

## Krafting a comeback?

*Once-disgraced Nina Kraft has made a return to the sport*

By Cameron Elford

In late 2004, German star triathlete Nina Kraft left the sport in disgrace after testing positive for synthetic EPO at the Ironman World Championship in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, in October of that year. EPO, or erythropoietin, is a naturally occurring hormone that stimulates the production of red blood cells. However, a synthetic, injectable form of EPO has been developed to treat various medical conditions, including anemia in cancer patients and kidney failure.

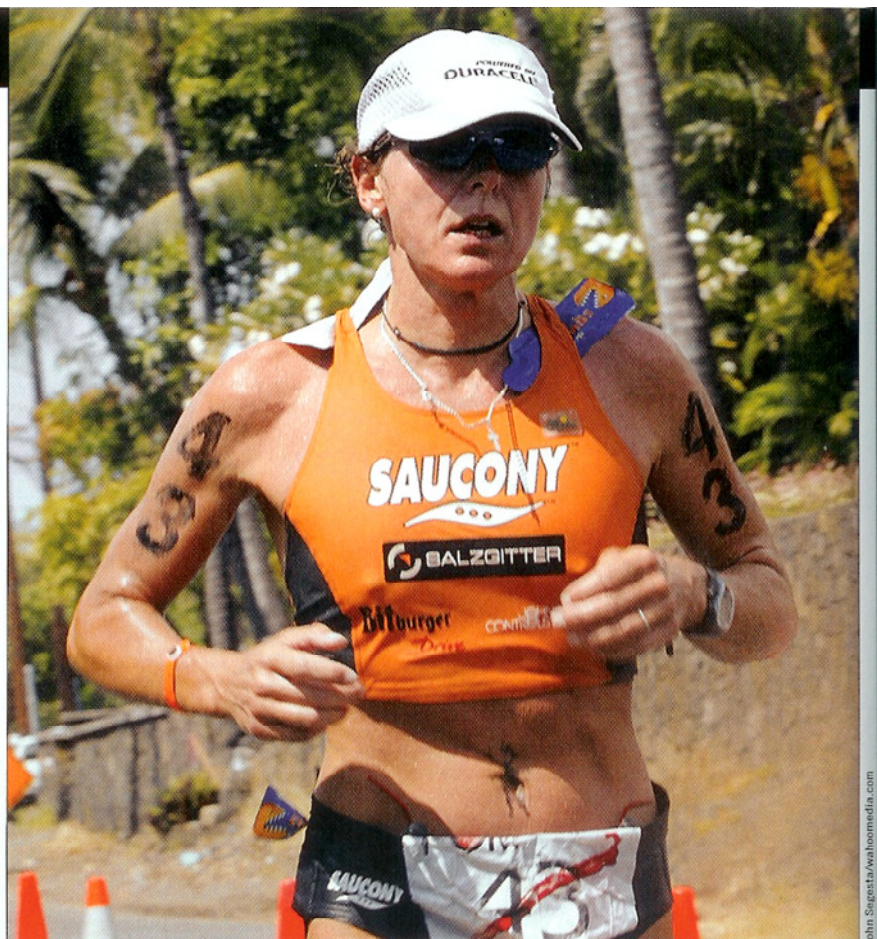
This synthetic form of the hormone has been abused by some endurance athletes in an attempt to improve performance by increasing the blood's oxygen-carrying capacity, and, in 2000, French scientists developed a urine test as a means of combating EPO use among professional cyclists. The test measures the electrical charge of isoforms released by the body. Isoforms resulting from naturally occurring erythropoietin have a distinctly different pattern than do those that result from the use of synthetic EPO.

One of the limitations of the test, however, is that it can only identify recent EPO use. As soon as three days after an injection, the differences between natural and synthetic EPO can no longer be detected. That shortcoming makes it difficult for testers to detect the use of a drug that has performance benefits lasting up to three weeks.

### KRAFTY MANEUVER

Kraft tested positive for EPO in a doping control performed immediately after the 2004 Kona race. After finishing as high as second in Hawaii, in 2002, Kraft in 2004 powered to an overwhelming victory with 5:24:53 bike split that put her out of reach of the rest of the women's field on a hot and blustery day. Switzerland's Natascha Badmann, then a four-time Ironman world champion, was second across the line, finishing nearly 17 minutes behind Kraft.

Once the results of Kraft's positive EPO test were made public, in November of 2004, Kraft admitted to taking the drug in



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the weeks leading up to Hawaii and was stripped of her Kona title. Badmann was subsequently awarded her fifth Ironman world championship.

Now, however, Kraft seems to be crafting a comeback. The 37-year-old from Braunschweig, in central Germany, finished second at the Santos International Triathlon in Brazil in February, then took fifth at St. Anthony's, an Olympic-distance race in St. Petersburg, Fla., in April.

Following her 2004 EPO positive, Kraft received a one-year competition ban, imposed by the DTU, the German Triathlon Union; however, this ban expired in November of 2005, clearing the way for her to return to triathlon this season.

However, still sanctioned by a two-year prohibition imposed by the Florida-based World Triathlon Corporation, Kraft remains banned from Ironman events until Oct. 16, 2006. In theory, Kraft could return to Hawaii this fall, since the 2006 championship race is scheduled for Oct. 21; however, because her 2004 victory was stricken from the record, Kraft would have to qualify for the event (whereas past Hawaii champions are invited back to Kona without having to qualify each year), but her WTC ban effectively prohibits her from contesting any 2006 Hawaii-qualification races.

Despite heavy criticism from 2004 Hawaii men's champion Normann Stadler—and many others involved in the sport—follow-

ing her doping positive, Kraft seems committed to mounting a triathlon comeback and spent the month of April training in Clermont, Fla. Still, Kraft remains forthright about her doping transgression and, on her Web site, asks for a second chance in the sport.

"I am not proud of what I did in Hawaii 2004," she writes in German. "But I received the maximum penalty that existed at the time. Therefore I ask for the right to a second chance. I know that not everyone will be able to forgive me, and you have the right to be disappointed."

In a display of candor not unlike her November 2004 *mea culpa*, in which she admitted to using EPO before Hawaii, Kraft goes on to write, "I experienced much envy and hate in this world; I cannot change that, but I can try to make it somewhat better with some friendliness and with a small smile."

If history is any guide, however, Kraft will face an uphill battle for acceptance and absolution. By way of comparison, Belgium's Rutger Beke, who in August of 2005 was completely exonerated of a September 2004 doping charge, nonetheless faced stinging criticism from the skeptical blogosphere and from a number of spectators at the Hawaii Ironman last October. As a confessed cheater, Kraft's quest for a pardon in the court of public opinion may well be denied.