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Best Feature Story

Julie Moss Found Ecstasy After Losing to Agony

TRIATHLON

By **ARMEN KETEVIAN**

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All you could think was, "Oh God, she's going to fall again. She's 15 feet from the finish line, 15 lousy feet from all the glory she deserves, and she's going to fall again. Dammit, she's not going to make it."

For nearly 12 hours, she had given everything the human spirit can ask of the human body. The race, this 140.6-mile torture test called the triathlon, had been hers since five miles into the marathon. She had passed the previous tests—the 2.4-mile swim in the Pacific, the 112-mile bike ride. Now, with 15 feet to go in the 26.2-mile run, her world was falling apart. The finish line was almost close enough to touch, but she looked as if she couldn't possibly get there.

Her legs, so rubbery they looked like jelly, shook and then surrendered.

She had fallen the first time 440 yards from the finish and sat there, dazed and staring at the street, unable to rise for nearly three minutes. Finally, she struggled to her feet and forged on.

With less than 100 yards left and her nearest competitor closing fast, she collapsed again. And got up. With less than 50 feet left, her legs gave way once more. Some race officials tried to help her to her feet so she could finish. Somehow, she picked herself up again.

Now, for the fourth time, she was down—a frail, crumpled heap on the ground, 15 pathetic feet from a dream.

The streets of Kona, on the Big Island of Hawaii, had been packed with partiers—"It looked like the Rose Parade," she would say later—but they had fallen silent. No celebration now. The surrealistic side of sport had taken over. The revelers could do nothing more than bear witness. A courageous Raggedy Ann look-alike seemed to be struggling for her life at dusk.

This happened February 6. Thirteen days later, in living rooms across America, millions of people watching ABC's "Wide World of Sports" saw the tapes of this utterly compelling spectacle and sat stunned, collectively thinking the only possible thought: "If anything is fair in this world, let Julie Moss get up right now. Let her walk, stagger or crawl those last 15 feet. Let her finish. Let her be the women's winner in the World Ironman Championships. Please."

In the background, a haunting, beautiful instrumental tune played on.

Commentators Diana Nyad and Jim Lampley said nothing. Minutes earlier, after the second fall, Nyad had delicately explained a substance on Moss' shorts, saying, "In situations of extreme stress you sometimes lose control over bodily functions."

There was nothing left to say now. It was only Moss and that mysterious music. All the crowd could do was hope.

"I couldn't see their faces," Moss said recently, drawing lines in the sand at Cardiff Beach near her home in Carlsbad as she thought back to the scenes that gripped a national television audience. "All I could feel was arms actually trying to lift me up and carry me along. The energy was unbelievable.

"Then I looked up and saw Kathleen cross the finish line."

The race was over. Kathleen McCartney of Costa Mesa had won. Moss could have quit. Instead, she started to crawl. Slowly, agonizingly—red head down, one thin arm in front of the other—she crawled.

No one can describe the sight of an athlete such as this, beyond the limits of exhaustion, crawling to a finish line. Nobody tried. Only the music played on.

One minute later, the odyssey ended. Julie Moss wobbled and fell once more. When she did, her left hand felt the finish line. No matter that she was second. Incredibly, she had made it.

You wanted to cry. Many did.

"Have you ever seen pictures of dead people?" she says now, her freckled face very much alive. "When I saw the picture of the finish line, I thought: 'That's what dead people look like.' But you know what? My eyes were closed, but I was smiling. I knew, finally, it was all over."

No it wasn't. The story of 23-year-old Julie Moss, who grew up loving the beach in Carlsbad, was only beginning. From that moment Moss, even more than winner McCartney, became to many viewers an instant and authentic heroine, an unforgettable inspiration.

Ever since February 21, when host Jim McKay closed the telecast by calling the 20-minute sequence "perhaps the most dramatic moment in the history of Wide World," and ABC News and Sports President Rooney Arledge went immediately to the phone to offer rare congratulations to the crew, the reaction had been astonishing.

