations,” says Heidi Buttery, 35, from Woodstock, Conn., who has competed at Wildflower four times. “Over the years, I’ve gotten so familiar with the course. Mentally between mile 4 and 7 on the run it’s just a tough place — it’s always hot and you’re climbing. And then you go through the campsite and you have people offering you bacon and bourbon. I remember being so tired and thinking, ‘Gosh, I don’t know, do I want bacon?’ I actually love bacon and it was great. In another spot, someone was handing out Red Vines and Vaseline.”

To appeal to more people, organizers have added more types of accommodations: Canvas yurt-style Bell Tents, which offer a more upscale camping experience and have beds and basic furniture for up to six

people (all sold out for this year), and Tinker Tins, fully loaded vintage campers that come with everything from bedding and a bottle of wine to VIP festival passes. Or visitors can rent an RV through Get-away RV or RVPlusYou and have the vehicle delivered to the park, so they can stay in comfort without having to drive a big vehicle.

“The slogan this year is ‘build your own Wildflower experience,’” says Bousman. “You can make Wildflower whatever you want. You can be fancy or go old-school Woodstock, you can sleep on the ground or have a down comforter and Posturepedic mattress.”

Regardless of the events, programs, and sleeping options, people like Brian Fitzgerald and his buddies will keep making the journey here, continuing their annual tradition of drinking homemade wine, embellishing race stories around the campfire, and sleeping under the stars at night, and racing hard, cheering on other athletes, and enjoying the festival vibe by day.

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