

# San Francisco trial attorney doubles as a true ‘Ironman’ in life

By Brian Cox

Brian Buddell lives life and practices law with a singular passion and intensity.

“Work hard, play hard” is more than a catchphrase for the San Francisco trial attorney. It’s a credo he has followed since he was



A veteran triathlete, Brian has competed across the United States, including in the Challenge Daytona Triathlon Festival where athletes swim, bike, and run at the iconic Daytona International Speedway.



young and aspired to be a fighter pilot before learning that his poor vision was a likely barrier to that ambition.

So instead of flying jets to feed his drive to push limits, Buddell chose to pursue law.

He’s always been drawn to challenges with high stakes that require preparation and endurance. And he has both the trial wins and the triathlon medals to prove it.

“I’ve always been very high energy,” says Buddell. “People always laugh when I tell them that I don’t drink coffee on a regular basis because nobody wants to see me on coffee.”

There is a strong sense of inevitability to Buddell’s legal career. After all, he made his debut appearance as a trial lawyer in the sixth grade.

He recalls that his 12-year-old “client” in the mock trial was not well liked by the other students in the government class so there was little he could say that would win him the case.

But he fell in love with the art of arguing, nonetheless.

“People say I argue well because I’m a trial attorney,” says Buddell, “but I always correct them. I’m a good trial attorney because I argue well.”

A native Californian, Buddell grew up in Santa Monica in the 1970s and ‘80s. He attended Santa Monica High School alongside future celebrities like Charlie Sheen – still Carlos Estevez at the time – and the Lowe brothers, Chad and Rob. Sports dominated much of his youth. He played football, but it was hockey that became his true obsession.

Back then, hockey in Los Angeles was not as popular as it is today. Buddell and his friends could buy cheap student tickets to Kings games at the Forum and sneak down to the glass because the arena was half empty. He played goalie, embracing the strange psychology of the position as the last line of defense.

“As a goalie, you’re an individual in a team sport,” says Buddell. “There’s nobody behind you to back you up. I’ve always liked that kind of pressure. I embrace it and just go with it. And that’s translated into how I try cases.”

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His talent in front of the net almost carried him into professional sports. At 16, a New York Rangers scout approached him about pursuing hockey seriously, but, though tempting, Buddell understood the lean economics and randomness of minor league sports. He had other ambitions anyway.

Law had already started pulling at him.

Raised solely by his mother, who worked in food and beverage management to support him and his sister, Buddell learned early about hard work and self-reliance. At University of California, Berkeley, he majored in English literature, minored in rhetoric, and competed in debate. The combination sharpened skills that would later define his courtroom style: storytelling, timing, and connection.

“It’s a talent I’ve always had,” he says of storytelling. “And I definitely use it as my primary tool when I’m trying a case.”

Buddell describes the ideal trial attorney as “part actor or storyteller, part psychologist, and part salesman.” The formula sounds simple when he says it, but he has spent more than three decades refining it in real courtrooms before real juries.

He knew from the beginning that trial work was the only kind of law he wanted to practice.

After graduating from Berkeley, Buddell attended Golden Gate University School of Law in San Francisco, a school known for trial advocacy. The first year nearly knocked him out. He openly admits he came close to failing. But once he moved past foundational coursework and into advocacy training, everything changed.

He made Golden Gate’s traveling mock trial team as a second-year student – the first second-year student ever selected.

“We were a force to be reckoned with,” says Buddell. “We went to nationals. We beat the hell out of Harvard. We beat the hell out of Boalt Hall (UC-Berkeley). And then we ended up losing to the University of Montana, but it was a great experience, and we had a good time.”

Under renowned criminal defense lawyer Bernie Segal, Buddell developed the aggressive, conversational courtroom style that still defines him today.

He also learned one of the most important lessons of his career.

As a certified law clerk with the San Francisco City Attorney’s Office, Buddell tried his first real case while still in law school. Standing to deliver his opening statement, he felt a rush of nerves. Then he heard Segal’s reassuring voice in his head reminding him: “You’ve done this before.”

The jitters passed and everything settled.

A juror later told him she could actually see the moment he became comfortable.

That instinctive comfort in trial work has remained ever since. Buddell says he refuses to hide behind a lectern if he can avoid it.



Over the past decade, Brian has finished six full Ironman races and countless half-Ironman events. The long-distance endurance event consists of a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride, and 26.2-mile run.



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He prefers walking the courtroom, talking directly to jurors instead of lecturing them.