Top-level executives of other networks, 40th-floor ivory tower

types who usually don't get excited about anything except Nielsen ratings, called ABC, moved and envious. A touched public called, too.

"We've had more calls on that show than any in recent memory," an ABC spokesman said. "I can't remember anything like it. It was an amazing thing . . . It gave people the impetus to go on with their own lives."

Add this: Every week for 12 years, a shot of Yugoslav ski jumper Vinko Bogatej crashing horribly has epitomized "the agony of defeat" in the opening montage of "Wide World." Suddenly, for the first time, there is talk around ABC of footage dramatic enough to compare with it.

In the last 34 days, Julie Moss has flown back to New York with McCartney, at ABC's expense, for a live, in-studio update with McKay on February 28; accepted an invitation to NBC's upcoming "Survival of the Fittest" competition with men's Ironman champion Scott Tinley (also of San Diego) in New Zealand this month; and turned down a guest spot on David Letterman's TV show. She was contacted about joining ProServ, a Washington, D.C., firm that represents athletes as diverse as Moses Malone, Tracy Austin and Tai Babilonia, and has been interviewed by dozens of newspapers around the country. She is making a motivational speech at a June IBM convention in Hawaii and picking clothes for magazine cover shots. *People* magazine thinks she is a celebrity.

She's just Julie now, sitting in gray blouse and jeans on the beach in Cardiff, not far from the house where she lives with her parents. She is 5 feet 5, skinny, and very cute in an athletic, outdoorsy way. Like many before her, she could be playing it cuter in order to magnify her moment, maneuvering to promote what might be shortlived star status. She hasn't done that. It just wouldn't be the Julie who has lived in San Diego County since fourth grade and majored in physical education at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. She leaves tomorrow, at NBC's expense, for New Zealand and the "Survival of the Fittest" show, and will stay for a month's bicycle tour. This summer she will work as a life guard and train for another go at the Ironman Triathlon in the fall.

She says the Letterman appearance was accepted, then turned down because, after watching the late-night show, she didn't like Letterman, or his act.

"I have a special feeling about that tape," she says. "I just thought it deserved better than late-night television."

McCartney has met with the William Morris agency, but Moss intentionally avoided a New York meeting with ProServ, the sports marketers.

"Basically that's not what I'm into," she says. "Do I promote and go while the going's good? I asked myself what's my goal. I know it's to do well in October (the next Ironman competition). I kind of had to draw the line."

The need to draw the line arose the day after the Ironman, in two

time zones. At an awards dinner in Hawaii her name was called, honoring her second place time of 11 hours and 50 minutes. Suddenly, spontaneously, some 2,000 people stood and cheered. Five hours east, the fire was beginning to burn at ABC.

As soon as Moss returned to Carlsbad, Nyad called and said the show was being moved up from an original April air date, that people were working around the clock to get it out.

ABC Production Assistant Jimmy Roberts, 25, was part of a hardened Hawaii film crew. "We don't get excited about too many things," he says. "But even before we edited the tape, Bryce (producer Bryce Weisman) knew we had something very special. All of us felt the same way. This was a story we were all very attached to."

Roberts worked six days, 10 a.m. to midnight, editing the tape. He found the mysterious background music, a Tim Weisberg song entitled "Dion Blue."

"I went to the ABC Music Library. Fifteen minutes after I got there, I found Weisberg's greatest hits album. I knew as soon as the needle hit that that was the song," he says. "Usually, you wait to see how it takes with the video. Not this time. There was no doubt about it."

A couple of days later Roberts was in putting sound to tape, working in a large audio screening room. "People had heard about the screening," he says. "It was packed. There were network executives . . . A whole other show in production at the time stopped and watched. There was nothing but silence. People were dumbfounded."

