



Thirty-Three and Change

BY SCOTT TINLEY

I'm nearing Mile 20 of the marathon at the 1983 Ironman in Kona. It's not called the world championship but anybody who counts knows it's the cruelest, baddest, toughest one-day show in all of endurance sports. The man who leads me by nearly six minutes with just more than six miles left knows that. And I know it too. But in that one-minute-per-mile chasm lay the difference—Dave Scott respects it, but I only acknowledge it.

We'd started the run together; had ridden the last few miles through town trying to size up each other's heart, soul and lactic acid level. I was the runner learning to swim well, Dave was the swimmer who had run 2:46 in his first marathon. We'd both won the Ironman in that previous and anomalous year, 1982, when races had been held in both February and October.

This was before Mark Allen had lifted his Kona curse, before Scott Molina discovered salt pills and before the Europeans became enamored with the sport and invaded Kona in all their underwear and Jesus-sandal glory.

This race was bigger than a world title. This time the El Dorado kingdom was at stake—

Northern versus Southern California, two golden places in triathlon history, two blond kids chasing some Valhalla of their own making.

As the afternoon clouds rolled in and my confidence slipped away, I could only focus on how easy it was to lose. Dave Scott had garnered the fastest split times in all three sports at the October 1982 race. I kept thinking that when I had told a reporter that Dave was now "the man" I would soon regret the assignment of that label.

We'd passed the airport turn-off on our way back to the pier, but I wondered if I were the only one who could see out over the lower Hamakua Coast and all that it would come to mean to both of us. There was a helicopter hovering in the distance but it appeared as a bothersome fly that won't leave your peripheral vision regardless of your swatting hands.

I came up on Dave's spotter, Pat Feeney, a likable professor of physics who could look at my stride length and calculate the amount of potassium, water and sheer luck that Dave would have to ingest to win the event.

Pat—I gave him my best puppy dog look—How far up is Dave?

Nothing.

I watched the whiz kid plug some numbers into a breadbox-sized computer and jump into a waiting town car.

It's meaningless, I kept telling myself. There is no way that you can catch Dave. He's "the man." You told everybody that. And had meant it.

Between Mile 20 and Mile 23 my world was doing its best to shift on its axis. *There's something here for the taking*, one voice would say.

You can't take what you didn't earn, another voice would argue. Then a third:

Do you know the difference between dignity and illusion?

My legs were pounding and my new white shoes had red racing stripes streaking from the toe box. *Funny, I thought, I've never seen red running shoes before.*

That's when my wife, Virginia, appeared as some haunting apparition. It was

just after Mile 23 and I had concluded the worst. Standing on the side of the road, no obvious vehicle in sight, just an empty, pre-Costco Kona landscape and the hint of a stale onshore breeze.

Was it an illusion or an omen? A ghost who seemed to know tenacity better than I knew myself.

Dave doesn't look so good, she said. *He's not running as perky as you.*

Perky? Where's your computer and your poker face? Can you please just leave me alone? I'll see you at the finish line, OK? Just a few more miles to stomp on my integrity.

Two-twenty, she said, *you're only two minutes and 20 seconds behind Dave.*

Was that possible? And if so, what the hell am I supposed to do with that information?

There are times in an athlete's life that polarize all that happens in their careers, chasm moments that you can still viscerally evoke even in those sunset years when a plaid blanket covers your spindly and aged legs that rock in a corner of the frighteningly still room. Like a death, a birth or an airplane near-disaster, nothing you do afterward will ever be the same as before.

I take a deep breath and jump.

I don't care if it's 2:20 or 22 minutes. If I'm going to lose I'll do it on my own terms. An increasing tempo catalyzed by a thing much deeper than the self-pity that had drained my resolve, something primal and essential began to rise from the blood in my shoes. And when it settled somewhere between my heart and my eyes I realized that there are both tragic irony and great lessons in the world of sport.

If a 6:30 mile pace feels better than 7:30, why not run six minutes or faster? What is pain but a feeling as transitory as regret or guilt? It's always better to burn out than to fade away.

I round the corner onto Ali'i Drive and know that the sport and my respect for it would never be the same. I'd tanked, and the knowledge of that would drive me, empower me, haunt me for the next 15 years.

I saw Dave being loaded onto a medical stretcher before I saw the finish line.

Thirty-three seconds. Might as well have been 33 years.

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I take a deep breath and jump.

He'd taken his body to places that only a daring mind would allow. I envied him for his strength and loved him for the gift that it had given me. ▀