

KONA 2016

ONES TO WATCH

Every year sees triumphant breakthroughs and agonizing breakdowns played out on the sport's most hallowed ground. Who will etch their name in Ironman Hawaii history?

BY THORSTEN RADDE

The Ironman World Championship in Kailua-Kona is anyone's race, where athletes must answer not only to the world-best competition on the day, but also to unforgiving race conditions and an all-in pressure as suffocating as the midday humidity. Still, there are a handful of athletes we'll be watching extra closely on October 8 to drive the race-day action. (Be sure check Triathlete.com for full race-week reporting and interviews with these athletes and others.)



Sebastian Kienle (GER)

The 2014 champion wasn't happy with his 2015 season and eighth-place finish in Kona, and he's had a lot of time to work on getting back on top. His summer Ironman in Frankfurt showed his progress: He quickly rode up to the front group on the bike, but also had enough trust in his run to not waste too much energy by trying to break away. His 2:44 marathon was a PR by more than five minutes—his run breakthrough will allow him to be a bit more patient on the bike in Kona. Frodeno will be tough to beat, but Kienle will exploit any weakness his friend and biggest opponent might reveal on the day.



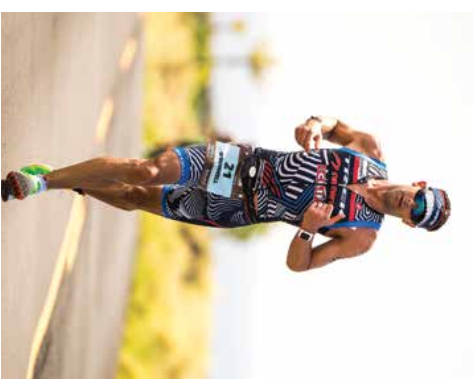
Brent McMahon (CAN)

McMahon continues to impress over the Iron distance: Outside of his ninth place (8:29) in Kona 2015, he has consistently finished sub-8 hours or very close to it. Last year a podium finish was within his grasp after finishing the bike with the first chase group, but a 3:06 marathon wasn't good enough on the day. He'll look to improve his Kona run—a 2:42 marathon in Brazil on the way to one of the fastest-ever Ironman finishes showed his potential. McMahon's swim and bike are also strong enough for him to reach T2 with the front group, so if he can produce the marathon he's capable of, a podium position is certainly within reach.



Lionel Sanders (CAN)

Sanders has amazing bike prowess that last year propelled him to a 14th-place finish in his first Kona race and a sub-8-hour win in Arizona. In order to do better in Kona, he needs to improve his swim, which left him with a gap of more than 10 minutes to the front and in last place at the start of the bike, forcing him to play catch-up all day. If he can limit the time loss after the swim, a top-10 finish is definitely in the cards for him.



TIM O'DONNELL (USA)

O'Donnell had a breakthrough race last year to earn his first Kona podium spot. He rode away from the field in Hawaii, allowing him to build a gap to most of the stronger runners, and only Frodeno and Andreas Raelert (GER) finished in front of him. This result gave him the confidence that he is capable of winning in Kona, and this year he'll again do his best to drive the bike pace and hold position on the run. He struggled in the cold and rain in this summer's Ironman in Frankfurt, but the Kona conditions suit him well. A strong run could easily see him finish on the podium again.

JAN FRODENO (GER)

Even though the last successful male title defense in Kona by Australia's Craig Alexander dates back to 2009, the 2015 Ironman world champion is the hands-down favorite this year. "Frodo" is among the very best in each discipline (and just set a new world standard at the distance at Challenge Roth), and this allows him to be very flexible with his race strategy. He could win the race from the front (as he did at the 2015 Ironman European Championship in Frankfurt and in Roth), but he could also ride with the front group and then unleash his superior run like he did in last year's race.



Andy Potts (USA)
Potts' Kona strategy is to drive the pace in the swim, hammer hard on the bike to minimize any time loss to the super bikers, and, as one of the stronger runners in the sport, start the marathon in podium striking range. In 2014 and 2015 he executed a smart bike and run, allowing him to finish in fourth place on both occasions. In order to go for a Kona win, though, he needs to go big on the bike without compromising his signature run speed. At 39, Potts, who recently captured the Ironman Canada title, is proving that veteran Ironman racers can hang with the young guns.



Frederik Van Lierde (BEL)
Van Lierde won the Ironman World Championship title

In 2013 but has struggled in Kona since. However, he is still one of the most solid long-distance triathletes and always on the list as a contender. Last year he had a heavy race schedule (regional championships in South Africa and Frankfurt before Kona), but this year he went back to his successful 2013 plan of only doing Ironman France. A bike crash left him with a broken clavicle, but he still finished fourth in Nice. He'll be more rested this year and knows what it takes to end the day on the top podium spot.