The New York trip with McCartney has been Moss's biggest thrill to date. Originally, in-studio interviews in Los Angeles were proposed. Arledge said the reaction was already too great. He wanted both women back in New York with McKay.

So a couple of California girls took to New York for a three-day freebie: Limousines, rooms at the Plaza ("Every woman in a full-length fur coat"), sightseeing at the World Trade Center, Tiffany's and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, lunch at the Russian Tea Room. Moss loved the city. And the city, as doesn't often happen in New York, loved her back.

A man in Macy's was the first to notice. A short time later, a businessman stopped Moss on the street. "Both men said, 'Saw you on TV and just wanted to tell you how wonderful you are and to welcome you to New York.'"

Four years ago, the year after the Ironman was created, Julie Moss couldn't run two miles without stopping. It was only last summer that she competed in a triathlon of any distance. Her best previous finish was third at the 23-mile Del Mar Days Triathlon in September.

It was after Del Mar that she decided to try Hawaii. Christmas killed any idea of December workouts. She surfed instead. In January she began cycling 100 miles a week, swimming five miles in a

pool and running 40 miles. Good mileage, but hardly worth consideration at Kona.

She arrived in Hawaii on January 21, 17 days before the Ironman. A transformation took place. Captivated by the other Kona crazies, she increased her weekly mileage dramatically: 300 miles on the bike, 10 miles in the water, another 50-60 on foot. "The energy level was incredible," she says. "Everywhere you went, someone was saying 'Let's go on a run or bike.' We worked out from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m."

"Psychologically, that's what separated me from those who were just trying to finish. I was ready to go."

In the swim, she ignored warnings and went out fast. At the half-way point she found herself all alone—a unique feat, considering there were 580 competitors. "I must have found a pocket between the real fast swimmers and the rest of the pack," she says. "I swam the last mile with no one around me."

Her time was 71 minutes, strong enough to nearly tie men's winner Tinley. She knew her time was well into the top 10, but how far, nobody knew. Later she realized she was third.

Halfway into the 112-mile ride along Kona's striking lava fields, Moss caught a tiring Shawn Wilson, pushing after leader Pat Hine, who was hindered by a stress fracture in her foot. Hine was barely walking when Moss passed her on an uphill grade, five miles into the marathon.

"It was weird," Moss remembers. "I never imagined I would be leading."

The ABC crew immediately made friends. "We're with you the rest of the way, Julie," one said.

About this time, Moss met Rowen Phillips, an Australian triathlete who was in Hawaii, alone to compete in the Ironman. "His accent was so thick I couldn't understand him. He kept talking. Finally I said, 'Look, I have trouble talking in a race. You talk, I'll listen.'"

"It's funny, one of the things he said to me was, 'I'll just hang around you to get my picture in the paper.'"

Phillips never left Moss' side for the rest of the race. As the drama wore on, he became the only constant in a sea of uncertainty. He gave her inspiration as she inspired millions.

"People have told me how we were working for each other," Moss says. "I guess we were. I know I could have run with someone else, a friend. But they may not have been as gallant, or whatever the word is, as Rowen. I guess I didn't want to disappoint him."

Experience is the unseen edge in any sport. It means more in the Ironman, where one must gauge personal time and distance, the ability to spring and relax, in relation to unseen leaders and followers.

Moss said she made her first mistake 16 miles into the marathon. Word came out McCartney was eight minutes behind. "I felt a need to keep pushing, to stay ahead," she says. "In retrospect, eight min-

utes might as well have been an hour. After that much time, there's no way you can gain on a person."

At 20 miles, after four miles of increased pace, Julie Moss' body broke down. "I hit the wall plain and simple," she says. "I realized right then I hadn't eaten enough. With the excitement and everything I was cutting down on food. I should have been eating more. You learn that with experience. But by then it was too late."

She began to feel lightheaded. She drank an electrolyte replacement fluid, watered-down Cokes, then full cans. Anything. "I was looking for any kind of buzz to keep me going," she says.