“I just want to talk to the jury,” he says. “Engage them and relate to them. You’ve got to make sure you can distill the case to the salient points that really, really hit home, to reach success.”

Over the years, he has obsessively refined that skill. After trials, he regularly asks jurors what they think worked and what failed. He wants blunt honesty, even now.

“I learn something from every case I try,” he says. “I’m always developing as a trial lawyer. We all are. And if you think you’ve reached the point of no development, then I feel sorry for you because I think you’re selling yourself short.”

The results speak for themselves. In 32 years of trying dozens of cases, Buddell says he has lost only twice.

Early jobs at firms and insurance companies gave him trial opportunities at a pace few young lawyers can experience today. At Golden Eagle Insurance, attorneys were expected to try four to six cases a year. Buddell thrived in the environment and became known internally as the office “trial dog,” the lawyer assigned difficult files and courtroom battles.

Even outside the courtroom, his life often seemed to accelerate toward extremes.



**Brian raises his bicycle in triumph on the bank of the Mississippi River after completing the RAGBRAI, an annual seven-day bicycle ride across the state of Iowa.**



**Brian with his wife, Kendra, and his two children, Jalen and Abigail.**

In college, Buddell spent a summer on the Yosemite Search and Rescue team after volunteering during an emergency rescue operation involving an injured 12-year-old stranded in rising floodwaters. Soon he was rappelling into rescue sites, riding in helicopters, and living among what he affectionately describes as a talented but chaotic band of climbers and rescuers.

“We were just a bunch of clowns who loved what we were doing,” recalls Buddell. “We were really good at what we did, but we worked hard and played hard, which has always been my mantra.”

Buddell’s office walls are lined with medals from obstacle course racing, triathlons, and endurance events. At 49, almost on a whim, he signed up for a Spartan race around his 50th birthday. One race turned into dozens. In 2016 alone, he completed 42 Spartan races and eight trifectas (completing a Spartan Sprint, Super, and Beast race in one year).

Then came triathlons.

Fourteen months after deciding he would probably never attempt an Ironman, Buddell completed his first one. The long-distance endurance event consists of a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride, and 26.2-mile run, totaling 140.6 miles (226.3 km) to be completed within 17 hours. He eventually finished six full Ironman races and countless half-Ironman events, racing internationally and across the United States.

The attraction wasn’t just about fitness.

“Being a trial lawyer and being an Ironman and being a hockey player are pretty much my identities,” he says.

Ironman training requires 20 to 25 hours a week of swimming, biking, and running. Buddell typically wakes between 4 and 4:30 each morning to train before work. Even now, after retiring from full Ironman-distance races, he continues cycling, racing, and chasing endurance challenges. Shortly after turning 60, he completed RAGBRAI, the iconic seven-day bicycle ride across Iowa.

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Yet for all the intensity, Buddell’s life is not defined solely by competition. He says his favorite titles are husband and father.

He met his wife, Kendra, while taking a deposition in Seattle. They married in 2007, with his longtime friend and colleague John Brydon officiating the ceremony. Together they raised their son, Jalen, and daughter, Abigail, whom Buddell suspects may someday have the temperament for trial law herself.

At Demler, Armstrong & Rowland, LLP, where he now practices in San Francisco, Buddell has become deeply invested in mentoring younger attorneys. He believes trial lawyers are “born, not taught,” but he also believes raw ability must be developed and challenged. He pushes associates to argue, to question, and to stop fearing rejection.

“It’s a great firm to work for,” he says. “People really respect each other. We get along well. And I love the people I work with. I take very good care of my team who work under me and try to develop them. And I’ve got a couple of shining stars right now who I look at as proteges.”



**Brian and Abigail hit the ski slopes.**



**An avid outdoorsman, Brian enjoys backpacking with Jalen.**

There is a recurring theme throughout Buddell’s stories: he goes all in. He is a Certified Bourbon Steward with a selection (not collection!) of more than 175 different types of bourbon at his home bar.

And whether it is traveling solo through Africa after leaving a job, backpacking through the wilderness with his son, racing across Iowa on a bicycle, or preparing another case for trial, he approaches life with the same intensity he brings to a courtroom.

He is determined to extract as much experience as possible from every year.

At 60, he has started seeing contemporaries pass away unexpectedly, a reality that has informed his perspective on success.

“My measure of success is if I was struck down tomorrow, would I be satisfied with what I’ve accomplished in my life, both personally and professionally?” he says. “And I can honestly say ‘yes.’ I’ve crammed more into my 60 years than I think most people have done in 120 years.”