

On the People Behind the Athlete

In our *what-have-you-done-for-me-lately* world of triathlon, we often forget the Other, that person or persons living behind the doors of our individual hubris, that secreted cheerleader who polishes our medals but never wins one of their own. How did we ever find ourselves so lucky to gain their undivided support while we seek only our personal acclaim? Triathlon is a selfish sport. This is how it works.

Meet at a health club.

You both wear tight black pants with recognizable logos and are pulled like magnets toward the last available spin bike. The class is full and he says "You go ahead," that he has been looking for an excuse to ride outside in the sun and the chill.

"After all," he smiles, "45* is quite bearable with booties, long-fingered gloves, and a flask of Jack Daniels."

You thought it was a sweet gesture, a refreshingly-chivalrous sign.

He smelled better than what you remember of the last one.

Keep running into him or her or it. You aren't sure just yet and this excites you. The latest time was at the grocery store. You liked his/her eclectic cart of fresh, healthy food, dog biscuits, and good red wine. Laugh at his joke about the wine being for the dog.

Start dating. Six thirty, Friday night is fine, just a casual meal, maybe stop by a party at one of his training partners. He makes sure you know its six thirty *P.M.*

Think how nice it is to finely be dating a person with a young person's body, even if they drop you off by ten o'clock.

"Hey, it's early," you suggest, "I know of a great band playing at Jimmy's Grill and..."

"Boy, that sounds fun but I told the group I'd meet them at the pool at 6:00 *A.M.* for a long descending ladder."

Wonder if they'll need that long ladder to fix a broken drain at the bottom of the pool. A hole in the ground taking away something that is better left for the world to enjoy. Admire their talent but still be disappointed that they won't take you dancing. Look at their tight jeans and wonder if they earned them.

It starts like that-just a few little things-they have six pair of shoes on the front porch. He shaves his legs and can't *really* say why? She lets all of her hair grow and knows exactly why. His Saturdays are spent on a bike seat. Other women sometimes ride along. She wants to be that Other woman but maybe not for the same reason.

Why would they always ride in groups, like a pack of wild animals? You'll never now. You can't ride or hunt wounded prey that fast; you found that out the hard way. *Dropped* was the term they used, discarded like yesterday's news and old meat.

What could they ever find to talk about for five hours? Think your mother would make a good triathlete for this reason alone. Your butt hurts just thinking about it. But still, there is something desirable about that hard/chiseled looks and what spandex can do in the afternoon sun.

When he asks you to go swimming with him, feel better but then watch that joy melt as guilt moves in, then embarrassment about not being able to swim as fast as the slowest swimmer.

Get out, sit in the spa for what seems like an hour and feel like crying. Dislike that feeling. Wonder where it came from. You were a pretty good swimmer in third grade, made it all the way across the pool

twice without stopping. You were proud of yourself then. Guilt sucks.

But who started this thing? Vow to fight that feeling. You're a successful executive, had a decent marriage for a while. A couple of cool kids in college. Missing that send-off for the 8th 100 yard sprint on the 1:30 won't change who you are.

They never stop; wind-up energizer bunnies back and forth, back and forth. And what does "on the top" really mean?

Okay, so he's kind of driven, but you can tell that he really likes you, though you'd be hard pressed to explain just what it is that makes him happy to be with you-and that troubles you.

You give him/her a Big Chance.

The day after they moved in, the number of shoes on the door multiplies by three. Bite your tongue, oh well. At least they look new. And some wimpy crook might think twice about some buffed guy or gal chasing them all the way around the block.

After you get a promotion at work, your responsibilities increase and you won't be able to make those spin classes. Your partner seems happy for the promotion but disappointed about your resulting lack of exercise. He knows you feel better when can get to the gym. It's kind of cute and you assure him you won't gain 30 pounds. But he has this faraway look in his eye, as if he wants you to sign a binding contract to that agreement.

And those tight jeans...

Get mad one night when they won't go for a walk with you; two lousy blocks after dinner. He says walking seems so, uh... *pedestrian*.

Sneak a glance at his checkbook and be shocked at what he had paid for that shiny new ten-speed bike. Your first car only cost half that much.

As summer rolls around, bring up the topic of a vacation, maybe a cabin in the mountains with no other distractions. Watch his face try to hide the tearing internal conflict, like two leashed dogs running in opposite directions.

Feral discontent.

"Well, I was kind of thinking about this race out west. It would be easy to qualify and..."

Qualify for what, you think? The most narcissistic person you know?

But then that guilt creeps in again, like Frost's fog on little cat feet, and you tell them that would be fine, just damn fine.

They fall asleep early, every night. You ask them at breakfast on a day when they are scheduled for "active rest."

"Do you wish I was a serious athlete too? Would you like it if I could run around and around that track with all your friends? Would we be a 'couple' then?"

And you wonder if they'd want you more if you could kick their skinny ass.

There is a silence between the two of you, a chasm moment that could extend well into the next relationship. Outside, a cloud has covered the sun and you hear a chainsaw buzzing down the block.

What could be their possible answer?

--"Oh yeah, but you'll have to be committed. Probably quit your job."

--"I kind of like the fact we have our separate interests. It makes the relationship more...stimulating."

--"Oh don't be silly. You wouldn't like it, you know, being committed to performance. Track workouts aren't exactly jogging."

The answers are large and deep, made up but true. The sport means more to him than sport; like being in love with the idea of love. And you decide that is one of the things you love about *them*-all that passion.

But so misanthropically dreamt by them and woken by you.

They see the mystery in your eyes and try to unravel it.

It won't always be this way, they say. Just something I have to do. You believe them and wonder if they're trying to make up for being the last one chosen for kick ball in the 3rd grade.

That night they ask you to go for a walk but you tell them you're busy, you're online buying yourself a \$6,000 bike, but they could help by measuring your inseam.

There's an innocent laugh from the other room and you order race wheels too. Then post your Match.com profile looking for "a *fire-watcher* or an old school *luthier*, someone stable and unencumbered in their own skin."

Just someone who sees a forest and some trees and the wood that will make sweet music if correctly shaped and glued. Not trail run options.