

Interview with Sister Madonna Buder
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Speakers: Dr. Carolyn Anderson and Sister Madonna Buder

Dr. Anderson: Hi everyone and thanks for joining us for our interview with Sister Madonna Buder, the world champion holder as the oldest female to finish an Ironman Triathlon at the age of 82.

My name is Dr. Carolyn Anderson and I'm founder of the Impowerage magazine. And you can read Impowerage at Impowerage.com, [I-m-p-o-w-e-r-a-g-e .com](http://I-m-p-o-w-e-r-a-g-e.com). It covers topics on health, fitness, and retirement.

One of the main messages of Impowerage is that it's never too late to do anything. And I honestly can't think of a better person to do this for our readers than Sister Madonna Buder. I feel truly blessed to have the opportunity to speak with her today, she's been an inspiration in my life and really the catalyst for me launching Impowerage, the magazine that I started to raise money for macular degeneration research.

Sister Madonna has dedicated her life to God and the betterment of her community as a full-time practicing nun and in her probably incredibly limited spare time, she's become an internationally recognized, professional world-record-holding triathlete. She's an Ironman Triathlon extraordinaire, and just so our readers have some background, just completing this grueling race at any age is an immense accomplishment. The Ironman distance makes the familiar Olympic distance look easy by comparison. The Ironman Triathlon takes even the fittest athletes over eight hours to complete and consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 120-mile bike ride, and a full marathon run of 26.2 miles. Like wow! I think that's an amazing for a 32 year old, let alone an 82 year old.

So I just really wanted to thank you, Sister Madonna, for being here today to join us and I really look forward to speaking with you.

Sister Madonna: Oh, thank you, Carolyn.

Dr. Anderson: Now, how does it feel to be a world-record holder?

Sister Madonna: Well, I didn't realize that I was because my focus has been, the last three years, to try to open that 80-plus age group for women in the Ironman distance. And this is the third year, so I said to the Lord, "Either the third time's the charm, or three strikes and I'm out." And so he made the most perfect weather imaginable, that I can ever remember, in all of the Canadian Ironman events I've done. So with that perfect weather, I was able to open that age group for women by finishing almost a half an hour ahead of the cut-off time.

So that was my focus. I had no idea anything further than that. And when somebody told me the next day congratulations, I said, "Well, thank you very much." They said, "Well, you know, you set a world record." I said, "What?"

Dr. Anderson: Wow!

Sister Madonna: Now wait a minute. I got to thinking, well, of course, probably no woman that old has even attempted to do an Ironman, so how can I miss not holding the world record. So I just was kind of tickled by it, that's all.

Dr. Anderson: Well, it is an amazing accomplishment and I know, they think of it as the Ironman Canada race where you finished in 16 hours, 32 minutes, is that right?

Sister Madonna: Referring to.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, and that was 20 minutes faster than you'd ever raced before. (*in recent years*)

Now, I understand you held a world record as the fastest person to complete, for, I think, from August to October of this year, is that correct?

Sister Madonna: Yeah.

Dr. Anderson: Which is amazing.

Sister Madonna: I was hoping to finish the Hawaiian Ironman and maybe top 1 of the 5 men in their 80's that were doing it.

Dr. Anderson: Yes, yes.

Sister Madonna: It didn't happen because the weather was really not with us and those who did finish, well, there were 200 of us that did not, and so I, the swim had a strong current both directions, going out and coming back, so my swim was at least 20 minutes longer than it should've been, leaving no lead time on the bike, which really was necessary, because we had winds coming from every direction, plus rain, plus a little mist that you could hardly see through, and so I was too late by 11 minutes bringing the bike in to go onto the marathon.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: And I was going to use that marathon as training for the New York Marathon almost three weeks later, and I said, "All right, Father knows best." He knew I

needed rest instead of training and then it came close to the New York Marathon and now I think he's preserving me for myself, when he cancelled that one.

Dr. Anderson: That's right. Yeah, because I understand that that was obviously cancelled because of the hurricane.

Sister Madonna: Oh, Sandy, yeah.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, that was quite something. Now, do you have any future races planned right now?

Sister Madonna: Oh, yeah, I was invited back to do the Boston Marathon, so that's in April.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: The week after that I'm going to do a half Ironman distance in the New Orleans and the week after that, go over to Florida, since I'm still on the east coast, to do St. Anthony's which is an Olympic distance. So that's three weekends in a row to start my season 2013 in.

Dr. Anderson: Wow, that's a grueling schedule. Just getting back to your description of what occurred to me, Ironman in Hawaii, I find it amazing just listening to you describe it, that some of the adversity comes up almost as a blessing for a way for you to get rest, just your positive attitude about the swim being difficult and then the bike being challenging with the wind. How does attitude play into you accomplishing these amazing feats?

