

Have you ever had one of those days? Have you ever had one of those days with a couple of thousand people watching you have one of those days? If you have, then you can imagine what it must have been like on May 27, 1984...

Missing in the Mist

A tale of triathletic horror and murderous intent set in the misty forests of the Deep South. The eerie, early morning fog lifts to reveal the deepest, darkest fears of a race director come true.

There is a bit of history to this Atlanta race. The Bud Light USTS has been to Stone Mountain, Georgia before. The last time was back in 1984, and the scene was the same as it will be in '87—Stone Mountain Park. While the race that year was not a total disaster, it came very, very close to being just that. It was the Race of the Short Swim, the 1500-foot swim, the 500-meter swim, the dive in, take-three-strokes-and-turn swim that turned the hair of Race Director Caroline Muegge gray and the head of CAT Sports Vice President Jim Curl a bit less lushly forested.

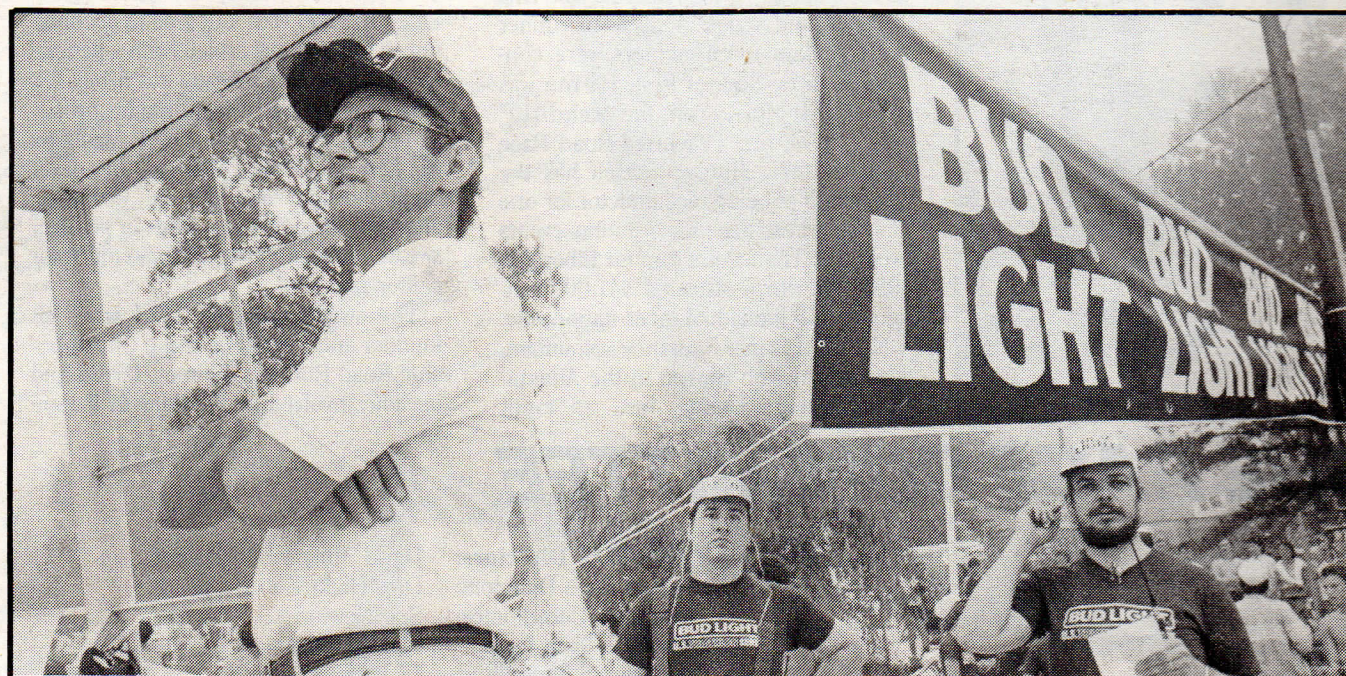
The Bud Light USTS came to the Atlanta area the first time in 1983. Procedures were a little less defined then than they are now; the Series had leaped from five races in 1982 to 12 in '83, to 11 in '84, and there was still a lot to learn about putting on mass participation triathlons. The swim coordinator of the race that year, a woman whose identity we have sworn to protect, decided that the best way to mark the course was to lay out 2,000 yards (the swim distance that year was 2K) of rope, tie empty bleach bottles to it every three feet or so, then haul the whole thing out into Stone Mountain Lake in a small boat.

