

## **Ironman: More than the Sum of its Parts**

With October's 2001 full moon behind us, another season has come to a close. This year's edition of Ironman demonstrated beauty and brutality; beauty in the spirit that pervades this unique event, and brutality in the extreme conditions that the athletes were forced to contend with.

Like many of you, I find this period of calm after the storm an opportune time to reflect on lessons learned. Success in an all-encompassing event like Ironman rests on three support pillars:

- \* A training program based upon sound training principles
- \* Proper application of those training principles
- \* A high degree of mental focus

In previous articles I have discussed certain key training principles and their application. This article will discuss the essential element of mental focus.

While no Ironman is ever easy and without its tests of mental fortitude, Hawaii 2001 was especially cruel in the punishment it wreaked upon its participants. While as a spectator I found myself having to struggle simply to remain standing amidst the punishing winds, I realized more than ever how swim, bike, & run encapsulates only a small portion of this event and what it takes to succeed.

My first cycling coach, and later a mentor in many areas of my life, climbed Mount Kilimanjaro this past year as part of an extended travel period where he sought out self discovery and understanding through immersion in other cultures. The lessons Jeff learned in his journey up the fabled African peak are universally instructive in gaining the mental focus critical to person achievement.

I believe that the sum of these lessons can be forged into a powerful and enabling tool.

### **Lessons from Kilimanjaro**

#### **1. One foot at a time**

*"It is incredible how much distance we can travel or how much we can achieve when we are willing to begin the journey and continue on a path simply placing one foot in front of the other."*

Hawaii has as many stories of incredible journeys as it has competitors. Yet they all begin and end with taking a step and moving forward. Perhaps the most literal example of this lesson occurs shortly before midnight on race day. I never cease to be amazed and inspired by these finishers.

#### **2. The human body is incredible - we should be in awe every day**

*"It is amazing to watch your body adapt to altitude and to recognize your body's efforts to send clear signals. One of the most amazing experiences is to sense the difference between how you feel at say 16,000 feet when you are going up the mountain and then how you feel at 16,000 feet when you come down the mountain. Coming down you feel like you are swimming in oxygen ... it feels incredible. Going up you feel like you are sucking air through a straw."*

*To me, this is a metaphor for life. The exact same external situation can create a totally different response (physically and/or emotionally) depending on the context and experience that comes before it. It is very empowering to believe that you can change your body's function and your emotional response to the same stimulus. It is all about conditioning and perspective."*

Natascha Badmann understands Jeff's lessons better than anyone I have ever seen at Ironman. She smiles her way through gale-force winds, listens to the ocean sing to her in the oppressively hot Energy Lab, and generally exults in whatever the experience is that presents itself. Yes, Natascha is a gifted athlete, but it is not her swim/bike/run prowess that puts her in a league of her own so much as her overwhelmingly positive response to any adversity that crosses her path.

On the other end of the competitive spectrum, an athlete I coached gave me another lesson in perspective in his written race report. While in this very article I have described conditions as brutal, worst-ever, etc., Ironman James Derrick's perspective was that the winds were "cooling." The grasshopper instructs the Master in this case.

### **3. A sense of blessing and re-affirmation of our fragile nature**

*"It is funny. I think we often gain a very inflated view of man's ability to control and manage nature. When we are traveling at high altitude in a wilderness area such as this, it becomes clear quickly, that we are not in control of our destiny. As the African's say when asked about almost any goal or possible achievement 'God willing'.*

*On a mountain like Kilimanjaro, you are not in control. You must be willing to flow with the mountain's energy and accept the power of this force. Sometimes, what we want is just not meant to be ... Our souls and hearts can be strong! Yet, our bodies are fragile and vulnerable. Sometimes a wilderness experience provides strong "shock" treatment to shake this into our heads and help us sense the great blessing in what we have before us each and every day."*

To me, Jeff's lesson of the power of nature and our relative insignificance in its face, strong heart and mind not withstanding, describes one of our sport's greatest athlete's personal history with Ironman.

Six-time Ironman winner, Mark Allen, has spoken often of the need to respect the power of the Island that is Hawaii. It took Mark many years and failed attempts to conquer Ironman. He would win virtually every race in the sport, but would trip, stumble, and fall every October.