Sister Madonna: Oh, I think, you know, even more than being physically fit, being psychologically prepared for these things is the real reason for success—in anything you do, actually. It is your attitude and it can either make you or break you. And people who have a mindset that they have to do an Ironman by a given time and they have this goal are crushed when they can't even get through with the whole thing, but they set themselves up for disappointment that way.

And I just like to enjoy whatever weather God gives us, it's a challenge, but that's what life is all about. It is a challenge. You have your ups and your downs, so in a given day with an Ironman, you can go through an abbreviated lifespan with the ups and the downs.

But for me, it keeps me very flexible. You work with what you're given and then if you're disappointed because you didn't make your goal, well, you know, I always toss it up to the God and say, "Well, Father knows best." Probably I would've fallen apart on the run not having enough energy left to complete it, so yeah!

Dr. Anderson: Yeah. Kind of a metaphor for life almost, in a ways.

Sister Madonna: Matter of trust.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah.

Sister Madonna: We try to sometimes get ahead of God, so to speak, and control our lives. Well, to a certain extent, control, yes, as far as being disciplined is concerned. But taking over and playing God, uh-uh. It's much easier to throw him the reins and that way you're accomplishing his will. Whether it's according to your will or not doesn't matter.

Dr. Anderson: Right. Right. Now, I think you've sort of answered my next question because at Impowerage we're kind of really big supporters, and I am personally as well, of the mind/body connection and how you're, you know, how the spiritual and just your ability to calm your mind really, plays into, you know, achieving physical feats as well and how it has such a connection. I would assume from just hearing your last description that your spiritual life plays a big part in your ability to achieve these feats then, yes?

Sister Madonna: Oh, yes. You know, I was actually introduced to running by a priest who emphasized how running harmonizes mind, body, and soul.

Dr. Anderson: Okay, interesting.

Sister Madonna: And that's what caught my attention. Because I couldn't get up, see getting out there and running for no good reason. All the running I ever did growing up had to do with interaction sports, not just getting out and running.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: That seemed very strange to me, that concept.

Dr. Anderson: Now, I read that you were in your late 40's when you started running, is that right?

Sister Madonna: Yeah, that's when he, I think I might have been 47.

Dr. Anderson: Okay. Because we have a lot of readers that are, you know, probably in their early of mid 50's that have never really, you know, got out there and done anything physical. What advice would you give them to start?

Sister Madonna: Never too old to learn something new.

Dr. Anderson: Yes.

Sister Madonna: Or to have something new happen.

Dr. Anderson: Yes.

Sister Madonna: And you owe it to yourself to get off the chair and, well, if need be, push the chair around.

Dr. Anderson: That's right. That's right, yeah. No, I love that, and that's one of the big things that we, we try to inspire our readers that it's never too late to really live the life of your dreams, whatever that looks like. So, I love the fact that you're just a living example of that.

I had a question just about how, if competition spurs you on, because I know when Lew Hollander, I guess took over the record from you in the Hawaiian competition, is chasing Lew Hollander in any way a motivator, or no?

Sister Madonna: Is teasing him, you say?

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, well, chasing him, sort of.

Sister Madonna: Oh, chasing him.

Dr. Anderson: From a friendly competition perspective.

Sister Madonna: He seems the only one I've got to chase. I don't have any women to chase anymore; I have to chase the men.

Dr. Anderson: I know.

Sister Madonna: And now there're too many of them, there were 5 of them this year in the 80-plus, there used to be, when I opened the age group 75-79 in 2005, there had been a couple of men in their 80's who had attempted it, but never did finish. But that particular year, because the weather was mild, comparatively speaking in Hawaii, a man in his 80's opened the 80-plus for men when I was opening the 75-79 for women.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: Now it's just mushroomed.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah.

Sister Madonna: And, you know, it's funny, like somebody's got to do it, so this is why I felt that I was set up to be the pioneer for the women. Open that category. Since the men have it open, why not the women? It just takes us a little bit longer, that's all.

Dr. Anderson: Right. Well, and I find it fascinating that once somebody breaks that barrier or does it, people have a belief that it can now be done, it's like the four-minute mile with Bannister right?

Sister Madonna: Right.

Dr. Anderson: I mean, I think now that you're out there doing it and you're over 80 and you're completing and, you know, breaking records, that people now feel that they can do it. What I found interesting though is that women typically compete in different categories and when you were going for the record of being the oldest person, it kind of broke down all the gender categories. Do you think you're more able to compete in general as we get older? Because typically, I mean, and I'm a big proponent for women and women's health, but I also understand that the physical strength is a factor and in the younger age groups for the women to compete in the same category or with the men, against the men, it is difficult. I mean, just as an example, I'm a big golf fan, but Annika Sorenstam, who is one of the best golfers in the world, tried to compete in the PGA for men, and it was extremely challenging and difficult for her, even being in the pinnacle of her career as a woman.