It was a terrible task, not a practical idea at all, and it wasn't made any easier due to a nighttime riverboat cruise on the lake that made it impossible to set the course until midnight or so. The next morning the string of bottles bobbing in the water set a less than professional-looking stage, especially since the rope was anchored at only a couple of points, so the entire line bowed and twisted, marking a route that only a drunken sailor might appreciate.

It was not a successful effort, and the swim coordinator, who had some strong experience in fitness and aquatics, pleaded with race director Muegge for a second chance the following year. Muegge agreed.

In 1984, in response to the burgeoning fields of competitors, the Series instituted the wave start system, an innovation that was unveiled to rave reviews in the season opener in Tampa Bay. Atlanta was #2 on the schedule, and Jim Curl and Co. rolled into town brimming with optimism. There'd been some rough spots in '83; Curl was looking for a gem of production the second time around.

Once again, the swim course had to be set late at night, after the riverboat, the Henry W. Grady, had docked. Muegge



Jim Curl looks uneasily out at a swim course that he knows is not correct.

was supervising in the transition area and heard the swim course team hard at work, the coordinator's voice, amplified by a bullhorn, echoing directions across the lake. She couldn't actually see what was going on, of course, but this was the second year, after all, and everything was under control. When she left the park at 2 a.m. to catch a quick half hour of sleep, the swim crew sounded like they were winding up their operation, too.

In the morning the lake was shrouded in heavy fog. It sat and sat as the 7 a.m. starting time approached. The pro field lined up at the water's edge; the age group triathletes spread out down the narrow beach, waiting for their turn. The hour came, then went, with Curl standing in a lifeguard tower above the beach holding up the start until the fog lifted at least enough so that everyone could see where they were going. Standing next to him on the tower was the swim coordinator. Below him were the pros, asking questions about the course they couldn't yet see. "Which Way, Jim?" "Where's it go?"

Curl pointed to a big, orange bouy some 200, 250 yards offshore. It was barely visible. "See that?" he said. "That's your first buoy. Just swim straight out until you run out of buoys, then turn around and come back."

The fog lifted slowly at around 7:15. Curl, standing higher than the rest, saw the problem first. Caroline Muegge standing on the beach, saw it soon after. "It was 'oh, shit' time," she said, laughing about the morning three years later—although at the time she wasn't laughing at all. "Ohhh, shit."

Curl turned to the swim coordinator.

"Where are the rest of the buoys?" he asked.

"Rest of the buoys?" came the response.

"That's all there are."

"How long did they tell you the course was supposed to be?" asked Curl.

"Fifteen hundred meters," came the reply.

"Uhh, do you know how long a meter is?" asked Curl, the realization beginning to dawn. There was a slight pause.

"Kind of like a foot, isn't it?" said the coordinator.

Now it was Curl's turn to pause. He had options, of course. He could turn and strangle the woman on the spot, which was his first impulse. But there were people watching; the pros below him were mumbling, starting to ask about the rest of the buoys. Assaulting someone would only make matters worse. He'd be carted off to jail, certainly, and someone needed to make a decision. He decided to offer a simple correction of fact.

"No, Becky (it was the woman's name—I couldn't resist), it's kind of more like a yard," Curl said drearily. Then he announced to the anxious triathletes on the beach that there was a problem with the course, that there'd be a delay. He jumped from the tower and made a beeline to the Series public relations director, Cathy Hoy.

"Cathy," he said. "We have a BIG problem, a major problem. The swim course is two-thirds short."

