

John O'Neill shares his heart recovery story

M eet John O'Neill – husband, father, grandfather, and a full-time farmer living in Olivia, Minn. An actively competing tri-athlete, John passed out following the Frozen 5K Run in

Spicer on January 24 of this year. The weather conditions and physical exertion that came together that day to cause him to pass out just may have saved John's life.

John hasn't always been an athlete, in fact, for many years he wasn't even in very good shape. Nine years ago, when his son announced that he was getting married in one year, John weighed 285 pounds. "Back then, my idea of a good restaurant was Burger King and we were living a 'drive-through lifestyle,'" says John. "The kids were busy in school activities and many times we picked up supper from the drive-through window on the way to sports meets and school events."

One year seemed a reasonable length of time to John to lose weight for the wedding. Out came the calorie-counter and the tennis shoes for walking. He lost almost 100 pounds and he wanted to stay there, so he began running, "to get the exercise over with sooner," he says. He started small, choosing short distances and increasing them as he was able to, and eventually competing in local races.

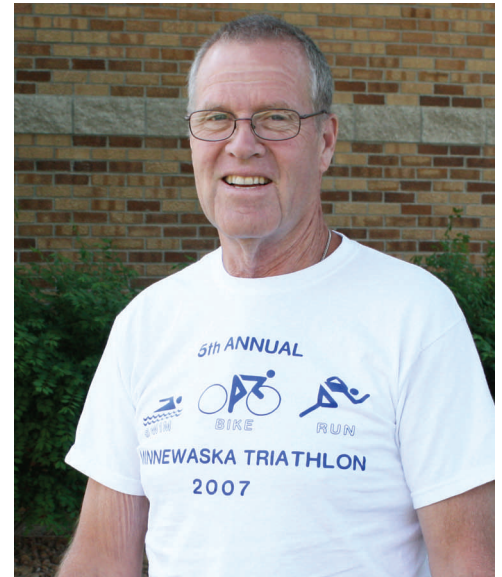
"From running I got interested in triathlons because they were more fun," John says. "Three different events don't use the same muscles and

joints all the time, so they're easier to do in a way."

Everything was going well on the race circuit until Jan. 24,

2009. John finished first in his division, then collapsed shortly after the race as everyone was gathering inside Melvin's. "If you're going to pass out, a race is a good place to do that," he jokes, "because a lot of doctors are runners and there's usually an ambulance crew and AED." He recovered quickly, but was urged to go to the clinic for an EKG. The doctor there told him, "It's nice to see a perfect one every once in awhile."

John, however, had skipped a few annual physicals, and thought it would be a good idea to visit his regular physician for a checkup. During the physical, his doctor noticed a heart murmur and referred him to a cardiologist, where John was diagnosed with a bicuspid aortic valve defect. The aortic valve in his heart hadn't formed properly before birth and would have to be replaced during major heart surgery to correct it. John had had no idea that his bicuspid aortic valve was defective, and if he hadn't gone to the doctor following the race in January, he still might not know today. "I was told that there usually aren't any symptoms,



and the defect rarely causes trouble, but that some time in your 50s it tends to show up,” John says. “John Ritter had it and ignored it, and he died as a result. My cardiologist said I had two choices: I could have surgery and risk dying on the operating table, or, I could ignore it and be dead within three years.”

John asked if surgery could wait until after harvest this year, and the cardiologist said he could wait up to three weeks tops, but only if something special was scheduled. John underwent open heart surgery on April 27, 2009. In addition to his heart valve replacement, “surgeons also found 80% blockage, probably from my drive-through days, so they performed one bypass surgery and one aneurysm repair. I’m all tuned up now and ready to go twenty more years,” he says.

Once John was home from the hospital and recovering, he wanted to get back to his regular activities, including farming, running, swimming, and biking, as quickly as possible. However, he realized that he would need help knowing when his heart was ready to take on different tasks. “My cardiologist recommended that I attend a Cardiac Rehab program, and I chose the one at Rice. My wife feels better, and so do I, because they’re monitoring my heart and my activity,” John says. “My doctor told me that my heart is great, but I need to be careful of the wires holding it together. My chest needs at least six months to heal.” John also likes that the Cardiac Rehab program provides support for many other issues that come up when recovering from heart surgery.

“The Foot Lake 4 Walk/Run and the Green Lake Race are out this year – no jogging allowed,” he says. “I’ve run the Foot Lake 4 three or four times. One runner passed me the first time I ran that race, and then last year he passed me again, and said I sounded like I was going to keel over. I noticed that I had been slowing down in the past year, but

thought it must have been my lungs because my legs were fine. Now I know what was going on.”

John has been given the go-ahead to swim and bike, and it’s okay to walk. “I finished the Memorial Day 5K Walk/Run in one hour and ten minutes. My wife and I were the last ones in, but it felt wonderful,” he says. John swims one-half mile before coming to Cardiac Rehab for his workout. “It used to take me only 22 minutes to swim it, but now it takes 36 because I’m not supposed to use my arms to pull. So I just go through the motion and kick like heck.” John is allowed to lift only eight pounds, which is a challenge when you farm. He works with his brother, who’s doing the heavy lifting for now. John says that all of their friends and neighbors have come out in great support.

One frustration for John was that he had been doing everything right for the past eight years, yet he still found himself in a cardiologist’s office. “I asked my doctor why I had to go through all this when I ate right and I exercised, and he told me, ‘If you hadn’t done what you’ve done you wouldn’t be here.’”

“In this journey to lose weight and be healthy, we changed our lifestyle and we changed the way we cook,” John says. “I get along with fruits and vegetables. We use olive oil and whole grains and they taste better, they’re more satisfying. I’d rather have two servings of green beans than green beans and mashed potatoes and gravy – those are Thanksgiving foods now. I still make candy and all those other things at Christmas. We only need them once a year. If there’s something I want I have it, it doesn’t do any good to forbid things. I just don’t have it all the time.”

Cheer on John the next time you attend a Walk, Run, or Triathlon. Whether he’s walking, running, swimming, or biking, perhaps you’ll be inspired to join John on the road to good health. ♥