Tim Van Berckel (AUS)

Last year's Ironman World Championship was a bit of a disaster for Van Berckel, as his 36th-place finish saw him walk most of the marathon, barely beating his bike time. In his 2016 races he was a much stronger competitor—a second place in South Africa was followed by a win at Ironman Cairns with the fastest run split. If Van Berckel can stay with the front bike group as he did on the way to his seventh-place finish in 2014 and still have a solid run, he should be able to finish in the top 10.



Andi Bächterer (GER)

After a serious bike crash Bächterer struggled for a few seasons to regain his form, but in this year's Ironman European Championship he pushed Kienle to a new marathon PR and took second place only a minute back. He improved his own marathon best by more than 11 minutes, showing that he no longer has to rely on a strong bike to place well. Bächterer's best finish on the world championship is eighth place (2011)—on a good day in Kona and with a smart race plan he could end up on the podium.



BEN HOFFMAN (USA)

After Hoffman's second place in Kona 2014, a 27th-place finish in 2015 was a disappointment. He was in a good standing until the half-marathon mark, but then faded with stomach troubles. A win in the strong regional championship field in South Africa showed that he is in excellent form. When Hoffman is running well, there are very few faster athletes. If he can run a marathon close to his 2:51 from 2014, he'll be a very strong podium contender.



DANIELA RYF (SUI)

In 2015 Ryf won all of her races, including the Ironman European Championship, Ironman 70.3 World Championship, Ironman World Championship and the million-dollar Triple Crown. After an extended break, she showed that she isn't actually a machine when she DNFed with hypothermia after a non-wetsuit swim in cold temperatures in Frankfurt. But she quickly rebounded, winning Challenge Roth with the fastest time in five years, an astounding 8:22—only Chrissie Wellington has gone faster. Ryf is one of the strongest female cyclists to dominate the sport in recent years, and she is only getting faster. Compared to Mirinda Carfrae, her run may have previously been considered a weakness, but her first sub-3 marathon in Roth showed that is no longer the case. Ryf does seem to race a lot (she set a new record in Switzerland a week after Roth), although has proven to be incredibly resilient.



Jodie Swallow (GBR)

The 2016 Ironman Asia Pacific champion, Swallow's swim and bike strengths consistently put her in a front-runner position in T2, and she has finished as high as fourth in Kona (2014). Swallow will have to avoid overdoing it on the bike-like in Kona 2015, when she tried her best to ride with Ryf and blew up on the run. Count on this: Swallow will drive the race dynamic on the swim and bike—and maybe even hang on for a podium finish.



Heather Jackson (USA)

In her third year of competing at the distance, Jackson posted an impressive course-record win at Lake Placid. Last year's top U.S. finisher in Kona, she has developed a lethal bike-run punch. Last year in Kona she had one of the fastest run splits to move from 14th in T2 up to fifth place at the finish. Jackson will need a faster swim that puts her in a better position on the bike with the strongest cyclists.

WILD CARDS

There are a number of other interesting athletes in the field. American **Jesse Thomas** will be racing Kona for the first time, and he comes to the race with the confidence from a win over defending champion Fiodano at Ironman Lanzarote (also a hot, hard course on a volcanic island). German **Patrick Lange** was the surprise winner of the Ironman North American Championship in his first Ironman race. German **Andreas Raabert** has a lot of Kona experience and a second-place finish in 2015 (though he's struggled to stay healthy this season and, as of press time, he has yet to validate his spot with an Ironman finish). If **Joe Skipper**, the first British athlete to go sub-8, has an improved swim, he could deliver the surprise performance of Kona 2016.



Mirinda Carfrae (AUS)

The three-time Kona champion was forced to DNF in 2015 when a back injury flared up early into the ride (she was hit by a car a few days before the race). But her unfinished business has only provided extra motivation for Carfrae, and she showed in Austria that she still has some fast races in her legs. Everyone knows her as the sport's best runner, and her 2:49 marathon was downright impressive, but she also posted the fastest female bike split, only a few minutes shy of the course record. She has clearly worked hard on her bike in order to limit the T2 deficit, and she should be able to close any gap of five to 10 minutes with her fantastic run.

HEAD TO HEAD: Here's how the top competitors' swim, bike and run strengths stack up (on a scale of 0 to 5). The points for each athlete are based on the actual results in iron-distance races and adjusted for course conditions. Learn more about Rade's rating system at TriRating.com.

