

Life **force**

Next time you're complaining about your stiff knee, think about the triathlon achievements of a man who would be too polite to laugh in your face, but would have every right to do just that

Last October, 33-year-old Rajesh Durbal crossed the finish line at Ironman Hawaii in 14:19:12. That's not bad for a man who only completed his first sprint triathlon in 2009. It is truly astonishing for a triple amputee who swims without his prosthetics and uses his core muscles to control his descents on the run.

Durbal was born with a congenital deformity in both legs and his left arm. When he was a year old both legs were amputated below the knee. He also had surgery to replace bones in his upper legs and partial right arm. He was in a full body cast for three months but the operations made it possible for prosthetics to be fitted. Not surprisingly, he had a tough time in school – he was relentlessly teased and bullied but, though often fearful and

depressed, he refused to let the taunts or his physical limitations hold him back.

That is not to say he struggled; as a young man he wore loose clothing to hide his prosthetics and he found it difficult to fit in with his peers: "I had no friends all through high school." He has said he did not find any inner peace until he was 27. Durbal has developed a deep religious commitment from which he draws strength and inspiration, both of which are handy when you're doing an Ironman.

"I trained my butt off, and got the right mix of people around me to help make it all happen," he says. "I never gave up, and always focused on how to get myself where I needed to be. I didn't listen to everyone's voice telling me how and what I should be doing. I only listened to one voice, God."

He says he took up triathlon because he was looking for a challenge, something that would test his abilities to the limit – triathlon fit the bill. He did that first sprint triathlon after training for three months. It was not easy: he crashed on the bike and suffered terrible pain on the run because the sockets of his walking legs rubbed his skin raw. He could barely stand for the next week but he was determined to do more. In June 2010 he completed the Florida 70.3, finishing in 6:31. Durbal felt he was ready for Hawaii. He decided he was going to be the first triple amputee to finish one of the toughest one-day endurance events in the world.

"I stayed attentive and constantly evaluated my surroundings, friends and attitude. I had to make hard decisions in order to move forward, holding myself accountable for any setbacks. In the end, it all came together, for the goodness of the larger purpose, to live free."

Live Free has become a mantra for Durbal and it's also the name of the foundation he set up in 2010 to support physically challenged people, in fitness, IT job training, life coaching and prosthetic research and development. The words came to him while he was training for his first Olympic-distance triathlon; crying in pain as he ran in the rain he prayed to be free from whatever chains were holding him back. Whatever you think about the source of his strength it has worked.

Consider the immense challenges of the race. When he swims he relies almost entirely on his left arm to generate momentum. At Kona his swim time was 1:17:54, almost 20 minutes faster than his usual pace. For the bike leg, Durbal rode a Felt B2-R bike courtesy of Locomotion Bikes in Orlando, Florida (he lives in the city). The bike has been heavily modified to allow safer and more efficient riding.

WORDS: STEFAN GRUN

The front and rear brakes have been routed with a brake splitter to the left-side brake level and the bar-end shifters have been reversed so the left side controls the rear and the right controls the front derailleur. The right-side aero pad has also been modified to give him more space for his right arm and to allow him to get into a better aero position. Bear in mind that he has to take his left hand off the handlebars to grab drinks.

It was not an easy ride. The wind on the Kona bike leg can be ferocious and Durbal says it was very difficult to control the bike. He almost came off a couple of times and staying upright took an immense toll on his upper body. He finished the bike in 7:07:39 and then put on his running legs.

Durbal's run and bike legs are made by Procare Prosthetic; they feature Elevated Vacuum Technology and flexible outer sockets. These legs are held on with a high-vacuum pump that stabilises limb volume, promoting good blood circulation. The legs have been designed to allow Durbal to endure the Ironman distances

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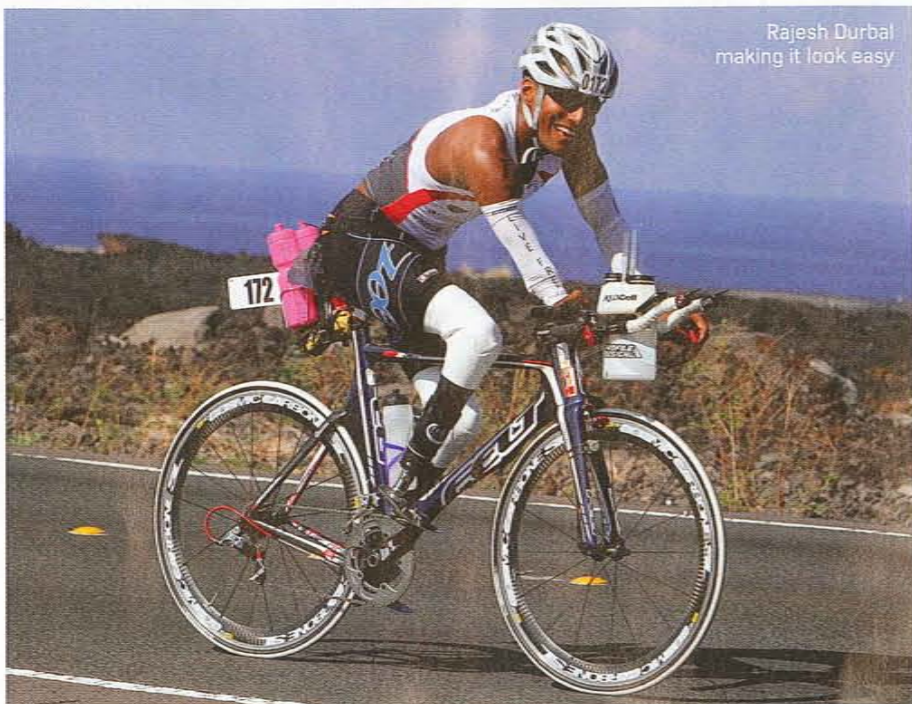
and to limit potential problems such as skin breakdown and excessive sweat, which could be both painful and dangerous.

