



FORGED BY FIRE

*Burn victim Shay Eskew
finds solace in triathlon*

By Pete Williams



Shay Eskew would like to attach his prosthetic right ear to a necklace and wear it for the swim portion of triathlons, clipping it to side of his head as he enters transition.

It would make sense, the 38-year-old figures, to treat the ear as another piece of equipment, one he needs to hold sunglasses in place. Plus, it would be fun to gauge the reactions of people.

Eskew would do it, too, were it not for the protests of his wife Brooke and knowing that the ear costs \$10,000 to replace. He once lost it cycling and spent hours in the dark retracing a two-mile stretch before finding it undamaged along the side of the road.

Eskew's training stories and twisted sense of humor are not those of a normal triathlete but, then again, his is hardly a conventional story.

Eskew, which he often abbreviates as "SQ," is a married father of four children 6 and under who maintains a rigorous triathlon schedule, including competing in last year's ITU Long Distance Triathlon World Championship. He does it all while working in suburban Nashville as a salesman in the health technology sector.

None of which he could have predicted growing up in Atlanta, where he dealt with horrific injuries and taunts from kids who called him "Freddy Krueger" after the disfigured villain of the "Nightmare on Elm Street" horror films.

In 1982, at the age of 8, Eskew suffered burns and burn-related scarring on more than 65 percent of his body. A 15-year-old neighbor girl accidentally doused him and a 7-year-old buddy with gasoline while dealing with a nest of yellow jackets.

The boys caught fire and flames engulfed the right side of Eskew's face, neck, shoulder, and stomach. The 8-year-old had the foresight to drop and roll to extinguish the flames, but not before sustaining damage that doctors predicted would prevent him ever from playing sports.

Eskew quickly proved them wrong, but dealing with his appearance, which included the loss of his right ear, was more of a challenge. The sight of amputees and wheelchair-bound people is commonplace, after all, but burn victims are unusual.

"People can't help but stare or say something," Eskew says. "At some point I conceded that I was going to be single the rest of my life. People are incapable of overlooking the burns. That's what drove me to sports. I figured it would compensate for a lack of physical beauty."

Despite the first of 30 surgeries and mobility issues that even now keep him from breathing on the left side while

swimming and limit his ability to turn to the left, he became an All-American high school wrestler, a champion boxer at the University of Tennessee, and later a competitive mountain biker.

Along the way, he developed a sense of humor to deal with the insensitive comments and put people at ease.

When kids called him Freddy Krueger, he'd smile and break out the horror film character's signature line, "I'll see you in your dreams." When, as a teenager, younger kids at the pool would point to the right side of his head, Eskew would pretend his ear had just fallen off and was resting near the pool drain. Soon a bunch of 6- and 8-year-olds were diving to retrieve it.

Eskew's hearing is limited on the right side, though it's better than people realize, especially with the prosthetic ear he's only been able to afford in recent years.

People will ask if he can hear in the right ear.

"What?" Eskew will shout, goading them to talk increasingly louder before he lets them in on the joke.

Eskew says his disfigurements have helped him in the world of sales, which typically is dominated by tall men and attractive women — people who make memorable impressions.

"People don't soon forget a one-eared burn victim," says the 5-foot-8 Eskew, whose wife marvels at how restaurant hostesses treat them like VIPs when they return for a second time.

Not everything is amusing, of course. Eskew has high-deductible health insurance that makes some treatments cost prohibitive. A scar from the incision for his prosthetic ear has thickened and resembles a tumor on the side of

his head that oozes constantly. He must wear a guard over the screws that attach the prosthetic ear to keep skin from growing over them.

Pain? As a kid, the grafted skin on the right side of his body would split open as he grew, requiring more skin grafts from other areas.

Not surprisingly, Eskew developed a high tolerance for pain. Over the years, he's also been attacked by a bear, endured a major car accident, broken eight bones, torn an ACL and suffered a concussion.

"Bad things happen," Eskew says. "The key is how you deal with them."

Eskew realized early that his burns would prevent him from excelling in finesse sports such as basketball or golf, but the pain threshold made him a natural for wrestling, boxing and ultimately triathlon.

As a young father working in Atlanta in 2008, he worked out to lose weight and build his chest and biceps, the showy beach





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muscles, before a chiseled man in his 60s challenged him to attend a boot camp class and develop some core strength. That man was Henry Forrest, one of the 12 finishers of the original Ironman triathlon in 1978.

Forrest was suffering from Stage IV pancreatic cancer, but that didn't keep him from leading boot camp each morning. When Forrest died in November of that year, Eskew and some fellow classmates vowed to do the next major triathlon they could find.

Eskew registered for the Gulf Coast Triathlon, the half-iron distance event in Panama City, Fla. That led to the 2009 Ironman Florida and soon an ambitious schedule as a competitive age group triathlete.

At last year's ITU Long Distance World Championship in Las Vegas, he endured multiple flat tires, a crash and miles of running alongside the bike barefoot before finally fixing the tire and getting back in the saddle for good.

It's just another interesting endurance tale for an athlete who gives motivational speeches and plans to write his life story. He's attracted a few sponsors, including Newton Running, and would like to land an airfare sponsor so he can continue to take his growing family to races, especially as more of his kids age out of the free 2-and-under seating. He's also uploaded a video to Kona Inspired (www.konainspired.com) with the goal of winning a trip to the Ironman World Championship in October.

Eskew speaks to schoolchildren, Rotary groups, and the occasional corporate audience. The message is one of overcoming adversity but also to not just settle for getting to the starting line.

"I think the biggest injustice people do to those of us who have been through trauma is to treat us with kid gloves," Eskew says. "I don't ever do a race with just the intention of finishing. I always think I'm going to be in the top 10 percent. I might not be, but if you train the way the best train, you're going to surprise yourself with what you can do."

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