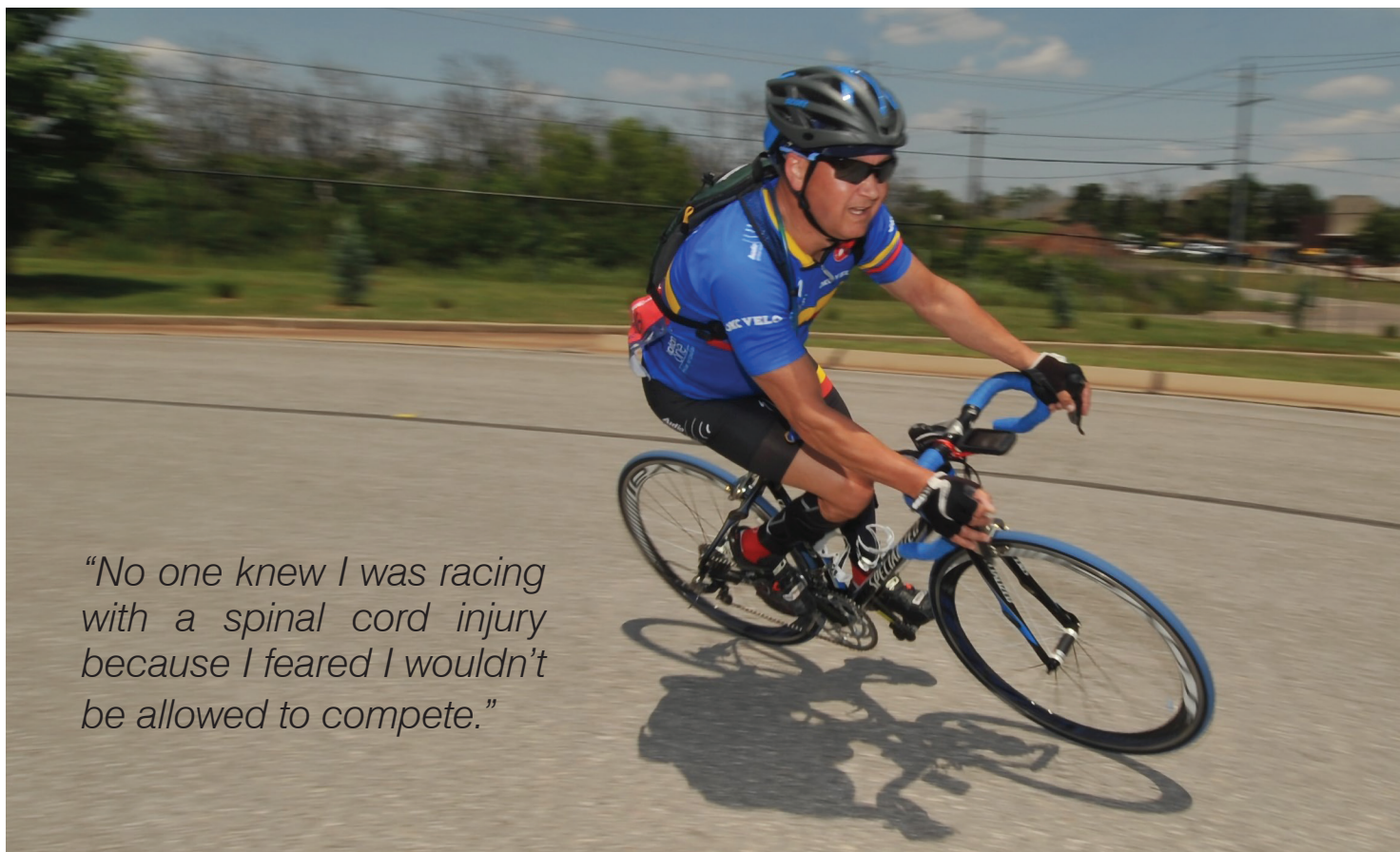


Sooner Nation

Body shattered, Steve Lovelace embraced one of the world's toughest sports and a new future.