But technology cannot solve all the problems he faces. Because he does not have the muscles to control his stride Durbal must use his core muscles to control his descent. The same core muscles that take such a battering on the bike. He describes the sensation as "like doing the plank while running". Try it.

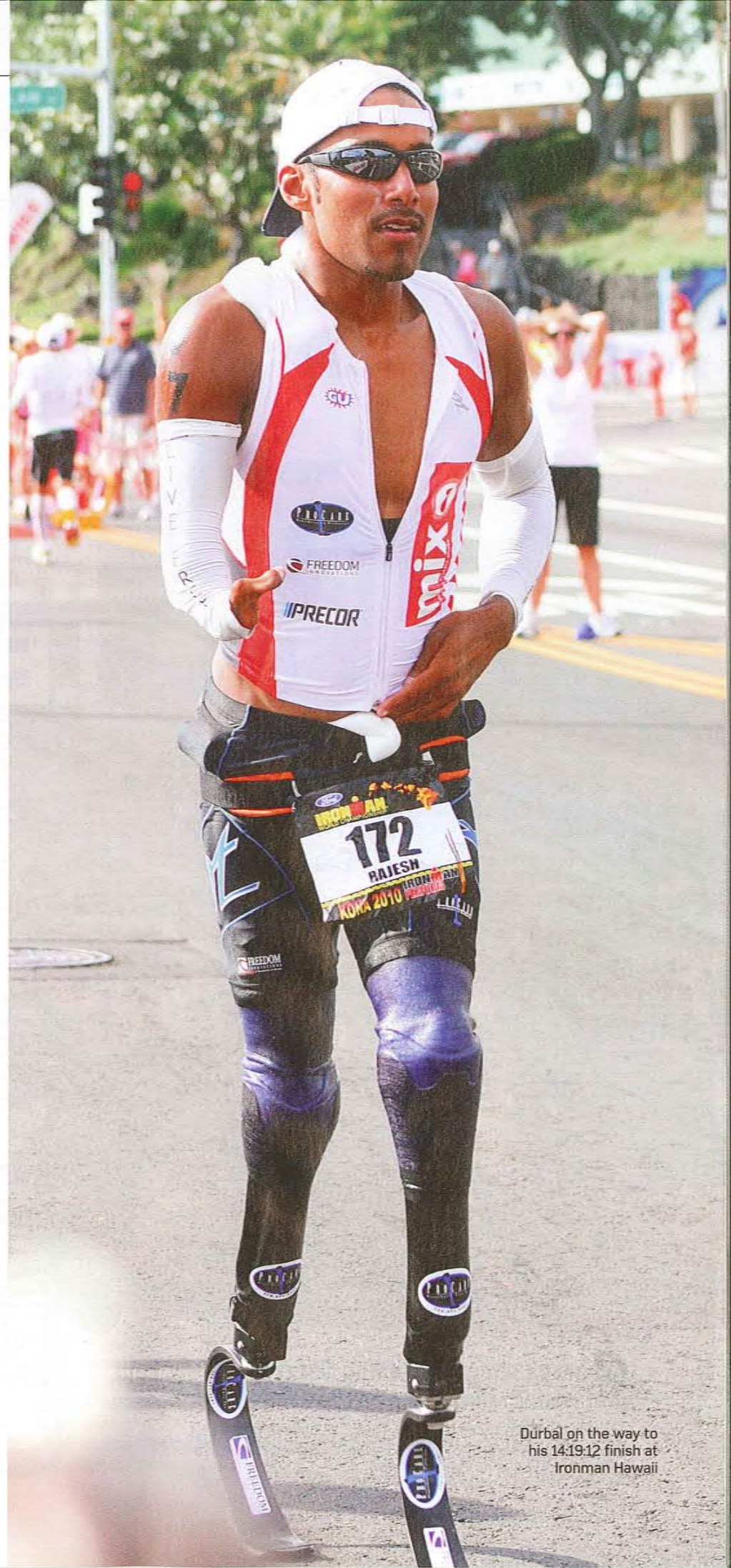
His run time was 5:36:18 and while he was delighted to complete the event he plans to go faster this year. "That was my first Ironman, so I paced myself conservatively. I plan to shave 30 minutes off my bike this year and run a four-hour marathon. I'll train more efficiently and recruit different training programmes to stimulate myself past plateaus."

Durbal is planning to race the Ironman St George in Utah, in May; the St Anthony Triathlon, in Florida, in October; and to take part in the US Paratriathlon National Championship in New York, in August. And then there's Kona, round two. Not bad for a man who just wanted a challenge.

For more information on Rajesh Durbal go to live-free.net.



Rajesh Durbal making it look easy



Durbal on the way to his 14:19:12 finish at Ironman Hawaii