

Triathlon isn't a game of poker but for Mike Waldner, 51 of Madison, SD, he's been dealt a different hand than expected.

Waldner will be participating in the annual Chisago Lakes Half Iron Triathlon (now Toughman MN) on Sunday, July 30 as his comeback race after learning of his body's fight with psoriatic arthritis. "I've gone from doing multiple half iron distance triathlons to being diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis and not being able to get out of bed," says Waldner.

Psoriatic arthritis is a simultaneous diagnosis of psoriasis and arthritis; an autoimmune disease with an unknown cause and no cure. "Your body attacks itself and you have swelling, stiffness and soreness throughout your body, specifically in your joints," says Waldner. "It attacks and affects everyone differently. Most of my pain is in my right fingers, thumb and wrist, shoulders, chest and ribs. And my left toes are constantly numb." Most recently additional affected areas include his hips, hamstring and left jaw. "I still struggle opening bottles with twist tops, turning the key to start my car and even opening door knobs. Someone called this one of the silent diseases as you're in so much pain yet no one would know it because you're not bleeding, not black and blue and there are no bandages." Waldner's symptoms became recognizable when he was 48-years-old.

Waldner competed in his first triathlon in 2006 and he along with a group of triathletes from Madison have been participating in the Chisago Lakes Triathlon (Toughman MN) for several years. And participating in any triathlon is no small feat, especially a long distance tri with an autoimmune disease tacked on. It takes time, dedication and ample training. For Waldner getting through each sport; 1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike and 13.1-mile run, brings on its own challenges. Waldner says it will be interesting during the swim because a lot of his pain is in his shoulders and he can feel it with every swim stroke. Because of his crumpled toes, swollen and arthritic fingers and weight on his shoulders during the bike it will be painful and difficult to peddle, shift gears and put weight on his upper body. And during the run his toes will again become a factor not only with the numbness but how this affects his running gate in turn affecting his IT band and left knee. Waldner is hoping some other pain he has experienced in his training with his ribs and chest will stay at bay during the race.

Pushing through the uncomfortable is one of Waldner's loves of multisport. "I like the dedication and commitment it causes you to have. Not many people can put three sports together and do them back to back to back. And in a weird way I love the sufferfest. If you can get through training and a hard race there is not much in life you can't overcome." But for Waldner it's not all about the toughness, it's socially pleasing as well. "The people you meet is really special. And I like getting others involved in the sport and how it gets people off the couch, training and working towards a healthy and positive goal."

They say just showing up is the hard part but one can bet the finishline will be an hard place emotionally for Waldner and his cheering squad. He will be greeted by some old college friends in the hopes of getting them interested in the sport, possibly his youngest daughter who ran her first ½ marathon with Waldner as part of his triathlon training and his wife of 25 years. “She has helped me through this process and seen me at the worst and has been part of the progress. I hope she has a great day and when I finish can take pride in the fact that she helped me get to that finish line.”

Throughout the past 10+ years Waldner went from doing multiple half-iron distance triathlons to his current diagnosis. But he didn’t give up. The cards he has been dealt led him to square one with beginning to exercise again with a couch to 5K program, swimming 3 laps and biking just 10 minutes at a time. Take it from Waldner, “It took a lot of hard work and discipline. Building your body back up while balancing the effects of medication, fatigue, working and family is emotional when you stop and think about it. I’ve leaned on my training to fight it using the mantra of ‘Just keep showing up.’ This helps remind me that it is not going to beat me and if it does, I’m going down fighting. Hard.”