

by *Scott Tinley*

Ironman World Champion, 1982 & 1985
Ironman Hall of Famer; Triathlon Hall of Famer

"Between the idea and reality...falls the shadow." -- T.S. Eliot, The Hollow Men

Triathlon is sport of contrasts. It is a sport laden with beautiful and healthy people challenging themselves in precocious events. It is a sport rife with titanium dreams and second-skin focus. Body fat comes in single digits, glutes are ball peen-hammered, and bottles are opened in the spaces between abs. And in more recent years, body types have had less bearing on participation than the quest for something immaterial and intangible.

Against some odds, triathlon has become egalitarian.

It is a sport that conjures images of Caribbean races with magenta sunsets and rum drink finish lines; mind-pictures we spin while riding our bikes in the dank basement of a Minnesota winter.

It is a sport whose greatest event is held in a sleepy seaside town with boarded-up boutiques and a Wal-Mart on the bike course. The word Kona has become more prayer than place, more of a direction than an arrival. Triathlon is hard work with great rewards. It is as easy as we allow it to be or as tough as we can take. For many athletes, the greatest amount of pleasure is before and after the event. In between, it hurts.

It is a sport of youthful dreams and old-school training programs, of five-pound bike frames, four-figure fantasy camps, and three-digit Ironman times. It is a sport of long, arduous solo efforts but also of cannonballs into the water on our friend's head in between swim sets. But where triathlon is most contrasted is in how we purposely blur our quests with our illusions; where we release in our dreams what we can't in the mirror. And somehow, amidst our own athletic image shape-shifting, we cling to both.

It's a sport of mindful what-ifs.

Dreams and realities

In triathlon we seek processed perfection which is still a process and some are left digging gopher holes in their minds. The real world of sport is not in making it big or simply making do, but somewhere in between where dreams and realities shake hands across the Great Divide. It's not just surviving when the world kicks your ass, but dragging yourself up, out and beyond that functional disenchantment when sport and life get stale and you wake up hung over from a blended miasma of regularity.

Triathlon is anything but regular.

There was a period where I took the sport for granted--my smooth, wide bike-lane-of-a-life rolled past a So Cal coastline, sunshine on the back of my neck, training partners listening to my same boring stories. I had tin foil on the windows of my insight and my focus was on going fast and in one direction. Smile for the cameras if you had the time. But the quest for the greatness had gotten too close to the reality that I wasn't. Still, the shadow of illusion had created its own cooling effect. Many of us need to get out of the tepid heat of our own everydayness. A little well-orchestrated self-subversion can't be all made, can it?

Settling without giving up

This morning I was preparing for my two mile run. That's right, two miles: one out, one back. But it started to rain and I couldn't find an umbrella. That's right, an umbrella. But that's a lie. And before I kicked the dog and swore that my wife had

brewed decaf and generally became again that rock upon which I'd broken myself; and before I sabotaged a joyful 20 minutes tramping around in the mud; I reminded myself that it is good to be beset with the ironies of life.

Somewhere, I convinced myself, Sisyphus must be happy.

If I believe that if I can be okay with two miles, I'm avoiding the antiseptic training pressures that have gentrified multisport hearts and minds. The reality is not that I don't have time for three, or the energy for four, but that I only want to run two miles. An illusion would be that I needed to run more. For today, the Quest and the Illusion had brokered a climate of glasnost and joined forces in the sweet irony that if I changed my mind mid-run, I would go 10. Or 12.

Multisport is just that; multiple options.

If triathlon allows us to dream big and go short, to ride fast downhill and walk up the other side, so be it. We might lower our flags to our fears but that doesn't mean that they have beaten us; only that our ship has not sunk.

Keeping the dream in mind

To strive for something, to really go after it without the mediation of Dig-Me-Beach-Nightmares or faux Ironman-ifications is to be organically honest with yourself. That kind of mythic-rooted quest has sustained personal and spiritual campaigns since the Grail was more than the subject of a popular play. And Illusion, well, that's the malleable, incongruous entity that can sneak up on us and commit determination's perfect murder. Most of us endurance athletes have taught ourselves the difference between the map and the territory; we know how to lie to our legs when it counts in the race standings

but lie prostrate to the world when it doesn't. Self-deceit in sport is only a crown of thorns when you allow your own blood to blur your vision.

I like this sport for the same reasons that Steinbeck liked Cannery Row; for the "tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots." But also for its ability to let us both dream and get caught sleeping in. I don't like the illusion of the body politic as much as I like the drone of an angry peloton. The illusion is that quadriceps and mammary glands don't wax and wane. The reality is that the momentary bliss of a true sporting experience is forever.

Scott Tinley won the Ironman World Championship twice (1982, 1985) and the Ironman World Series three times. He was inducted into both the Triathlon and Ironman Hall of Fame upon retirement in 1999.

Near the end of his professional career he helped found and develop the sport of offroad triathlon and continues to co-own and manage the longest running offroad triathlon in the world, Scott Tinley's Adventures in San Luis Obispo, California.