So here you are basically competing as, you know, holding the record for the oldest person and kind of chasing men. Do you have any comment on that?

Sister Madonna: Well, actually, women have, I think, more endurance than men, not be as fast, but I'm still waiting for a woman to win an Ironman distance one of these years.

Dr. Anderson: Okay. Like even in a younger category?

Sister Madonna: Um-hm, in the pros.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah.

Sister Madonna: The pro section.

Dr. Anderson: Wow. And do you think it's the mental tenacity and the endurance, even if their physical strength is not quite the same?

Sister Madonna: Well, women tend to be multitaskers.

Dr. Anderson: Yes.

Sister Madonna: They have so many things to concentrate on, and that's why they're elected by God to rear children, because men would never make it. They couldn't stand the physical pain to begin with. But if you watch them cross the finish line, the pro men look absolutely exhausted when they finish because they have pushed their bodies to the limit. Now, a woman, the first woman, can look like she can go another 10 or so miles without collapsing.

Dr. Anderson: Wow. Okay.

Sister Madonna: And she knows how to listen to her body.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, the intuition thing.

Sister Madonna: It's cerebral, they listen to their head and they think that that's going to push them forward. Well, it takes a little more than that.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah. I find that fascinating. And in that kind of regard, how do you stay focused when you're racing for 16-plus hours? What are you thinking of as you're biking and swimming and running?

Sister Madonna: Well, sometimes I lose myself in the scenery. But then I'm not focused. And then sometimes I think of whoever comes into my mind is the person that I'm offering my efforts up to, as far as a prayer for them.

Dr. Anderson: Okay, nice.

Sister Madonna: So they're not lost moments out there, not at all. Because like I say, you go through a whole cycle in an abbreviated lifetime and so you have a gratitude to God for all the beauty that he has given us as our playground, and then you have petitioning to ask him to have mercy on those who are being troubled at the moment that you're thinking of them. And then, yeah, you can ask forgiveness for blaming him for the weather that he's giving us, and you don't like it. And so, all sorts of things you can think of.

Dr. Anderson: Right. And I guess you have a lot of time to think about it.

Sister Madonna: Oh, plenty of time.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah. And it's great just to have that time to connect as well and to use it for that. So you see yourself as a role model for older adults?

Sister Madonna: No. I don't understand what people are talking about when they come up and say, "Oh, what an inspiration you are." I just can't—I don't get it. But then, when I was puzzled about it, I just heard the Lord say, "Well, you don't have to get it, just accept it."

Dr. Anderson: That's right, because I think you definitely are, I mean, you definitely are an inspiration for people just to feel that they can get out there and do what they want to do no matter, you know, how old they are, so I think that's fantastic.

Sister Madonna: The one thing, that if it weren't for the camaraderie of the triathletes themselves that I engage with, I wouldn't be doing it this long.

Dr. Anderson: So tell me about that, is it like a big team?

Sister Madonna: People connection.

Dr. Anderson: Okay.

Sister Madonna: And I'm out there doing it because the public won't let me not.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: If it were up to me, I think I would've quit a long time ago.

Dr. Anderson: Do you have any advice for other aspiring triathletes?

Sister Madonna: Well, the will is so important when it comes to doing anything at all, and the more difficult it is, the more important it is to employ your willpower, to get through the difficult times, remembering that there's no time with God and everything that you're experiencing is in passing. You have all eternity to look forward to.

Dr. Anderson: That's great. Do you have a daily routine? I mean, when we first started the call, you were talking about that you'd been for your swim already. What do you do to keep—

Sister Madonna: Oh, I have to be very flexible.

Dr. Anderson: What do you do to stay so fit and healthy?

Sister Madonna: Well, if I'm at home, which is oftentimes not during the summer months, I like to start the day by jumpstarting it running to mass and back. That takes care of a minimal exercise and if it's in the summer and I've got the time, then I'll hop on

my bike and bike maybe 40 miles round trip, 42, to swim about a mile and a half in a nice lake. But that's when I'm training for the Ironman distance in the summer.

Dr. Anderson: Right. Right. Now, you've traveled all over the world competing, do you have a favorite location?

Sister Madonna: Well, again, location to me is people. And I just love those Aussies they have the attitude. I mean, they'll party the night before the Ironman event and they'll do superbly well, but their attitude is they play at work, where we Americans work at play.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: And I think, you know, they've got the better lease on life.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, no, I think they've got it the right way around.

Sister Madonna: So when we take ourselves too seriously, then we knock the joy out of our lives.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, I think that's just great advice, you know? And it's so true. You know? It is so true that you really want to enjoy the journey and really enjoy what you're doing and, yeah.

Sister Madonna: And it is a journey.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, absolutely.

Sister Madonna: It's movement forward.