When Mark has spoken or written of his breakthrough race in 1989, he speaks very little of his swim, bike, or amazing 2hr38min marathon split. Instead, he speaks humbly of the harsh lessons he endured before learning to accept nature's terms and his relative frailty against such an omnipotent force.

Every year I watch and listen to athletes who have either set time goals for Hawaii as one of their key season objectives or are disappointed with a strong physical performance but "slow" time. Listen to Jeff's words and Mark Allen's example.

### **4. The power of determination and perseverance**

*"Ron the oldest member of our group and all of the other participants in this journey were challenged. Sometimes you have to want something badly enough to get through the bumps and dips in the road that will encourage you to quit. Ron will be in the hospital for a few days getting tests and therapy and, most likely, will have a cast placed on his ankle.*

*Beth Anne (the woman who was hit by rock) will have vivid memories of a horrific moment that almost changed her life. Two of the other members of our group went through a brutal series of falls and physical challenges, but they were committed to reaching toward this goal. I certainly had my own hurdles to crawl over, push down, or wobble around.*

*For me, this is a powerful lesson - the sense of how much we can accomplish if we commit ourselves to a goal. We have to want it though ... the bigger and more challenging the goal, the more likely the strength and scale of the upcoming obstacles.*

*The human spirit is amazing ... I was inspired by the commitment and effort I saw during this climb. It seems to me that passion, hope, and a belief that the goal can be reached are essential ingredients in this mix. Oh, yes, some partnership and support are also much valued."*

Karen Smyers' trials and tribulations of the past several years have been well chronicled. A hamstring severed by falling glass, a losing encounter with a semi-truck, and membership in the club of cancer survivors. Grace and humor have characterized all of her efforts in overcoming these obstacles.

Karen returned to Hawaii with hopes of replicating her dramatic 1995 win. A strong swim and strong bike ride had her in the hunt. Yet on the run she was clearly off her game and struggling with stomach difficulties. She forged ahead and battled.

At mile 10 I watched her vomit profusely, not very gracefully I might add, before continuing on with a shaky step and diminished pace. Fernanda Keller roared by her and the rest of the women's field bore down on this wounded warrior. Fast forward to mile 19 and the exit of the Energy Lab and it is a rejuvenated Smyers who is striding in front of the vaunted Brazilian closer.

Perseverance and determination describe Karen's gutsy run performance, just as they do her remarkable career.

### **5. The power of a helping hand, a sense of confidence, and some encouragement from someone you trust**

*"I am fairly certain that I would not have successfully made this climb to the summit of Kilimanjaro without a group of people who chose to encourage and support me in my effort. There is something magical about feeling that you are not alone in any quest, something that makes you feel a sense of encouragement.*

*We all have doubts and uncertainties about our capabilities to accomplish powerful goals and commitments that exist in different parts of our life. We often have some level of fear and a caution about continuing the down a vulnerable path ... especially if the goals we are pursuing are big and require us to stretch out of our comfort zone.*

*My guide Simon's words transformed my walk up the mountain. If he had not demonstrated a raw and unwavering confidence in my ability to achieve this goal, I doubt I would have continued. Everything in my body was telling me to quit. The same has been true in many other areas of my life."*

Competing in an Ironman can seem like a lonely and solitary experience. Yet, as a spectator the past several years, I have been tremendously moved by the unconditional support and encouragement that the athletes receive from their friends, family, and loved ones.

You can see it in the dawn hours before the gun goes off as you watch the supporters scramble to find a viewing spot, study the race program, look nervously at their watches, talk nervously to each other and embrace, comment on their loved one's training, all the while anxiously gazing out at the swimmers treading water.

They may not have a race number, but they are IN this race with you, much more than you can realize as you fight your way through the waves, howling winds, and beating sun. Remember this before, during, and after the race.

In summary, if Ironman is to be the means with which you explore the faraway frontiers of your human potential, then a high degree of mental focus is an essential part of the process. Just as the physical disciplines of swim, bike, and run require drill-work and practice, so too does preparing yourself for the mental rigors of this extraordinary event. May you use these lessons as you strive for your goals.