

THE GRIP 6

STORIES & COMPILATION BY BOB BABBITT

PHOTO BY DAVE EPPERSON

It's funny how things turn out. Throughout the 1980's, to win the Ironman World Championship, you had to dethrone the Lord of the Lava, the one and only Dave Scott. After Mark Allen finally defeated his long-time rival in 1989 in the classic IronWar battle, he came back to win five more titles, but each time the person who finished in second place was different. In 1990 it was two-time Ironman World Champion Scott Tinley, in 1991 it was Aussie Greg Welch, in 1992 it was Cristian Bustos from Chile, in 1993 it was Pauli Kiuru of Finland and in 1995, in Allen's last ever race, it was Germany's Thomas Hellriegel. This feature, The Grip 6, showcases the articles I wrote after each of those races. I hope you enjoy this trip back in time!

IRONWAR / 1989

THE EQUALIZER / 1990

CHECKMATE / 1991

CON MUCHO BUSTOS / 1992

THE KILLING FIELDS / 1993

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE / 1995



THIS IS AN UP-CLOSE-AND-PERSONAL LOOK AT THE ZEN-LIKE FOCUS OF TWO-TIME DEFENDING CHAMPION MARK ALLEN AS HE AWAITS THE START OF THE 1991 IRONMAN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP. PHOTO BY TONY DIZINNO

BY BOB BABBITT

CHECKMATE

THE TWO ARE LOCKED TOGETHER IN MORTAL COMBAT. SWEAT BEADS UP ON BOTH FOREHEADS AS THEY SURVEY THE BOARD AND SCAN THE MEMORY BANKS. THEY SEARCH ENDLESSLY, DESPERATELY FOR THE BACK BREAKER, THE KILLER, THE PIÈCE DE RÉSISTANCE... THE MOTHER OF ALL MOVES.

PAWNS, ROOKS AND CASTLES ARE WILLINGLY SACRIFICED FOR THE WIN, THE ONLY GOAL THAT MATTERS. WHEN YOU ARE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE, THE PAUSE, THAT CALM BEFORE THE STORM, CAN SEEM LIKE FOREVER. A DEEP BREATH IS TAKEN AND "THE MOVE" IS FINALLY MADE. A SMILE PLAYS AT THE CORNER OF THE LIPS OF THE MOVER AND THE WORD THAT ALWAYS FOLLOWS THE MOTHER OF ALL MOVES IS SPOKEN LOUDLY AND CLEARLY, ENDING THE GAME, ENDING THE SPECULATION, ENDING ANY WHAT IFS. SO GOES THE GAME OF CHESS. AND SO GOES THE YEARLY GAME KNOWN AS THE GATORADE IRONMAN.

Dave Scott was the master of Iron chess. He always made the right move at the right time. King to Queen's Highway. That was the move, and he could do it in his sleep. He owned the Queen Kaahumanu Highway. That's where he sought out and destroyed Mark Allen year after year after year. No matter how many times Allen raced against "The Man," the result was the same.

Until 1989. On October 14, 1989, Allen finally made that final move. It came on the Queen's Road, 24½ miles into the marathon. And Allen became the new IronKing.

If his legs weren't so darn tight, two-time defending champion Mark Allen might have chuckled at the ironic way Ironman 1991 was playing itself out. Just in front of him, maybe 200 yards up the road, was the 1990 World

Triathlon champion, one Greg Welch of Australia. Welch had bypassed a chance to repeat as world champion in his homeland the week before to go head-to-head with Mark Allen at the Ironman.

During his epic battles with Ironlegend Dave Scott throughout the 1980s, Allen learned the hard way that the best place to be when you're the pursuer is in the neighborhood, within range. Off the front isn't necessary. It shows concern for your opponent, that you feel like you need to be in the lead. Going off the front, which Welch had been doing for most of the day, can be foolhardy. Mark Allen had learned from racing the master.

The Iron chess game is one that is incredibly demanding and at the same time requires the three p's: patience, patience and more patience. Allen had played the Greg Welch role too many times himself not to recognize it.

Watching Welch must have brought back a cavalcade of memories. Remember that time I went off the front in 1984? That was a real side slapper. I had a 12-minute lead going into the run and Dave mowed me down by mile 13. In 1987, I ran through town with Dave, smack dab down the middle of Alii Drive. But the pace seemed a tad on the pedestrian side. I dropped Dave as fast as CBS dropped Pee Wee and his Playhouse, built a six-minute cushion — then watched it disintegrate. Now 1989, that was a good year; that one was a keeper. I finally learned my lesson. I was still the rook. He was still the King. I knew my place and, more importantly, I knew what it would take to beat the guy. I was his clone, his shadow all day long. I kept my target right in front of me on the bike. We came off the bike together and I was resigned to a pretty awful reality: I was going to have to run with the guy the entire way until one of us died. We went out at a 2:40 pace and hung there all day long. With most people I've raced with, you can feel

them lose it, you can sense when they're about to crack. Not Dave. He was like a rock, never faltering, never giving an inch. But I was ready. I knew when to make my move, 24½ miles into the run on a small uphill. If he was still close, that's where I planned on finishing him.