MEN	Swim	Bike	Run	Overall
CONTENDERS				
Jan Frodeno	5	4	5	5
Sebastian Kleinle	2	5	3	4
Brent McMahon	4	3	3	4
Andy Potts	5	2	4	3
Timothy O'Donnell	4	3	3	3
Andi Böhner	4	5	1	3
Frederik Van Lierde	4	4	2	3
Tim Van Berckel	4	1	3	2
Ben Hoffman	3	2	1	1
Lionel Sanders	0	2	3	1
WILDCARDS				
Jesse Thomas	0	1	3	2
Andreas Raelert	3	3	5	4
Patrick Lange	3	2	4	3
Joe Skipper	0	2	3	2
WOMEN				
CONTENDERS				
Daniela Ryf	4	5	4	5
Mirinda Carfrae	2	3	5	4
Jodie Swallow	5	4	1	3
Heather Jackson	0	2	3	2
Michelle Vesteyby	4	3	1	2
Melissa Hauschildt	1	2	3	2
Sarah Piampiano	0	2	3	2
Elizabeth Lyles	2	1	3	2
Heather Wurtele	3	2	0	1
Julia Gaier	3	2	3	2
WILDCARDS				
Meredith Kessler	5	3	2	3
Linsey Corbin	1	2	3	2
Kaisa Lehtonen	2	1	3	2
Annabel Luxford	4	3	0	1
Susie Cheetham	3	1	4	2



Sarah Piampiano (USA)

Piampiano had a successful 2015 season—in Kona she had a solid bike and great run to move from the back of the field all the way up to seventh place, and then went on to win her first Ironman title in Western Australia. She was building toward her first season highlight at the Ironman North American Championship when a stress reaction prompted her to take a precautionary break. A summer Ironman victory at Vineman allowed her to assess the work on her swim and practice her Ironman pacing. With an improved swim she could use her "hand speed" (in 2015 she was the second fastest female on the combined bike and run after Kyf) to realize this year's dream of a Kona podium finish.



Melissa Hauschildt (AUS)

Hauschildt is one of the very few athletes who is undecated in an Ironman. She won Ironman Australia in 2014, the Ironman Asia-Pacific Championship in 2015 and the Ironman European Championship in 2016, but injures her from racing Kona. Watch for her to aggressively attack the field after T1 in her first Kona attempt.

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Heather Wurtele (CAN)

Wurtele is one of the strongest 70.3 athletes in the world, but so far the Canadian hasn't found the same success in the full Ironman distance. While she finished in eighth place in her first Kona pro race in 2011, she's had a number of frustrating disappointments and DNFs since then, including a mechanical issue that ended her 2015 race shortly after T1. But her 70.3 performances hint at her unrealized potential. At some point, she's bound to have the bit of luck she needs for a great Kona race.



Julia Gaier (GER)

After a sixth place in Kona in 2014, Gaier continued to improve throughout the 2015 season, but then DNFed in Kona last year. At the Ironman North American Championship, she posted the fastest bike split and a strong marathon, winning by more than five minutes. After a much needed break, expect her to be in great shape for Kona. Leaving aside Ryf and Carfrae, she is one of the best runners in the field, and a solid swim-bike will put her in a great position for a top-five day.



Michelle Vesteyby (DEN)

After Vesteyby's string of rollercoaster Ironman results last summer (DNFs on the run in Frankfurt and at Ironman UK, followed by a sub-9 win at Copenhagen), the smiling Dane surprised many with a fourth place in Kona. While a lot of athletes struggled in the heat, Vesteyby seemed immune to the conditions and was solid across all three disciplines. She'll likely be in T2 with the front group, and a run like last year will put her in the mix for another top-five finish. ▲

LIZ LYLES (USA)

Lyles was the top U.S. female finisher in 2014. In 2015 most of the athletes she usually rides with had bad days, and she ended up racing on her own for most of the day, losing a lot of time toward the end of the bike and struggling mentally before turning in a strong run. This year she has been working hard to ride stronger, especially in the late miles of the ride. Her dominating win in Brazil showed that she is on the right track toward a great result in Kona.

WILDCARDS

American **Meredith Kessler** has yet to have her best day in Kona, and after struggling with a mid-season niggles, she hopes to turn things around this year. American **Linsey Corbin**, who was sidelined for much of 2015 due to injury, is on the comeback trail and is in pre-injury form for her 10th Kona. Australia's **Annabel Luxford** is only improving in the Ironman distance. One Kona rookie to watch is **Kaisa Lehtonen** from Finland—she went sub-9 hours in Barcelona and won the Ironman African Championship. The 2015 sixth-place finisher, Great Britain's **Susie Cheetham**, has the run speed to get her into the top five this year.