



ALUMNA SPOTLIGHT – SISTER MADONNA BUDER ‘48

Sister Madonna Buder, known previously as Dorothy Buder, graduated from Visitation Academy in 1948. She is also fondly referred to as the Iron Nun. Sister has competed in 45 Iron Man triathlons even though she did not begin her running career until she was in her late 40s. Sister Madonna is well known in the triathlon community for her many age-group wins. In 2005, at the Hawaii Iron Man, at the age of 75, she became the oldest woman to ever complete the race—which requires swimming for 2.4 miles, biking for 112 miles, and running for 26.2 miles. She was inducted into the USA Triathlon Hall of Fame on June 26th in Chicago. Not only is she an inspiring athlete, but she is also a published author. Sister has written *The Grace to Race*, her memoir. Sister was kind enough to share with us a little bit about her journey to this point in her life.

Please tell us about the path you took after graduating from Visitation.

I knew I wanted to be sister since I was 14 years old. When my mother discovered my desire I thought she would be happy, but really she wasn't—she was thinking about grandchildren. She told me that I did not know the joys of motherhood and I had not even dated. So I told myself that I would play the game but that it's not going to change my mind. I dated many eligible bachelors so she could not say that I hadn't, but God had a different path for me that ultimately led me to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd and later the Sisters for Christian Community in Spokane, Washington.

How did you decide to start running?

There was no such thing as track when I was in school—only interaction sports. We had baseball, hockey, basketball, and a field day and I was good at all of that stuff, but we did not

have anything that was just about running.

In 1978, just before my 48th birthday, Father John Topel, a priest who was present for a workshop on the Oregon coast, expounded upon running. I did not even know there was such a thing as the running boom, which apparently started in the early 1970s and this was already 1978. I had not known anything about it. It wasn't my idea to start running—it was his. He spoke about the joyful release it was to harmonize mind, body, and soul and went on to explain about the health benefits associated with running. Because I was apparently good at it, he encouraged me to keep going. One day I went to go develop some photographs and this lab in Spokane had a poster that was advertising the second annual Bloomsday Run. I knew how hard it was just to run, let alone run while maneuvering my way through these herds of people like I saw on the poster. So I rejected the idea all the way home until I received a phone call from my mother who was preparing me for the news that one of my brother's marriages was in jeopardy most likely due to an alcohol problem. At that moment I said, "I'm going to do it! I am going to run the bloomin' Bloomsday Run in Spokane so that God will transfer my will to endure hardship to my brother's will to give up his dependency on alcohol and restore his marriage." My mother said, "Oh my! How far is this race?" I told her it was 8.2 miles and when I said it I thought, "Oh my God! This sounds awful." My mother told me that I could not do that with absolutely no training and my reply was, "well, how will I know unless I try?" So I did it and that is how I began running. Once I had gotten to know runners, one day one of them told me about this Iron Man that he had done in Hawaii and he told me that I should do it. I said, "What?! And get slashed and bashed by all these arms and legs swimming—and for 2.4 miles? Oh I don't know. Then the biking...I have ridden my mother's balloon tire bike, but I don't know what I would use for 112 miles. Then the running, 26.2 miles, well, that would be alright." The more he insisted the more I became interested and I thought that it would just be one of those things to challenge me. I got sucked into it and away I went. Now I have completed 45 Iron Man triathlons and well over 360 triathlons. I have opened several age groups in the Iron Man triathlons, including the 80+ age group in the Iron Man Canada in 2012. It was my third attempt to open that age group. I told God that this is either third time's a charm or three strikes and you're out. He gave me beautiful weather that day. I was so satisfied when I finished since I accomplished my goal that I didn't think about anything else. The next day everyone was coming up to me congratulating me on my World Record. It didn't dawn on me until right then that, well yes, if no one has ever opened an 80+ age group then I guess I did set a world record. Others told me that the announcer had said that day that this record will never be erased. When you get to this age, it isn't easy. People say that it takes an iron will to complete an Iron Man, but in my case with all that has happened it takes more than an iron

will—it takes a steel spirit.

