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Burned at 8, McEachern Alum Now an 'Iron Man'

Shay Eskew overcame an accident 30 years ago that tremendously altered his body to participate in some of the world's most grueling competitions. And to make it to the World Championships, he needs your help.

 By [Michael Stone](#) | [Email the author](#) | July 12, 2012

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For a while after the tragedy of Aug. 4, 1982, Shay Eskew didn't remember—or want to remember—what happened.

But as time went on, especially when he began to give inspirational speeches, the mental images resurfaced.

His 15-year-old neighbor asking Eskew, who was 8, and his 7-year-old friend to help her get rid of a yellow jacket nest.

The neighbor throwing a match on the nest.

The neighbor then tossing gasoline in the nest's direction.

The gasoline accidentally landing on Eskew, his friend and the match, sending the boys' bodies aflame.

Eskew rolling on the ground to extinguish the flames while his friend stood there, screaming in pain.

Eskew hosing his friend down to stop the fire.

"For the longest time, I refused to acknowledge that I was a burn survivor because I was afraid that would limit what I could achieve," said Eskew, now 38. "I just kept looking at it like I had a really bad accident."

His body was 35 percent burned, all above the waist and mostly on his right side. Gangrene later claimed his right ear, and 65 percent of his body is now scarred through complications and through 35 surgeries over 30 years, including skin graft transplants from both legs, stomach and buttocks.

When he was little living in Decatur, kids would point, call him Freddy Krueger and say things like, "Ew, gross. Look at him." Some nights, he would

cry himself to sleep.

But things did progressively get better.

His family later moved to Powder Springs, where he served as president of [McEachern High](#)'s class of 1992 and is now organizing the 20-year reunion.

He went to the University of Tennessee and earned his bachelor's and MBA degrees.

He lives with his wife and four small children in Franklin, TN, and works for EnableComp, a company that makes sure hospitals get paid by insurance companies.

Through it all, one thing has remained constant for Eskew and has driven him to better himself—athletics.

"Here's a guy who doesn't let anything stop him when he gets his mind made up to do something," said friend Butch Wabby, who met Eskew a year ago in a Franklin gym. "I admire him, and he certainly does not let adversity stand in his way."

Before the accident, Eskew was involved in baseball and football—activities he continued just months after being released from the hospital. He admits he "wasn't any good, but I was out there playing."

"Once I was burned, I was told I'd never be competitive in sports again," said Eskew, who attributes his Christian faith as being a guiding light.

"It took three years (after being burned) just to lift my right arm above my head. My mission was to use sports to redefine who I was. I didn't want to be known as the burned kid, so I thought the more I devoted myself to sports and becoming a better athlete, people would look at me differently."

He continued football through his time at McEachern, but was "mostly a benchwarmer. I had the cleanest uniform."

Eventually, though, Eskew figured out he could become a top competitor in certain sports.

"If it's a sport that requires touch—golf, tennis, basketball—I'm horrible. I can't do it," he explained. "But if it's a sport that's, 'Give it all you've got for as long as you can, and take as much pain as you can withstand,' that's what I'm the best at."

At McEachern, he became an All-American wrestler, [gaining second- and fourth-place finishes at state](#). At UT, he was a three-time boxing champion.

And for the past four years, Eskew has been competing in events that would likely test any professional football, baseball or soccer player—triathlons.

He trains six days a week, a couple hours at a time. He spreads small meals throughout his day and focuses on eating protein. Sleep is also important, "but with four kids, I never get enough."

Eskew [has competed in several triathlons and Iron Man races](#), and two years ago, finished sixth in the Half Iron Man National Championships. For the race he's now looking at—the Iron Man World Championship in Hawaii in October—he needs your help.

He is one of 14 competitors vying for two spots in the triathlon reserved for people who have overcome something major in their lives.

"All of us have some kind of story, whether it's cancer or losing 150 pounds," Eskew said. He hopes to finish the race—which includes 2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of biking, and 26.2 miles of running—in under 10 hours.

The two with the most online votes will get to participate in the race. [You can vote online](#) once a day through Wednesday, July 18.

If selected, Eskew will raise money for Shriners Hospitals for Children. He wasn't insured when he was burned, so Shriners funded his treatment until he was 21.

Shriners spokeswoman Vanessa Mosley called Eskew's story "one of challenges and triumphs, but also of the power and resiliency of the human spirit."

"To see someone who has faced such an obstacle not only survive, but achieve such tremendous success, is heart-warming," she said via email. "Although Shriners Hospitals for Children provides care regardless of the patient's ability to pay, the cost of care continues to rise. These types of fundraising efforts allow us to continue our mission."

His fundraising efforts, his athletic triumphs and struggles, his appearance and the day he was burned—Eskew doesn't mind discussing any aspects of his story and enjoys giving motivational speeches based on it. All the while, he's developed a sense of humor about everything.

When people ask him where his right ear went, he jokingly responds: "Well, I don't know. I had it a few minutes ago."

Attached are photos of Eskew's injuries, him competing and a newspaper article following the accident.

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12:15 pm on Saturday, July 14, 2012

I remember getting whooped by this guy in wrestling back in high school. You've got my respect and votes for Kona. Best of luck to you!

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