Everything worked out perfectly in 1989.

But this is 1991, October 19 to be exact. How are the conditions? Not as fast as 1989, but a ton faster than the blast furnace and wind tunnel Kona served up in 1990.

Greg Welch surprised everyone but himself by making up 45 seconds on Allen and catching him early in the bike. They were two minutes back of Wolfgang Dittrich of Germany, the leader out of the water.

"Welchy made the move he had to make," said Mike Pigg, fresh off a second-place tie at the World Triathlon Championships on October 13 and playing spectator for the day. "He's with Mark. They can let Wolfgang sit out there. Now the question is, did it hurt Welch to catch

Self-doubt. We all have it. But it can be magnified to the nth degree during the heat of battle, in the constant glare of the insatiable media, under the heat of the midday Big Island sun, into the teeth of winds whose only constant is their resolve to snap your psyche like a twig.

him because he was 45 seconds down coming out of the water? Did he go too hard too early?"

Allen had to be wondering the same thing. He admitted beforehand that Greg Welch was one of the people he feared most. "In the Ironman, the scariest person to race against is someone who can run. If you're up against someone who can run off the bike, it's a scary proposition."

Greg Welch has proved that he is one of the best in the business at running off the bike. He has sub-30-minute 10K speed. He won the World Championships in 1990, beat out Allen for second place at the America's Paradise Triathlon in May and pulled away from him again at the Texas Hill Country Ironman in September.

Was the Texas Hill win important? Mike Pigg seems to think so. "Welchy got to see Mark crumble at Texas Hill," says Pigg.

The message is clear: Greg Welch had to be feeling that Allen was beatable, that he could be had. "I've done all the groundwork," said Welch at the pre-race press conference. "Mark's been beaten four times this year, twice by me, twice by Mike Pigg."

Welch wanted Allen to know that he was ready to take

him down. His race performances and his pre-race comments served a purpose. He was like a farmer planting seeds... the seeds of self-doubt.

Self-doubt. We all have it. But it can be magnified to the nth degree during the heat of battle, in the constant glare of the insatiable media, under the heat of the midday Big Island sun, into the teeth of winds whose only constant is their resolve to snap your psyche like a twig. If any of those seeds of doubt are still there, they will manifest here, where they can take root. "This isn't my day," you'll say to yourself. "I'm really not ready." "They are simply better on this course than I am." If these thoughts crop up and you don't suppress them... your race is history.

Mark Allen was concerned that this could be Greg Welch's day.

"A couple years ago, I said that he's the guy coming up who's going to dominate this sport," said Allen. "He began last year by winning the World's. This year, he beat me a

couple of times pretty handily."

Allen was surprised when Welch caught him so quickly on the bike. "I thought I was going pretty hard during the early part of the ride, and then Welch was right there next to me," says Allen. "I thought I was going pretty good." At the time, Allen was concentrating on cutting into Dittrich's lead. When Welch caught him, catching Wolfgang became secondary.

The Dittrich chase group included Jurgen Zack, Pauli Kiuru, Allen, Welch... and Jeff Devlin.

Devlin, tenth place at the 1990 Ironman, is one of those athletes whose race day performances are just starting to catch up to a limitless potential. Four minutes back of Allen out of the water, he outsplit Allen on the bike by nearly three minutes.

"When I caught those guys, they seemed to be going slow," says Devlin. "I thought, 'What am I going to do here?' No one wanted to push the pace. Do I try to go by them? If I do, they're just going to sit on me, which they did. I decided screw this. I'm not going to give them a free ride. I decided to back off and let them go."

The ride turned tactical, Allen content to keep Welch



"MY PLAN WAS TO WAIT UNTIL WE WERE OUT OF TOWN ON THE LAVA FIELDS BEFORE TRYING TO GET AWAY. THERE'S SO MUCH ENERGY IN TOWN, IF YOU PUSH IT, THE OTHER GUY IS NOT GOING TO DROP OFF. IT'S JUST WASTED EFFORT. WE RAN TOGETHER UNTIL THE PAY AND SAVE HILL. HE DROPPED BACK A LITTLE BIT ON THE HILL, SO I KEPT IT GOING." - MARK ALLEN
PHOTO BY LOIS SCHWARTZ



MARK ALLEN, THE ONLY IRONMAN WORLD
CHAMPION TO WIN THE RACE ON A HUFFY!
PHOTO BY LOIS SCHWARTZ



where he could see him. Welch wanted to let Allen know early that he was planning to be there all day long. “My plan was to catch him and stay with him,” says Welch.

