THE BRAIN ISSUE

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JEFF JONAS

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O2 TRIATHLETE • SEPTEMBER 2017
MUCH IS KNOWN ABOUT HIM AS A LAUDED DATA SCIENTIST, BUT JEFF JONAS HAS SOMEHOW FLOWN UNDER THE RADAR AS A RECORD-SETTING IRONMAN. UNTIL NOW.

WORDS: ERIN BERESINI
PHOTOS: OLIVER BAKER
New observations add up.

Away food and wondering WTH.

Story back to this audience, who’s now pushing genius like Jonas could relate an endurance poop like mango.’”

Jonas is going to open with this—or where he’s

He looks at his hand, he looks at me. Then I kid

Has now got brown, oozy junk on his hand. I’m

Right color, and it can happen with stomach

Hasn’t noticed, but it’s definitely in the right place,

In your shorts?’ And he looks at me and with his

Friend that I am: You know you’ve got diarrhea

You, you don’t know me, but this is the kind of

Them I realize they’ve got a bunch of diarrhea

Upon somebody walking, and as I come up to

Swim, the 112-mile bike and I’m doing the

Ironman in South Africa. I’d finished the 2.4-mile

Tell a story:

He does Ironmans.

Earth from Armageddon. And in his spare time, the

600,000 asteroids over 25 years to save the

Protected Singapore’s waterways from piracy

Fraud, increased voter registration by 2 million,

Software has helped Vegas casinos identify

Chief scientist for IBM Entity Analytics, whose

Please welcome Jeff Jonas, IBM Fellow and

His introduction goes something like this:

About using data from a distinguished

They’re here to learn how to think differently

JONAS WAS 31 WHEN HE RAN HIS FIRST MARATHON.

“I thought he was kind of wimpy,” his mom, Gail, jokes of that first race. She’d asked him to run the

Avenue of the World’s Marathon with her among

Northern California’s redwood trees, even though he’d never run outdoors and the event was five weeks away.

(Jonas says he asked her to walk. A lot.)

Even as a kid in Healdsburg, Calif., Jonas wasn’t much of a sportsman, preferring projects like wiring his

Parents’ chandelier over phys ed. He played guitar in a group called Contraband as a teen—“I don’t even

Know how he learned to do it,” Gail says—and got the

License needed at the time to be a radio DJ.

Jonas admittedly smoked his fair share of pot as a

NorCal teen in the early ’80s, and if his dentist father

Or lawyer mother ever wondered whether he’d take up

Family profession, they didn’t have to wonder long.

Gail took Jonas to see a TRS-80 computer being shown

At a small retailer in Santa Rosa when Jonas was 14. “He became absolutely enchanted with computers,”

Gail says. “That became his passion, his work. The

Athletics came a great deal later.’’

Jonas’ career trajectory is the stuff of computer

Science legend. He sold a word-processing program to

Los Angeles County School district for $200 when

He was in high school. Then he dropped out after junior

Year to start his first software company, locking in his

Status as an OG tech entrepreneur.

He had 21 people on his payroll when he was 19 and

Declared bankruptcy at 20 after going $110,000 into

Debt. On top of that, he had a baby on the way—though

He wasn’t dating anyone at the time—so his dad kicked

Him out of the house.

“So now I’m bankrupt, and I live in my car,” Jonas

Says. “All I want to do is build software, so I had to come

Up with a way to convince people to take a risk on me.”

He took showers at a racquet club and kept his clothes in

The back of his 300-class Mercedes for four months while

He couchsurfed and worked out a strategy.

He wasn’t dating anyone at the time—so his dad kicked

Him out of the house.

Fellow triathletes get it. But only a joke-loving

Genius like Jonas could relate an endurance poop

Story back to this audience, who’s now pushing

Away food and wondering WTH.

“I say, ‘This has a lot to do with my work,’” Jonas

Says. “Then their heads just go whaaat?” Then his

Next slide says: New observations add up.

