

Lake County

Lake County edition is part of the Orlando Sentinel

Triathlete's death may lead to lawsuit

By Steven Hudak

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

TAVARES -- The family of a woman who died after nearly drowning during a Florida triathlon wants a Lake County judge to force race organizers to turn over videotapes, reports and other documents that may prove negligence.

South Florida lawyer Diana Santa Maria said she needs the documents to study the death of Dorothy Barnett-Griffin, 43, who passed out while swimming during the 2007 Ford Ironman Florida in Panama City.

The demand, posed as a fact-finding effort that could lead to a wrongful-death claim, was filed in Lake County because the coordinator of the endurance event's 2.4-mile swim, Timothy Johnson resides in south Lake.

"He's the key," Santa Maria said of Johnson, "He put the whole [swim] thing together."

Johnson, who was in Hawaii for Sunday's Ironman Championship, could not be reached by telephone and did not immediately respond to an e-mail seeking comment. Court papers list his address in Minneola.

The demand also names Tampa-based World Triathlon Corp., owner and organizer of the Ironman World Championships, and USA Triathlon, the sanctioning body of the sport in which athletes compete in a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle race and a 26.2-mile run. Helen Manning, a spokeswoman for World Triathlon, said she was unaware of the pending legal action and could not discuss Barnett-Griffin's death.

Barnett-Griffin, a former nurse and Texas mother of three, never regained consciousness after Ironman volunteers pulled her from the Gulf of Mexico near the end of the competition's swim.

Her death, attributed to anoxic encephalopathy -- a brain injury caused by lack of oxygen -- was considered an accident by the medical examiner in Bay County, where she was pronounced dead five days after the race.

Barnett-Griffin had entered the event hoping to raise \$10,000 in donations and pledges for Journey of Hope, a nonprofit organization that helps children cope with death. She became involved with the group in 2002 after her first husband, Dr. John Barnett, was

killed in a crash as the family was traveling to Atlanta for a Thanksgiving Vacation.

But her death was strikingly similar to the death of Bernard Rice, 35, at the Ironman a year earlier.

Santa Maria, who also represented Rice's estate, sued World Triathlon and USA Triathlon in federal court, claiming negligence led to Rice's death. She alleged that organizers failed to provide adequate staff to oversee the 2,200 competitors and lacked proper medical equipment on shore, specifically a defibrillator.

The organizers, who argued that Rice signed an injury waiver and assumed the risk of death by participating in the grueling competition, prevailed in a jury trial in Panama City, though Santa Maria has filed an appeal.

She contends Rice's estate was denied a fair trial because the jurors were culled from a community that receives millions of dollars in economic benefits every year from the annual swim-bike-run competition.

Santa Maria said Barnett-Griffin's estate could make a similar -- but stronger -- claim.

Unlike Rice, who was discovered floating in the water by competitors about a half mile out in the Gulf, Barnett-Griffin was close to the beach.

"Her chances of survival were much better -- especially if a defibrillator had been nearby," Santa Maria said.

Fred Sommer, president of Sommer Sports in Clermont, which organizes and directs triathlons in Central Florida, said the swimming portion of the athletic contests generally poses the most danger to competitors.

"If you collapse or have a [medical] problem on the bike or run, you may fall, but you won't drown," he said.

The demand filed by Santa Maria asks for event videotapes, safety-procedure manuals, emergency-action plans and reports detailing all rescue equipment on scene and their exact location, including defibrillators or AEDs, automated external defibrillators. The portable electronic device can diagnose potentially life-threatening cardiac actions and treat them through the application of immediate electrical therapy.

Stephen Hudak can be reached at shudak@orlandosentinel.com or 352-472-5930