“My ideal strategy was to have a 10-15 minute lead by mile 20 of the bike,” jokes Allen. “But that was out the window. At that point, I figured it was best to start the run with him. It’s a little better to have him with me at the start of the run, to see what type of pace he’s running, than to have him behind me.”

Coming into the Kona Surf Hotel parking lot, Dittrich was 4:30 up on Zack, 5:15 up on Kiuru, Allen and Welch, and 6:15 ahead of Jeff Devlin, another great runner with a 30:02 10K PR. As they ran back up the Kona Surf hill, hung a right down into The Pit and then turned around and came back, Dittrich’s lead evaporated. Welch caught him on Alii Drive before town. Then Mark Allen caught Welch and the two ran together, first on opposite sides of the street and then side by side, to the screams of thousands.

“My plan was to wait until we were out of town on the lava fields before trying to get away,” says Allen. “There’s so much energy in town, if you push it, the other guy is not going to drop off. It’s just wasted effort. We ran together until the Pay and Save Hill. He dropped back a little bit on the hill, so I kept it going.”

“When Mark caught me, we ran together,” says Greg Welch. “When he got away, I tried to hang on as long as I could. I thought to myself, ‘Run your race. Maybe he’ll come back to you.’”

It’s happened before. In 1984, Mark Allen led onto the lava fields and came apart. Same thing in 1987. Dave Scott was there both times to pick up the pieces. But his year, Mark Allen was the guy making the King-to-Queen’s-Highway move. Even though Jeff Devlin ran his way past Greg Welch and into second place for a time, only 2:30 down, Allen controlled the race the way, well, the way Dave Scott used to.

His plan was to ride away and win from the front. Rather than panicking because Greg Welch, his most serious threat, caught him, Allen thought it out and made another move. He sat back, watched his heart monitor, and saved up for the run. “Mark’s not going to surge.” Said Mike Pigg at the time. “He’s got his heart monitor on and he’s sitting at 155. He’s going to make this ride as easy as possible so he can get off the bike and run 2:40-2:45. That heart monitor is his fuel economy gauge.”

Greg Welch had to dip into his fuel tank to catch Allen on the bike. Then he dipped deeper when he took off at the beginning of the run. “When he took off on the marathon,” remembers Allen, “it was like he was doing a 10K. I thought, ‘I’m in deep something now, guys.’”

Allen was tight off the bike. He had hamstring problems at Texas Hill Country and his legs were felling crampish at the beginning of the Ironman run. But it went away. Then a calf cramp about 12 miles into the run put Welch in deep something. He was forced to stop, stretch and fall back behind Devlin. But he was revived after diving into his special needs bag.

“I threw down some Aussie rubbish,” laughs Welch. “Some dinosaurs from Ralph’s. I had 10 strawberry and cream candies and was raring to go.” A pause. “I’d love to get a split on that last 10K.”

Unfortunately, all that last 10K could do was bring him back to within six minutes of Mark Allen and give him a three-minute bulge on Jeff Devlin at the end.

In the game of Ironman chess, sometimes the moves are so subtle no one seems to notice. But they’re there. Letting Welch dictate the pace on the bike took that responsibility off Mark Allen’s shoulders. It also put his most dangerous competitor right where he wanted him most: smack dab in his sights. No worries like “Where is that guy?” or “How far back is he?”

Allen played the waiting game to perfection. He waited on the bike. He caught Welch in the run but waited to make his final move until he knew the crowd would not be a factor, when his adversary’s only companions would be self-doubt and the stark nakedness of the lava fields surrounding him.

Allen played the Ironman chess game to perfection for the third time in a row. But he also knows that only three people have ever run sub-2:50 in Hawaii. Mark Allen, Dave Scott... and Greg Welch. Even though he had to stop and stretch for who knows how long this year, Welch still ran 2:48:10.

So don’t count the young Aussie out, Ironman fans. He learned a few lessons from the new Ironmaster. Both Allen and Welch know that this year is history, that the next time around they’ll start from scratch, that they’ll be playing the-guy-who-makes-the-King-to-Queens-Highway-move-first-wins game all over again. And it won’t take Greg Welch many moves to turn Checkmate into Check... Mate. **THE GRIP6**



ALLEN PLAYED THE IRONMAN CHESS GAME TO PERFECTION FOR THE THIRD TIME IN A ROW. BUT HE ALSO KNOWS THAT ONLY THREE PEOPLE HAVE EVER RUN SUB-2:50 IN HAWAII. MARK ALLEN, DAVE SCOTT... AND NOW GREG WELCH. EVEN THOUGH HE HAD TO STOP AND STRETCH FOR WHO KNOWS HOW LONG THIS YEAR, WELCH STILL RAN 2:48:10. PHOTO BY LOIS SCHWARTZ