“Some people say something and you know what

They mean, but a few minutes later you know what they

Meant,” Jonas says. “I would’ve bet $1 million that was

Diarrhea. But only after the conversation and events did

I change my mind about the past. Getting computers to

Do that is super hard.”

So that’s what he does: Jonas is particularly talented at

Getting computers to differentiate between proverbial

Diarrhea and mango gels. And in his spare time, the

53-year-old has completed every Ironman on the planet.

Picture 60 people settled in for lunch at swanky Cili

Restaurant in Las Vegas. They’re members of TBAN, the

Technology Business Alliance of Nevada—a generally serious bunch—and they’re here to learn how to think differently about using data from a distinguished tech entrepreneur.

Jeff Jonas is about to take the stage, and his introduction goes something like this: Please welcome Jeff Jonas, IBM Fellow and chief scientist for IBM Entity Analytics, whose software has helped Vegas casinos identify fraud, increased voter registration by 2 million, protected Singapore’s waterways from piracy and predicted possible collisions between 600,000 asteroids over 25 years to save the Earth from Armageddon. And in his spare time, he does Ironmans.

Then Jonas enters stage right in his typical

Dark button-down and black jeans, summons five years of Toastmasters training, and proceeds to tell a story:

“On the subject of Ironmans, I was doing the

Ironman in South Africa. I’d finished the 2.4-mile

Swim, the 112-mile bike and I’m doing the

Marathon. While running the marathon, I come upon somebody walking, and as I come up to them I realize they’ve got a bunch of diarrhea in their shorts. I get right next to them and start walking next to them, and I say, ‘I don’t know you, you don’t know me, but this is the kind of friend that I am: You know you’ve got diarrhea in your shorts?’ And he looks at me and with his

New Zealand accent, he says, ‘Do you mean I’ve

Shat my pants?’ And I’m kind of surprised that he hasn’t noticed, but it’s definitely in the right place, right color, and it can happen with stomach upsets. Then he wipes his hand on his back, and has now got brown, oozy junk on his hand. I’m

Startled. He looks startled, which is startling me. He looks at his hand, he looks at me. Then I kid you not, he sniffs it. Then he licks it.”

Note that luncheon organizers don’t know Jonas is going to open with this—or where he’s going with it.

“The guy looks at me and says, ‘Tastes like mango.’”

The room is in shock.

Mango gel explosion, awkward spot.

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Ironman Races and Tech Milestones

2004

• Vineman

2005

• Switzerland

• Western Australia

• SBD company acquired by IBM

• Software helps re-unify loved ones after Hurricane Katrina

2006

• Nice, France

• Arizona

• Silverman

2007

• Brazil

• Ironman New Zealand

2008

• Langkawi

• UK (Shetland)

• Ironman South Africa

• Nelson Mandela Bay

• Software helps MoneyGram save $250MM in fraud

2009

• Lancarote

• Cote d’Alene, Idaho

• Mexico Cozumel

• Port Macquarie

2010

• Frankfurt, Germany

• Louisville

• Software saves Alameda County Social Services $11 million in fraud

2011

• Austria

• Regensburg, Germany

• Wales

• Lake Placid

• St. George

• Texas

• Modernizes U.S. Voter Registration
“I was sitting in the car, unable to move, unable to breathe, watching myself die,” Jonas says. “I was watching my hands turn gray and thinking, ‘This is bad. I’m dying right now.’”

A man—to this day, Jonas doesn’t know who—opened his door. “They look up at me and ask, ‘Can you breathe?’ and I lip sync the word ‘no’ three times. Then they go, ‘Do you want me to lift your head?’ and I lip sync the word yes once.” The man held his head up for 27 minutes until an ambulance arrived. Jonas could breathe, but he was totally paralyzed. “If he had rested my head, settled it or tried to help somebody else, I would be dead,” Jonas says. There’s no mention of the man in police reports.

“The next scene is, I’m sitting in the hospital, completely paralyzed, and I’m like: I think I can still use my nose and attach a pencil and still program.”

And program he did. About eight days into an 18-day hospital stay, his toe wiggled. “Then wheelchair, walker, cane, left leg drag, four months of rehab,” he says. “Now my left side cramps up more easily because my brain doesn’t talk to it fully.”