How does your faith play a role in training for and completing that many competitions?

Back when I was just running, I was also going through a difficult time with my order. In the 70s things got to be in upheaval for religious and ours was no exception. So just getting out and running in nature was so freeing and made me realize that my little problems are so minuscule compared to all of this greatness that God has created. It really helped me through that difficult period in my life. It added discipline. A lot of days you don't feel like getting out and running, but it had to be done—especially if you were training for a marathon. So it gave me the endurance to put up with psychological problems, emotional problems, spiritual problems, and physical problems. I have never thought of myself as a head, a soul, and a body. It all works together in harmony and if you are off balance in any one of those three then you're not working at peak performance. The trick is to try to do things in balance so as to keep yourself whole. The determination comes from a deep seeded faith that whatever you undertake, if you have a desire to do so, you can—with God's assistance. He would not give us a desire if he did not want us to fulfill it. It is up to us to do our part to cooperate with his designs for us. When I entered (the order) I never would have thought that I would end up being what I am today, let alone be out of the habit. Once you give yourself to God he can do with you whatever he wants, but He is pulling the strings and I am just trying to cooperate.

How do you think that your time at Visitation impacted your life?

One of the Visitation Sisters is the reason for my vocation. My father was not a Catholic and consequently we were sent to public schools. Back in those days, the Roman Catholic Church didn't allow its members to marry non-Catholics unless the couple agreed to bring up their children in the Catholic Church. Up until that point, my father had reneged on his promise to rear us as Catholics. My mother finally succeeded in getting my father's permission for us to have formal religious instruction. When I was 10 years old, my mother took my two older brothers and me to receive formal instruction in the Catholic faith at Visitation, where she and my grandmother had both been educated by the nuns. My parents decided to pull me out of public school when I was in sixth grade and gave me the choice of Visitation Academy or Mary Institute – neither of which appealed to me at the time. Visitation seemed like a dungeon and Mary Institute did not seem like it would be a good fit either. I agonized over the decision, but eventually decided to attend Visitation.

The first day of seventh grade in my new school, my teacher, Sister Consolata, was diagramming sentences at the board. Everyone around me seemed to understand it, except me.

Then she assigned grammar homework. Having never had homework in my life and not understanding what she was talking about during the class, I waited for everyone to leave at the sound of the bell, opened my desk, and then the tears started pouring out. She came to my side and asked me what the matter was. I told her that I didn't have any idea what she was talking about and that I had never had homework before. She told me that I could come to her at study hall and she would be happy to explain it to me. I had never heard of study hall either—this was all greek to me. When I arrived at study hall, the room was full of girls doing their homework and it was silent. I was not about to walk up to her in front of everyone until another girl did just that. When she was finished, Sister smiled and nodded at me beckoning me forward, so I went and she completely won me over. I was doing grammar until it was coming out of my ears and I loved it. I had such admiration for her. We would even go to visit her during the summer when we did not have to go to school. It was her influence; her gentleness and her kindness that made me think that if Sisters are like this, I want to be one of those who can help others like she does. She was one of the main reasons I had my heart set on becoming a Visitandine, but God showed me He had other plans.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

You never know what God is going to throw at you. I cannot go to a race anymore without people stopping me for a signature or a picture. I don't understand it, but I don't have to understand it. All I want to do is His will and He can do with me as He wishes. When I sat up in the road after a fall that fractured my hip in March, I said, "God, I need a miracle." The dear Lord saw fit to heed the multitude of pleading prayers on my behalf—for which I am exceedingly grateful. On Pentecost Sunday, June 8th, scarcely 15 weeks after my fractured pelvis, I was able to complete the Eagleman Half Ironman triathlon in Cambridge, Maryland. Beforehand I implored the Holy Trinity that...

The Father would draw me safely from the watery depths of the Choptank River

The Son escort me over hill and dale on the Bike

The Holy Spirit push, pull, and shove me across the Finish Line despite anticipating a labored Run.