"No one knew I was racing with a spinal cord injury because I feared I wouldn't be allowed to compete."

OU alumnus Steve Lovelace competing in a triathlon against able-bodied athletes.

In 1982, Steve Lovelace's life was forever changed when he and a friend decided to cut firewood to earn extra money.

Lovelace had returned home from OU after his freshman year to help with the family farm upon his grandfather's passing. "We found this massive hackberry tree in a remote, wooded area in rural Wagoner County, and we started cutting.

"The tree split and fell. I remember thinking how bad it would be if someone got caught between those two halves. Literally, the next thing I remember is coming to, wondering where I was. I was pinned to the ground."

Lovelace suffered three crushed vertebrae in the lumbar

spine, his face had been clipped by the tree, jaw broken, roof of his mouth split open, forehead fractured, left wrist crushed, heart bruised, and he was paralyzed below the waist. The future OU College of Allied Health graduate and pioneer of triathlon and paratriathlon was given a 50% chance of survival.

After three and a half months in the hospital and an equal amount of time in a rehabilitation facility, he was barely able to shuffle across the floor with a cane and had very little leg strength. "I went from a 150-pound, athletic 20-year-old to a frail 90-pounder."

Three years later and still struggling, Lovelace happened upon

the Hawaiian Ironman Triathlon Championship on *ABC's Wide World of Sports*. Triathlon, an endurance multisport race consisting of swimming, cycling and running, was in its infancy.

"I had no idea what I was watching. I saw a young woman crawl across the finish line after a 2.4-mile swim, 122-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile marathon. I identified with her pain, her desire to finish. That was me. *This was my sport.*"

Lovelace, who lives in Edmond, Okla., says he had no idea where to begin training. He didn't even own a bike. "I ended up buying one at a pawn shop. I hadn't swum in years, so I worked toward lifeguard certification to have unlimited access to a pool, and I took a job at a sporting goods store for a discount on equipment.

"I trained, trained, trained, trying to figure things out. I eventually entered a competition knowing I was competing against able-bodied athletes. My legs were completely blown after I completed the swim and bike. I began the run portion and stepped off for a break. When I returned, I noticed the sweep vehicle behind me. I was last.

"I could have given up, but I crossed the finish line. No one knew I was racing with a spinal cord injury because I feared I wouldn't be allowed to compete." Lovelace became one of the first two documented disabled athletes to complete a triathlon.

He pushed himself further, competing in more than a dozen triathlon and bicycle races against able-bodied athletes. "There was no designation for para-athletes at the time," he says.

Renewed self-confidence prompted him to return to OU to complete a degree in radiologic technology exactly nine years

after he entered college the first time. "Nothing was going to stop me from achieving what I wanted at that point."

Lovelace held a number of positions before becoming evening radiology supervisor for what is now OU Health. When the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building devastated Oklahoma City in April 1995, Lovelace felt compelled to respond and volunteered to assist the medical examiner.

"Twelve to 15 X-ray techs were charged with identifying victims. I was the only one with pediatric experience, so I was tasked with X-raying the babies. That sticks with you," he says. Daily pain and sleeplessness led to Lovelace retiring from radiology in 2014.

Ironically, it was ongoing health issues—spinal fluid leaks, bacterial meningitis, and most recently, arachnoiditis—that made Lovelace challenge himself to take on paracycling and paratriathlon. Paratriathlon allows athletes with certain disabilities to compete against people who are physically similar. He now works to introduce paratriathlon to other disabled athletes.

"I can still swim and bike like everyone else, but my legs limit my ability to run, so I enlist the help of friends to complete the third leg of triathlon for me,"

Lovelace says.

"I've come to realize that you don't have to do all three sports to still be a part of the triathlon community," he adds. "That's truly the beauty of multisport. Bringing people and their best physical skills together as a team gives you the same feelings of accomplishment as having done it all on your own."

Sharon Bourbeau is assistant editor of Sooner Magazine.



OU radiologic technology grad Steve Lovelace was given a 50% chance of survival in 1982. He is one of the first documented disabled athletes to complete a triathlon.