He threw himself back into work, famously inventing a program called NORA, an acronym for Non-Obvious Relationship Awareness. It mines data sources to determine relationships between people—in kind of the same way Jonas discovered the difference between poop and GU at Ironman South Africa. Jonas developed the NORA tech through his company, Systems Research and Development, for Las Vegas casinos to help detect who’s who—and who’s colluding with whom. IBM bought the company in 2005, Jonas stuck with them, and was named an IBM Fellow in 2012. It’s the highest honor a scientist at IBM can achieve, typically bestowed upon less than 10 people a year, and a title that puts Jonas in the company of five Nobel Prize winners.

A variation of Jonas’ NORA blueprint has been used to accomplish everything from identifying terrorists to revolutionizing voter registration practices, and he’s still perfecting that type of analysis through his new Venice Beach, Calif.-based startup, Senzing.

“If there are only three things in my life that are the most unimaginable,” Jonas says, one was the honorary doctorate in science he got from Claremont Graduate University, because he didn’t finish high school. “One is to become an IBM Fellow, because you can’t will it. Then there’s becoming one of the three people to finish every Ironman.”

“A sign at his hotel’s front desk advertised The High Altitude Triathlon, an approximately Olympic-distance race put on by Ironman great Scott Tinley with a base elevation of 9,800 feet. Jonas signed up on a whim. He didn’t know who Tinley was and misread the race distances.

Race morning, “I look at Scott Tinley,” Jonas says, “and go, ‘Are you telling the truth? There are people that can swim freestyle all the way across there?’ And he looks at me like, ‘Why are you here?’” Amazingly, Jonas finished. “I was second to last. I was so dehydrated, I was ill for four days.” Despite all that, he started racing tris here and there—mostly shorter distances and at lower altitude.

A few years later, in 2002, Jonas decided to take on his mom at the now-defunct Half Vineman. “I crushed her!” he says. “And
I thought to myself, ‘I could possibly do that two times through.’” Full Vineman was his first iron-distance race, in 2004. At that point, triathlon was becoming a nice change from the mental challenge of his job. “He was just so passionate about his work, which takes place in his head, primarily,” Gail says. “The balance between intense thinking and intense physical activity—it changes your focus.”

Then—as things often do with Jonas—racing Ironman’s became a fun puzzle to crack. By 2010, Jonas had completed 15 iron-distance races and figured it could be possible to do them all. (There were 25 on the schedule then.) That year, he signed up for three, but only did two. So the next year he signed up for five to make sure he’d finish at least a few of them and wound up doing them all. Then he met Luis Alvarez.

“This crazy guy approached me on the bike,” says Alvarez, the 140-time Ironman finisher whose entourage of iron-competitors has numbered in the hundreds. Jonas told Alvarez about his goal to complete every race in the world.

“I didn’t know if he was for real,” says Alvarez, the 55-year-old CEO of Mexican fuel tank manufacturer SAG-Mecasa. The two of them chatted in 20-second increments so they wouldn’t get busted for drafting, and afterward Alvarez sent Jonas a note asking what he could do to help.

**MEMBERSHIP RULES**

On paper, club entry is simple: Look at the current circuit of full-distance M-Dots. If you’ve done them all—doesn’t matter when—you’re in. New races that haven’t happened yet don’t count because no one could’ve done them.

The feat was simpler, but still tough, a decade ago, when there were about 20 full-distance races on the calendar. But two changes of ownership since then have brought rapid global expansion, doubling the world’s 140.6s.

In 2016, Ironman produced 37 events. And just this year, the brand added four more: Santa Rosa, Argentina; Italy and Gurye, Korea.

“It’s like whack-a-mole,” Jonas says. You might do one this year that disappears off the list next year, as Coeur d’Alene will in 2018, so it no longer counts; anyone looking to join the club wouldn’t have to do it since they can’t race something that doesn’t exist. New races must be made up within one year of their appearance.