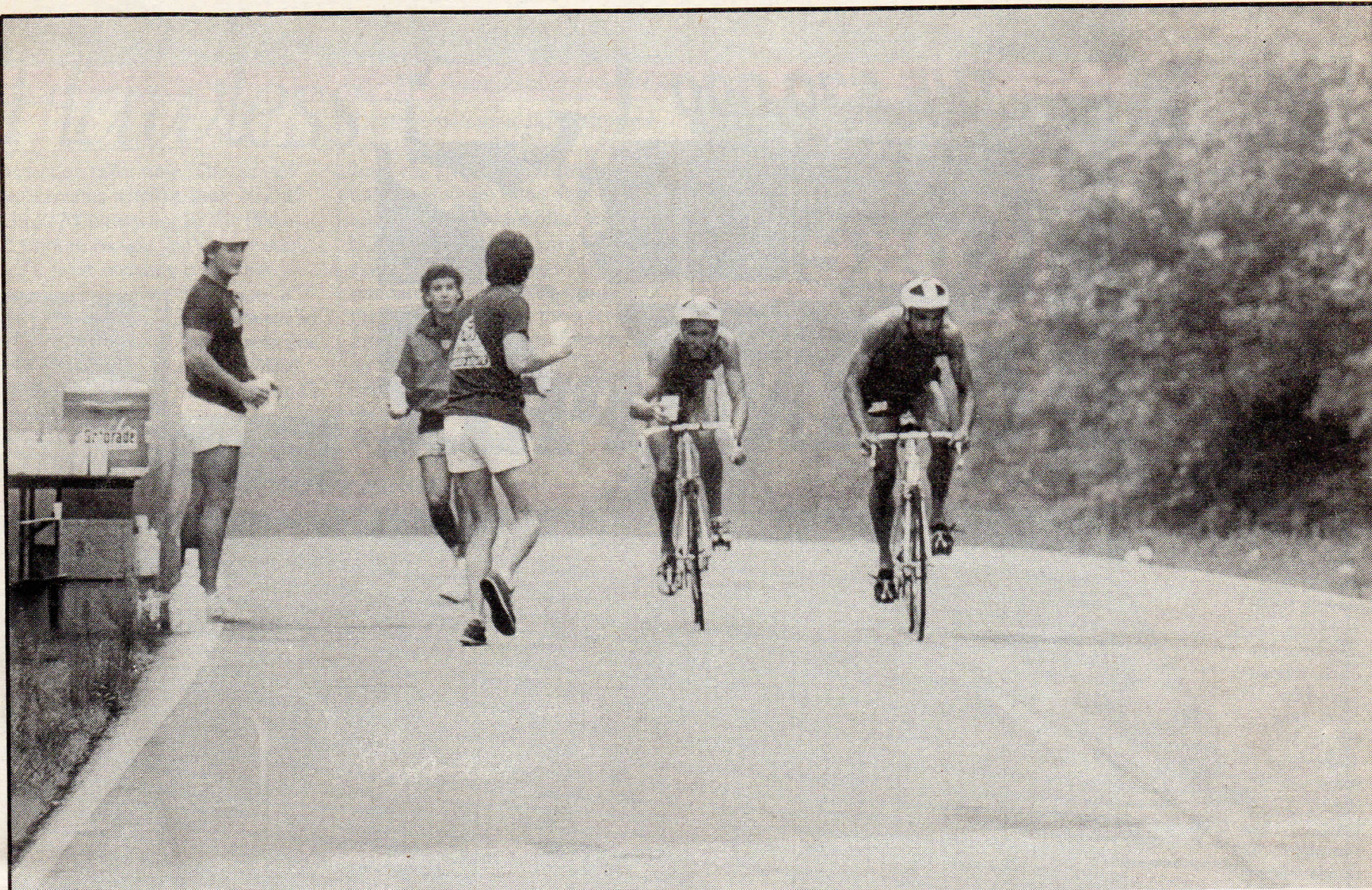
It was. The coordinator had laid out a swim course better suited to a bathtub. The question now was, what to do about it? The start of the swim could be delayed and the course reset, but the park auth-

orities weren't going to sit for that, Curl knew. The triathletes could be told to do three laps of the course, but that would be a logistic nightmare, too confusing to even consider. The only solution was to start the damn race, short course and all.

Curl rushed back to the lifeguard stand and made the announcement. Below him, Scott Tinley, who would normally be expected to give up a solid two minutes to guys like Scott Molina in a normal 1500-meter swim, stood there grinning. "I was all smiles," said Tinley. But there were frowns and murmurs of discontent all around him. The swimmers weren't happy at all.

Grimly, trying to ignore his own frustration and embarrassment, Curl fired the gun and off the pros went, fighting for space and sprinting for the best line to the turnaround buoy. They were back on the beach six minutes later, barely wet it seemed, a whole bunch of them rushing out of the water in a big pack, a second group not far behind while several of the age group waves stood standing in the sand, gawking. Gee, that *was* short, wasn't it?