Dr. Anderson: That's right.

Sister Madonna: Sometimes it's too, when I try to get to a destination at an important race, it's two steps forward and one step backwards because people surge me to get, you know, autograph, whatever, picture, whatever, and I think, am I ever going to get my mission accomplished for the day?

Again, it means not your will, but you're there to please somebody else. And that's what life is all about. We're supposed to be of service to one another. But we have locked ourselves into a me-first attitude that is so destructive and it's what creates borders.

When we get a woman president, things might change, I don't know.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, I love that thought. But you're right and I think just living in the moment when you're there, too, you know, if you're rushing off to try and make it to a race, but somebody stops you, to really be there with that person in that moment and share that time.

Sister Madonna: Say that again?

Dr. Anderson: Yeah.

Sister Madonna: You're fading on me.

Dr. Anderson: Oh, okay. Yeah, no, so just to really be there with that person and share that time, even if you have somewhere else you have to be, just to sort of live in the moment.

Sister Madonna: And sometimes they're very considerate. They know that they've stopped me in my tracks.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: They sometimes apologize. Other times people treat me like I'm public property and they snap at me without even asking permission.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, and that's not right.

Sister Madonna: You know, you just get all sorts of people, but you take it in stride.

Dr. Anderson: Absolutely. That's just how it is in life, I guess. Now, we have a couple of questions from two of our readers on Facebook. Daryl Mary asked, "Do you have any so-called normal aging processes, like arthritis of the hips or knees and if so, how do you cope?"

Sister Madonna: Well, I don't know what these aging diseases are because I've never been old before.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: So I'm stiff when I get up in the morning, but when I get moving, it just takes a little bit of oiling up to get moving and I really, when I have the time, before I get out and run to mass, I like to do floor exercises, just to get limbered up before I dash off for a run. In my 50's, I never used to do that, but I think it's more important to do limbering up exercises as you get older instead of just going out and doing it, but it can be done.

And I rarely go to the doctors unless I have broken bones, of which I've had a number, because I know what's wrong and they know what's wrong. But otherwise, I mostly just listen to my body and one knee was buckling when I was running for maybe a couple of years, but I would just self-massage it and use ointment and I have a little metallic thing, rollers, that I use. And yeah, I just take care of those little pieces of my body that need more attention occasionally.

And it just goes back to listening to your, well, I guess certainly watching what you eat is important. I'm not very good at nutrition, but I know that it's a lot easier for me to eat raw veggies and fruit because I don't have to take the time to cook them, for one thing, and they retain more of their vitamins when they're in the raw state, for the most part. Or else I steam them.

Dr. Anderson: Right.

Sister Madonna: And get a proper amount of sleep, that's the best thing I do any more, is sleep.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah, and you know it's such a critical component that so many people don't realize, the rest and the rejuvenation and the sleep is critical. But I noticed, too, when you answered the question, what's great is you're kind of focusing on your health instead of what's wrong. You know, focusing on trying to stay fit and moving and active and I sometimes wonder if the fountain of youth isn't just to keep moving. You know?

Sister Madonna: Yeah.

Dr. Anderson: Kandi had a question, too, that what do you say to people who think that you're too old to compete?

Sister Madonna: Are you too old to talk? Are you too old to take up your grandchildren and sit them on your lap? You're never too old to do anything you really want to do. It's your mind that stops you.

Dr. Anderson: Yeah.

Sister Madonna: The mind doesn't care how old you are, as long as you don't.

Dr. Anderson: That's right. So I have one last question for you, that if you could offer one piece of advice to somebody that was 52 years old right now, what would it be?

Sister Madonna: What kind of advice are they looking for?

Dr. Anderson: Just worldly wisdom, I guess.

Sister Madonna: Well, I tell you what, that's pivotal going to the person, I can remember turning 50 and I thought, "Oh, my God, I'm half a century old." But when you look at it that way, you are pretty darn old. If you don't think about your age, you're much better off. Just keep moving.

Dr. Anderson: Okay.

Sister Madonna: Forget how old you are. Don't even refer to it.

Dr. Anderson: I love that, thank you. You know, and thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to speak with us today. It's been amazing and so much of what you've shared is inspirational to all of us. So thank you.

Sister Madonna: Oh, thank you, Carolyn, it was a pure delight for me. And good luck to all those in your audience who have dreams that they might be filled.

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Sister Madonna plans on competing in a 70.3 triathlon in June 2013 to secure a spot in the Kona World Championships in October 2013. If she finishes at the World Championship she could regain her record as the oldest person, male or female, to complete an Ironman distance triathlon.

To hear the audio of this interview visit <http://impowerage.com/sister-madonna-interview>.

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Dr. Carolyn Anderson is an eye surgeon based out of Langley, British Columbia and founded the Impowerage magazine to raise money for macular degeneration research.