

HEAVY METTLE



From left to right: Gibbs & Bruns' Scott A. Humphries, John S. Black, Brian T. Ross and Jeffrey J. Cotner.

Partners Steel Themselves For Brazil Ironman Triathlon While Raising Research Funds

by JONATHAN FOX

After doctors diagnosed Brian T. Ross with lymphoma, three fellow attorneys at the commercial litigation boutique decided to honor him by raising funds for cancer research with a 2.4-mile swim. And a 112-mile bike ride.

And a 26.2-mile marathon run.
Back to back.

On May 25, Gibbs & Bruns partners John S. Black, Jeffrey J. Cotner and Scott A. Humphries of Houston will compete in an Ironman triathlon in Florianópolis, Brazil — a grueling endurance race in which athletes swim, bike and run those long distances consecutively. Whether or not they cross the finish line, they say, they have already achieved success, raising more than \$47,000 for cancer research at the University of Texas' M.D. Anderson Center for Cancer Research in Houston — more than double their original goal of \$20,000.

It's the three attorneys' first Ironman triathlon. They've previously competed in half-Ironman competitions and

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other races and already had decided to enter the Ironman race when Ross, an associate with Gibbs & Bruns, revealed his diagnosis in January. They decided to use their entry into the triathlon as an opportunity to raise money for M.D. Anderson in honor of Ross. They wanted to do more than wish Ross the best, Black says.

Black came up with the idea and has been the driving force in the fundraiser's success, Cotner says.

Ross says that Black initially asked Ross' wife Catie about the idea to see if he would be receptive, and she felt her husband would be comfortable with it. Black then created a fundraising Web page and showed it to Ross before publicizing it. His response: "Fine by me."

"I'm a little embarrassed by all the fuss," Ross says. "It's a small price to pay for them doing some good."

Shane Merz, who is not an attorney, also is part of the four-member "Team Gibbs & Bruns" competing in Brazil.

Ross says in December 2007 he found several lumps on the side of his neck and went to doctors for tests, which indicated that the cancer was limited to his lymph nodes and had not spread to his organs or bone marrow. After his diagnosis of lymphoma, a type of cancer that attacks the immune system, Ross received chemotherapy at M.D. Anderson, and his cancer went into remission after three of six scheduled chemotherapy treatments.

To ensure that the cancer is eradicated, Ross says he is finishing all six treatments, and his last chemotherapy

treatment will occur in late May.

Ross says that he works scaled-back hours from home, writing briefs "to contribute what I can and to have something to occupy my mind." Ross joined Gibbs & Bruns in 2002 and is up for partner at the firm this fall, he says.

Gibbs & Bruns has stood by him during his recovery, Ross says. "From the very beginning," he says, "everybody just made real clear up front that my No. 1 priority was to get treated and get better, and whatever time I took to do that would not adversely affect my position at the firm."

Ross, who hopes to return to work full time in mid- to late-June, applauds his colleagues for organizing the fundraiser for the center.

The funds raised by the Ironman team, Ross says, will endow a research fund in his name that will be administered by M.D. Anderson's Dr. Peter McLaughlin, Ross' primary treating physician and a lymphoma researcher.



Gibbs & Bruns' Robin C. Gibbs applauds the three lawyers' athletic effort, which he says "demonstrates the *esprit de corps* of our young lawyers."

McLaughlin calls the fundraiser a "great show of support" and very effective. "The energy and enthusiasm is very impressive to me," says McLaughlin, who has several ideas on how to use the funds for his research, including improving a lymphoma tissue bank, bridging the knowledge of various medical disciplines

to better fight cancer and upgrading databases of medical records.

Patrick Mulvey, vice president for development at M.D. Anderson, says the Ironman team raised a significant amount of money for the center and said that such "third-party events" initiated by supporters of the center are critical in advancing research efforts.

"The leverage factor may be as great as \$5 to \$10 for every dollar contributed," Mulvey says, because the center's doctors and scientists may use some of those funds to conduct preliminary studies that lead to larger federal funding of projects.

The people who have contributed to the fundraiser, Ross says, include Ross'

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friends and family, colleagues at Gibbs & Bruns, athletes, friends of friends, and attorneys who have represented opposing parties against clients of Gibbs & Bruns.

"I think it's a wonderful thing that the Gibbs & Bruns lawyers are doing," says Geoffrey L. Harrison, a partner in Susman Godfrey in Houston who has

opposed Gibbs & Bruns' attorneys in court. Harrison and with his wife Lauren contributed \$140 to the fundraiser. "Brian Ross is a fantastic attorney with sense and sensibility far beyond his years."

"It's a testament to Brian that his friends and family are willing to contribute that much," Humphries says.

No Guts, No Glory

The Brazil Ironman is one of more than 20 Ironman races worldwide held annually, the foremost being the Ironman World Championship, held every year in Kona, Hawaii. In 1978, the first Ironman competition was held in Hawaii as a dare by a bunch of Navy Seals, according to

the Web site of the World Triathlon Corp., which owns and organizes all Ironman races.

Black, Cotner and Humphries spend about 15 to 20 hours a week training for Ironman Brazil, Black says. "You have to have a real understanding spouse," he says.

Cotner says he is working the same amount of hours at the firm, but

"wedging the training into some odd hours." For example, Cotner says that he and Merz ran 15 miles on a Friday night, finishing at about 11 p.m.

Squeezing in so much workout time while maintaining a busy law practice and keeping up family commitments is a challenge, Humphries agrees.

"It's quite difficult, even more so when you travel," Humphries says. "You're at the mercy of hotels, which may only have a rickety old exercise bike."

Ironman contenders have 17 hours to finish all three legs of the race, and Black says he will consider a finish within that amount of time a victory. Participants, he says, eat and drink during the biking and running portions, and slowing down at times is a necessity for many competitors. "It's going to be a mixture of fun and misery," Black says.

"We're not going to be setting any records," Cotner adds. "We're a bunch of 30- to 40-year-old lawyers from Houston."

Robin C. Gibbs, founding partner of Gibbs & Bruns, applauds Cotner, Black and Humphries' athletic effort, which he says "demonstrates the *esprit de corps* of our young lawyers." Gibbs says he was shocked by the news of Ross' cancer diagnosis at age 31 but delighted at his progress in defeating the disease.

Ross and his wife are expecting their first child, a daughter, in August, and the news of her pregnancy in December 2007 combined with his cancer diagnosis in January created a "roller coaster" of emotions for him.

Notes Ross, "It has been a blessing to have something so positive to focus on." 

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