Mark Montgomery, always noted for his quick transitions, made one of his quickest, and was out of the parking lot first. Dean Harper and Scott Molina were right on his heels. The group was moving fast a half mile later when they pulled up short. They were supposed to bear right out of the park—that was what the map had said—but there was a chain across the road, blocking the way. Confused, the three men bore to the left and down a steep hill. They'd only gone a short distance before they heard someone



Tinley and Molina were together throughout the fog-shrouded bike ride in Atlanta in 1984, with the rest of the field falling farther and farther behind. Spectators got a rare treat when the two best short-distance guys in the sport rushed into the bike/run transition area together and then rushed back out the same way (below).

behind them calling them back. The blocked park exit had been the correct way after all.

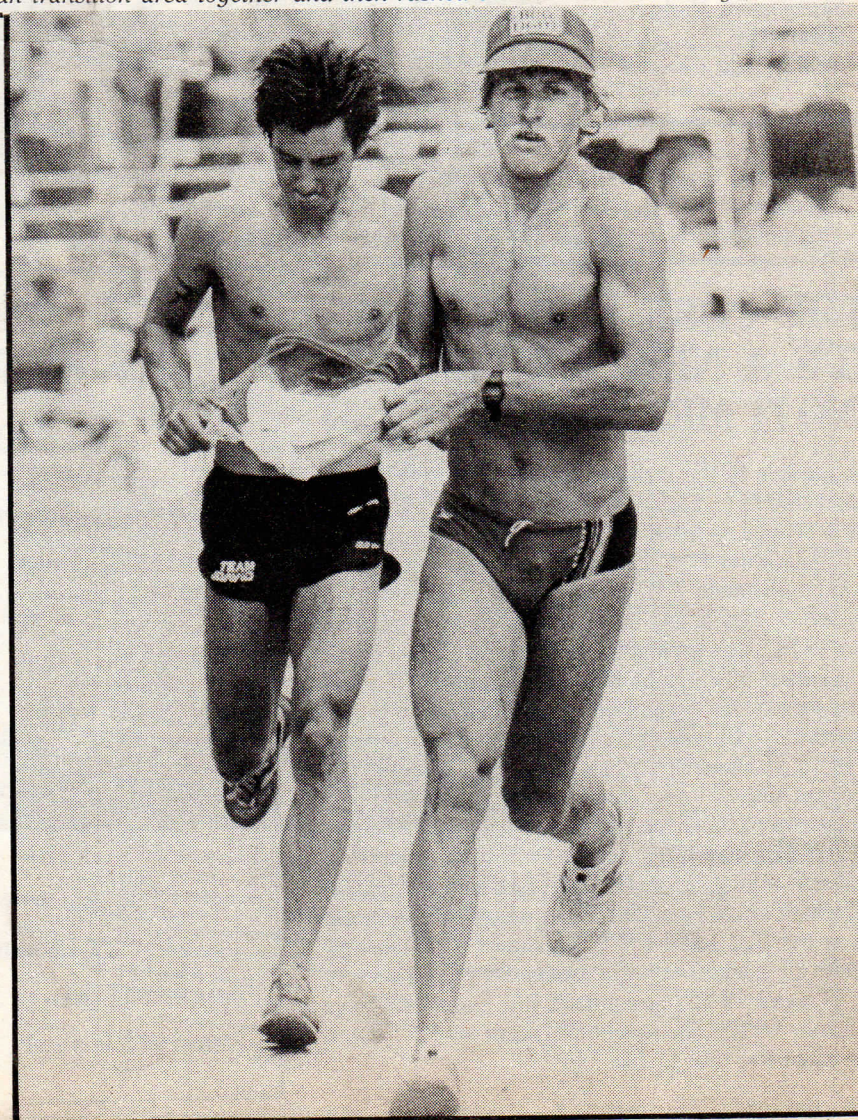
The short swim had screwed up everyone's schedule. The exit had been chained for safety's sake, to keep incoming traffic off the park road, and a Stone Mountain Park policeman had been assigned to drop the chain just before the cyclists arrived—which was 16, 17 minutes after the race got underway, right?

