



riathlete Rachael Maney felt the car before it hit her. She was training alone for Ironman Arizona on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, three years ago, when she approached the end of a bike path along her near-daily route. As she merged onto the side of a two-lane road, she noticed the driver of a Mercedes C-Class sedan pulling in 100 yards behind her. Traffic was approaching in the opposing lane, but Maney

heard the Benz driver gun the engine in anticipation of passing. "Once the truck in the opposing lane began to accelerate, I knew she was going to hit me," Maney remembers. "She couldn't depart the lane she was in to go around me—so she took me out with the side of her car." In the split second before the crash, Maney braced herself—"as opposed to relaxing my body the way I would if I were in a motor vehicle," she says—and then, a gaping blank. "I do not remember feeling the moment of impact."

Maney went to the hospital with injuries to her hip, shoulder, and along the left side of her body. Her bike was destroyed. She didn't feel the full extent of her injuries until a few days later. The pain persisted for almost a year, and it still flares up occasionally.

Her triathlon season crumbled. "Because of the crash and the extensive physical therapy I needed afterward, I was unable to run for 14 weeks before the race, which had a huge impact on my performance and the quality of my race experience," says Maney, who has been racing for six years.

And yet, she still considers herself lucky. A recreational cyclist on a beach cruiser witnessed the entire crash and called 911. A police report was filed, and Maney was able to recoup the costs of much of her equipment and medical care.

For the roughly 2 million triathletes and 100 million Americans who've ridden a bicycle within the past year, Maney's story is chilling but sadly relatable. "There are more of us on bikes now than ever and because there are more people in their vehicles ... than ever, it seems to be more of not an 'if' but a 'when' [a car-bike collision] will happen—if not to yourself, then definitely within one to two degrees of separation. That's sort of the experience that we're having," Maney says.

BELOW: CYCLIST ADVOCATE RACHAEL MANEY, A TRIATHLETE AND DIRECTOR OF BIKE LAW



●● I'VE HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING HIT BY A CAR, BUT I STILL LOVE CYCLING.



WHY NOW?

A big concern for road cycling safety rests upon the changing demographics of the American triathlete community—namely, there are more newbies on the road. USA Triathlon had more than 500,000 members in 2012, but in July its membership was at 400,000. So to boost participation in the sport, organizations like the World Triathlon Corporation (which owns Ironman) and USAT have fostered programs to attract and convert the "tri-curious." While this is all happening, the number of cyclists on the roads has been increasing—and they've been dying at a higher rate. A March 2017 report from the U.S. Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that cycling deaths rose 12.2 percent between 2014 and 2015—from 726 to 818. While official estimates for cyclist injuries based on police reports dropped to 45,000 in 2015

from 50,000 in 2014, not all riders report their injuries to police.

The issue of triathlete safety came to a very visible head in October 2017, when pros Tim Don and Matt Russell were hit while training for and during the 2017 Ironman World Championship, respectively (see "Kona Carnage" sidebar, right). The tri community was overwhelmed with a sobering realization: Crashes don't just happen to new triathletes when they're training alone on a country road. The worst can happen to the most experienced riders, even in the mecca of triathlon.

RISK REDUCTION

What does it mean to ride safely? In ever-changing real-world conditions, that can be a tricky question. Even in the official USAT rulebook (which also reminds triathletes that their safety is fully in their hands), the operational definition of "endangerment" is left up to the referee.

To help with some clarity, Ironman launched its CycleSmart initiative in 2017. CycleSmart is a program that identifies and defines the most important safety practices that new triathletes should adopt, and then aims to spread that message to as many people as possible through rider info packets, web videos, and even on bib-number stickers.

CycleSmart is modeled after Ironman's SwimSmart program—which has aimed to increase open-water safety with different start mechanisms, education, and more strict course guidelines. For Keats McGonigal, a senior regional director for Ironman who spearheaded the program, the initiative is personal: He's a seven-time Kona finisher and a crash survivor.

"I've had the experience of being hit by a car, but I still love cycling," he says. "Just because I've had that experience doesn't mean that I'm going to stop riding my bike. It just means I'm going to be more aware of what's going on around me when I do—and encourage others to do the same."

USAT launched a similar national safety awareness campaign called "Check Yourself" in 2016, featuring NASCAR champion and avid triathlete Jimmie Johnson as its



The 2017 Kona Ironman World Championship was a tough event for everyone, but it was unexpectedly life-altering for two pros and their families.



Two days ahead of the start, Tim Don—holder of a new Ironman record and a favorite to win on the Big Island—was doing a bike workout on Queen K Highway when a truck driver struck him. According to witnesses, the driver braked hard but couldn't stop in time. The crash rendered Don unconscious for at least 30 minutes and broke his C2 vertebrae. He miraculously avoided paralysis but wore a painful halo brace screwed directly into his skull for three months to stabilize his neck while he recovered. Don was able to remove the brace in January 2018, and pursued rehab in earnest. He returned to racing and in June won Ironman Costa Rica 70.3 in 3:49.



American Matt Russell was 76 miles into the race, riding back toward Kona, when the driver of a van pushed through a traffic stop and crossed directly in front of him. Russell tried to brake but couldn't avoid colliding with the vehicle and went through its back window. He suffered a concussion and lacerations to his neck, including a severed jugular. He returned to racing at the 2018 Ironman Texas 70.3 this past April, coming in seventh with 3:49:33.