Nothing worked. Her legs stopped functioning. Phillips kept her walking, trotting, until there were only 440 yards to go.

"The first time I fell, I could see the finish," she says. She could also see the end. "I felt like I had nothing left. In my head, I wanted to get up and sprint out. My legs said, 'You're done for the day.'"

So she sat for almost three minutes. The ABC cameras, sensing the impending drama, closed in. Time and again, Moss struggled to rise, only to plop back to the pavement. "I kept trying to figure out different ways to get up. I was trying to get my legs underneath, to throw my weight forward."

Upright at last, she says she mistakenly "ran out a little too hard." She fell again.

The third time, 50 feet from the finish, the awful truth became inevitable. ABC flashed the fresh-faced McCartney onto the screen. She was less than 100 yards away. Race officials ran to Moss' side, attempting to lift her to her feet.

"They wanted to help me up, and I didn't want them to. But then I lost my balance and had to reach back for them. It killed me to do that. By reaching back I was saying, 'I need your help.'"

Somehow she lurched forward. A young Hawaiian woman tried to hand her a flower. A hand unconsciously brushed it away. "I knew I couldn't accept it until I crossed the finish line," she says.

Seconds later, she was down for the final time.

Would she crawl? From the corner of the screen came McCartney. She went past, to the finish line. It didn't matter anymore. Yet to Julie, it did.

"It was really easy to crawl," she says. "I thought, 'It's only 15 feet. I didn't know where the next girl was, but I didn't want to finish third. Not now. I didn't care if it was embarrassing. A lot of what happened was embarrassing. I didn't care what people thought. I wanted to finish that race.'"

The future for Julie Moss? It is hard to say. She does not want to be overwhelmed by celebrity. Her boyfriend, Reed Gregerson, who finished fifth in the Ironman, will accompany her. They had broken up during intense triathlon training, only to reunite that awards night in Hawaii.

How much does she want to win the next Ironman? Listen to her: "You know the neatest thing? An athlete rarely has a chance to

take him or herself to the limit, and then go on. I know if I ever have to, I can do it. I can take it to the very end. Not many people can say that. And it's a feeling I can hang on to forever."

Judge's Comments

Strip away the hoopla of the Super Bowl, the flowing drinks and tasty hors d'oeuvres of the Kentucky Derby, the bigger-than-life aura of the World Series and the essential element of sports is revealed. The moment of truth, one person against himself or herself. When Julie Moss reached deep within herself at the World Ironman Championships, the drama was genuine. Had it not been for television's insatiable appetite for sports, this drama might have been frozen only in the minds of the relative handful of spectators.

Thanks to Armen Keteyian, we, too, are privy to Julie Moss' agony. The writing compels us to extend her a hand, just as the spectators wanted to do. We, like those privileged to be there, must only watch: "The revelers could do nothing more than bear witness. A courageous Raggedy Ann look-alike seemed to be struggling for her life at dusk."

We are uplifted by her spirit: "Moss could have quit. Instead, she started to crawl. Slowly, agonizingly—red head down, one thin arm in front of the other—she crawled."

We are buoyed by the response: "At an awards dinner in Hawaii, her name was called, honoring her second-place time of 11 hours and 50 minutes. Suddenly, spontaneously, some 2,000 people stood and cheered."

We could ask for more; we could get to know Julie Moss better. But let's be thankful for this feast of athletic courage. Keteyian seized on a story about the essential challenge in sports. He recreated the drama in such a way that even those among us who saw the ABC film can still appreciate it. Even more, we can savor it. We can reread it and let the images linger in our minds. On television, it's gone. That's the power of the written word, and Keteyian harnessed it for us all to enjoy.

Julie Moss starred in her own "Chariots of Fire," and no script writer had to embellish the details. This is real, right down to the second-place finish. She placed first in courage. The story places first because it permits us to share the moment.