

Tinley Talks
Bodywear

My neighbor can't run anymore. The soft tissue around his knees isn't torn, tattered, ripped or scarred. It's just gone; like some magician from his youth had waved a handkerchief over his leg and shazaam--thirty years and thirty-thousand miles later, the head of the tibia is staring at the lower part of the femur like two old neighbors tearing down an ivy-laden fence and introducing themselves.

The cool part is that he's okay with it.

"This knee has supported me for much longer than I would've expected," he spoke as if giving a eulogy for a fallen soldier. "He's contributed to the cause, done his time and now I'll let him rest." I almost wanted to take my hat off and sing *Amazing Grace*.

What's amazing to me is the relationship that some athletes have with their body. On one hand it makes perfectly good sense: the musculoskeletal and cardiovascular systems that propel them around 250 pound linebackers and up and over seven foot forwards is the vehicle that provides them with not only their livelihood but their identity and their feelings of validity as an athlete and a human being with a particular purpose on this planet. Arms and legs aren't body parts, they're an extension of their psyche and their soul.

Or are they?

Consider what happens when an athlete has not enjoyed a lifetime of use as my neighbor had, when accelerated time and tragedy take away what their maker provided them right from the factory. We've all seen it. We all know someone. They can be as insightful as One-arm Willie Stewart or the unvanquishable Jim McLaren.

"Fine," they will say with the honesty of a saint, "Take my arm, my legs, what ever; but what I have inside that counts, ain't nobody gonna' touch."

Or they may look at a career-ending ankle surgery and limp out to the barn to have a .44 caliber bullet for breakfast. It's difficult to predict, though any number of hindsighters will say they saw it coming. Sometimes we will be affected, but mostly not. Too many other messages tell us otherwise—we need to look good, to be whole to succeed in life. When you're raised with *Barbie and Ken* and surrounded by air-brushed images from *Men's Health* and *Cosmo*, it's hard to keep it real.

Sometimes we are pragmatic though, other times obsessive, but we are constantly changing the relationship we have with our own bodies. How we look does affect how we feel. And for the athlete, that process is often more dynamic and intense than a sedentary individual.

Athlete's bodies have become part of the economic and cultural landscape. It's not only about skill and performance anymore. It's about looking good while we just do it. Athlete's bodies are objectified, aestheticized and commodified—in that order. In other words, they are separated from the human as a living being, looked upon as art and beauty and then sold in every form from masculinized Gladiator to sexualized pin-up doll. If you aren't talented enough to win but you have the goods elsewhere, you can still become a talking-head commentator or do a centerfold spread. Anna Kournakova vs. Herself: Beauty is in the size of the bank account.

The body has many roles to play and society is often the curtained puppeteer holding the strings. But we all have a little Pinocchio in us, that innate need to go it alone. We are tossed into the fray of decision--what do we think of our bodies? Are they simply a carrier for our minds and souls? Are they meant to carry us across oceans and continents and finish lines and the bathroom floors? Are they meant only to attract the opposite sex and then procreate the species? Or some unanswerable amalgamation of the above?

Multi-sport athletes have a reputation for narcissism, for an overt focus on how they appear while they perform. Any number of participants will justify this with comments like, "I worked hard to look this good, to go this fast. I'll flaunt it as much as I want." To be sure, there is nothing wrong with showing outward pride for the results of inward hard work. It's natural. But if we are speaking about unique personal relationships with the body, when taken beyond the norm, this seems a bit incestuous to be healthy. But serious triathletes have often traded health for fitness, only learning the difference when tragedy comes knocking as a stress fracture or chronic fatigue.

Then there are those people like Rudy Garcia-Tolsen, whose story is well-known, and Dr. Beck Wethers of the infamous 1996 Mt. Everest tragedy when five climbers died in a sudden storm. The Dallas physician, who lost all or parts of several fingers, toes and facial parts, reportedly told an interviewer who'd inquired about the multiple challenges he faced without digits and dexterity, "It's only body parts."

Indeed. But those parts are hard to come by, even with reconstructive surgery. Wethers and Garcia-Tolsen, who opted to have his deformed legs removed as a child so that he could "be more like the other kids," certainly took the high road. When set up against elective surgery that alters such horrible maladies as size 34 B breasts and replaces them with a socially-desirable 37 D, one wonders just how they should go about this relationship with their body. But if the elective rekindles lost feelings of self-esteem and results in better lives, so be it. There are no right answers, only personal choices.

What's wrong is when our feelings toward our bodies and what we can or cannot do with them are manipulated by the media. There is no difference between a teenager with purple hair and the first Ironman competitors—somebody said it couldn't or shouldn't be done. And so they went and did it. And I applaud them all for it.

I hope that when my joints grind away like chalkboard fingernails and my face looks like the dashboard of a '62 Buick left out in the Arizona sun, and my kids have to help me onto my three wheel bicycle, I will be able to say that she gave me a good ride.

And the stuff inside that counts? Ain't nobody gonna' take away. It's only body parts; ashes to ashes and in between we did some cool stuff.

I'll do my best to push that day out beyond the horizon. Because the body really is an amazing thing, as fragile and resilient and wondrous as it is. But I don't want to be a servant to it either, especially if some meathead on a digital screen is telling me I won't be happy unless my teeth are as white as his. Left to bake under that desert sun, the dry meatless skull holding those teeth in place, they'll bleach to the same shade. And I'll be long gone, my neighbor and I swapping old training stories.