In the confusion on the beach, no one had thought to inform the cop of the change in the length of the swim. They found him now, in a hurry, but by the time they did, Montgomery and Molina and Harper had decided to help themselves. Angry over losing what little advantage they'd been able to gain in the water, they'd dismounted and lifted their bikes over the chain. They were in the process of rolling off again when the chain was finally lowered behind them, just in time to let the large, second pack of riders whoosh through. Cursing, Molina took off in pursuit. Montgomery and Harper started, but by this time a second officer—the Stone Mountain policeman who was supposed to be leading the race—realized that he'd been aced. Frantic, he threw his patrol car into reverse, directly into the path of Montgomery and Harper. Both men ran smack into the car and went down. Neither was seriously hurt, but Montgomery decided to call it quits anyway; the race was ten minutes old and it was already too weird.

Tinley, of course, was on Molina's tail from the beginning. He came out of the water 40 seconds behind, but the confusion at the gate had squeezed things even tighter. The result of it all was that the two men raced head to head through almost the entire bike ride, leaving the rest of the pro field scrambling for third place. If the short swim was terrible in all other respects, it at least gave the crowd a chance to see the two best short-distance guys in the sport work at close quarters. They were together at the end of the bike and through all of the run, with the pace over the last 100 yards driving faster and faster as they drove toward the finish line. Training partners and friends, they weren't so much trying to bury each other as simply running fast, together, but they were going hard when they crossed the line, and the result was a dead heat—and an historic photograph.

The rest, of course, was history that everyone would have rather forgotten. There was drafting controversy and several of the male pros were disqualified. Everyone, it seemed, had something to be mad about, and needed to find someone to complain to. To top it all off, Race Director Muegge, a woman of Great Fortitude and Endurance (she completed the fabled Iditarod sled dog race in Alaska this past spring—with a team of rented dogs and after just three weeks of training) found that her purse, money, credit cards and all, had been stolen. With late

MIST, continued on page 18



MIST, continued from page 13

finishers still coming across the line, she sat down on the curb and cried.

"I cried after that race, too," said Curl, who presided over a gloomy foursome of national Series staff members at a local Chinese restaurant that night. Muegge and her staff were in hiding. "I felt I couldn't do any worse than I'd done that day. It was a terrible feeling. We'd set such high standards, and here we were just like everybody else. I thought I'd screwed up the business. I thought we might never be able to put on another race."

Well, it was bad, but the Series survived, and everyone's real happy to be back at beautiful Stone Mountain. You know, of course, the first question 1987

EDITORIAL, continued from page 9

on that, because a groundswell of resentment against them would be devastating. As much as some of them resist the idea, they need constantly to be putting some effort back into the sport; they need to be good citizens of the triathlon community. If they are being given special considerations because they are the sport's public face, then they must present a face we can all be proud of.

For their part, the age groupers need to understand that many of the pros really are racing so that they can pay the rent. Since the Bud Light USTS offers them neither appearance money nor expense compensation, we need to give them the best competitive opportunity in the business. And quite frankly, in terms of training and technology and the growth of the sport in the public eye, the pros are on the cutting edge. They are going where the rest of us will follow.

Balance is important, but tolerance and mutual consideration and respect are, too. The Series will work on the balance part—we are certainly not blind to the needs of the "paying majority" as

Atlanta Race Directors Dave Murray and Ben Barron are going to ask their swim coordinator the night before the race—and if they don't get an answer that's very close to 39.37 inches, they're going to make a change real quick. Not that any combination of precautions would be enough to keep the hearts of the old-timers on the CAT Sports staff from beating hard if the sun comes up on the morning of June 20 and the beautiful lake is shrouded in fog. Talk about tension. The first smart aleck pro who says something stupid like "Where are the buoys?" is liable to be attacked by race officials, knocked senseless, then inflated and painted orange. Where are the buoys indeed.

Jim De Lacy puts it. I need to assure Jim that the pros do not, and will never, get paid at the expense of his or any other age group triathlete's race quality.

As far as tolerance and mutual respect—that part is up to you. I think it's a large and important piece in the Big Picture.

—Mike Plant

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Please be aware that you may be required to show photo I.D. for proof of age before being served. A race number isn't enough — bring your photo I.D. to the race if you think there may be any questions about your age.



Molina and Tinley at the tape in Atlanta in '84 — A dead heat.