There are currently four people in the Ironman World Finisher’s Club: Jonas, Alvarez, Wragg and Elizabeth Model, 58, CEO of Downtown Surrey, British Columbia’s Business Improvement Association and Wragg’s life partner.

The idea of tackling every Ironman in the world intrigued Alvarez, even if it wasn’t an officially recognized achievement; a constantly changing race roster makes it too tough a title for Ironman to manage. (See: Membership Rules below.) The club, for now, was all in Jonas’ head.

Then Alvarez started noticing Jonas and his shenanigans at events, even if Mike Reilly, the “Voice of Ironman,” did not. (Jonas jokes that Reilly, to this day, announces him as Jeff Jones.) When you’re racing five-plus Ironmans a year, you can pull some stunts.

Jonas now holds the record for fastest T2 at IM Wales (1:57, posted in 2011) because he biked in his running shoes so he could toss his rig at a volunteer and sprint for it. (He was surprised that a pro blasted through T2 within 14 seconds of his time.)

He did the entire bike at Lake Tahoe in his wetsuit. (“I was freezing and if I had a wipeout, it’s like I was wearing a giant padded Band-Aid.”)

One time, he drank seven glasses of wine before IM UK (“I was nervous”). And he raced Arizona on a full-suspension Cannondale, an intentional handicap (“I did it with my girlfriend at the time, and I was afraid she was going to beat me”).

Jonas and Alvarez became friends and started bunking together at races, often working right up until showtime, with Jonas taking international conference calls on the balcony and Alvarez chugging away on his computer, both running their multi-million-dollar enterprises.

“He is so passionate and so humble,” Alvarez says of his partner in big-ticket tri. “He has the money to rent a private jet, but he’s not picky about anything. He’s happy eating street tacos in a T-shirt.”

—

Reilly, to this day, announces him as Jeff Jones.)

“Voice of Ironman,” did not. (Jonas jokes that shenanigans at events, even if Mike Reilly, the...
four or five pictures in the house that you own to keep—excluding family—that picture of the three of us coming across the line,” he pauses, reliving that moment in his head. “As I was approaching the line in Copenhagen, when I realized that it was happening, I really was starting to choke up. It’s so unexpected to have been a paralyzed person and somehow do them all.”

Then the game of maintaining membership status began.

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“AFTER FINISHING COPENHAGEN, we were very happy because we would keep our record for a long time,” Alvarez says. But Ironman added three new events in 2014: One in Maryland, and a doozy of a weekend with one in Mallorca, Spain, on a Saturday, and one in Chattanooga, Tenn., on Sunday.

“That was very bad news,” says Alvarez. “We called each other and said, ‘Hey! We will only be members of the club for two months!’”

Then Jonas’ brain started ticking. They’d failed to finish Sweden and Copenhagen back-to-back, and those races were only four hours apart by car. How could they do two Ironmans on two continents in two days?

“We thought it was impossible,” Jonas says. “And then I started wondering if you can get from a helicopter from Mallorca to Barcelona and take a plane. And then I cracked the code.”

The weekend involved a private jet, showering in an airport, a nail-biting run-in with U.S. Customs because of Alvarez’s dual citizenship between Mexico and Spain, a lot of sweat and patient, loving girlfriend-sherpas. But the two managed to pull it off.

“One of the things I love about Ironman is it resets your brain,” Jonas says. “Now when I have hard things to overcome, like a really hard project—maybe I need to work 36 hours straight. I just think to myself, ‘Wow man can I do that?’ And I’m like, ‘F##! I can’t! Absolutely.’ It gives me confidence to do hard stuff. It’s a powerful thing.”

That’s a perk of defying physical expectations. But what keeps him going, chasing the impossible dream, is even simpler. “You get to see the world, the races are always in very interesting places. And I’ve met some really great people,” he says. He mentions Susan Haag, the first woman to complete 100 full Ironmans. “It’s one of those things that’s really stuck with me. She goes: ‘You know if you quit something, there is no chance a miracle could come along.’“

“ONE OF THE THINGS I LOVE ABOUT IRONMAN IS IT RESETS YOUR BRAIN.”