

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





"I REALLY TRY TO GO OVER THE RACE IN MY MIND," SAYS ALLEN. "I GO THROUGH EVERY SCENARIO. I SAW MYSELF RACING GREG WELCH AND I SAW MYSELF WITH PAULI KIURU. BUT I COULDN'T GET THIS FEAR OUT OF MY MIND THAT THERE WAS GOING TO BE SOMEBODY ON THE RUN WHO I CONSIDERED STRONGER THAN ME." PHOTO BY LOIS SCHWARTZ

CON MUCHO BUSTOS

BY BOB BABBITT

BEFORE THE 1992 GATORADE IRONMAN, DEFENDING CHAMPION MARK ALLEN PLAYED OUT EVERY POSSIBLE SCENARIO IN HIS MIND. HIS MAIN COMPETITION FIGURED TO COME FROM GREG WELCH, PAULI KIURU OR JEFF DEVLIN. THE NIGHT BEFORE THE RACE A NEW NAME POPPED INTO HIS MIND: CRISTIAN BUSTOS.

It starts slowly but can quickly — and totally — consume. One minute you're powerful and confident, all-knowing and in control. The next minute history is not only your major but your middle name. You're suddenly, without warning, a quivering shell.

Powerful? Not anymore. In control? Sorry. He's been traded for an emotion to be named later. Confident? Connie left on the early bus. All-knowing? Replaced by his friend All Over.

When doubt creeps into the sub-conscious, fatigue and failure are usually waiting at the door, bags nearby, planning to stay for the night. And after six hours of hand-to-hand combat in the lava fields, three-time defending Gatorade Ironman champion Mark Allen was about to succumb.

After arriving in Kona, Hawaii, a week before the October 10 multisport championship of the world, Allen set aside part of each evening to visualize, to play out the upcoming race in his head. After all, no one likes surprises.

"I really try to go over the race in my mind," says Allen. "I go through every scenario. I saw myself racing Greg Welch (second in 1991) and I saw myself with Pauli Kiuru (fourth in 1991). But I couldn't get this fear out of my mind that there was going to be somebody on the run who I considered stronger than me. At first, I thought it would be Jeff Devin (third in 1991), but it was never clear. I'd convinced myself that I'd be all right, but I hadn't

resolved that fear." Allen paused momentarily, thinking back. "It was interesting. The night before the race, all of a sudden Cristian Bustos' name came into my mind."

Mark Allen had reason to fear Bustos, who won his first-ever marathon in Santiago, Chile, in 2:19. That win got him a ticket to Frankfurt, Germany, where he ran a 2:16. At the Pucon Triathlon in Chile last January, Bustos came off the bike with Allen and put three-and-a-half minutes into him during the 10-mile run. "In Chile, we came off the bike together," Allen remembers. "All I saw of him was his back disappearing in the distance."

October 10 dawned Ironman cool. Temperature in the mid-to-high-80s, partly cloudy, no 50-mile-per-hour gusts anywhere. As the triathletes plunged into Kailua Bay, Mark Allen stopped thinking about Bustos. He wasn't even sure if Bustos, last year's ninth-place finisher, was entered in the race.

When the top swimmers emerged a little over 48 minutes later, the German, Wolfgang Dittich, was first out of the water and first to leave the transition area on his bike. Right behind him was Australian Greg Welch, the guy Mark Allen went head-to-head with for nine miles on the run the last time they met in Kona. Allen, swimming better than he has since college, was two minutes behind Welch.

So Mark, in all the scenarios you played out in your mind, did Greg Welch ever come out of the water two minutes ahead of you? Allen laughs. "There was no way in a million years that could happen. His swimming hasn't been as good as mine the last couple of races. I was stunned."

Right off the bat, Allen had to play catch-up on the bike. He didn't bridge the gap until mile 20. At that point, the lead group was led by Pauli Kiuru of Finland and included



PHOTO BY RICH CRUSE

“WHEN YOU COME UP ON MOST PEOPLE FROM BEHIND, YOU’RE MOVING MUCH FASTER,” SAYS ALLEN. “IF THEY TRY TO MATCH YOUR PACE WHEN YOU CATCH UP, USUALLY THEY CAN’T HOLD IT VERY LONG. WHEN I CAUGHT UP TO CRISTIAN, HE JUST LOOKED AT ME OUT OF THE CORNER OF HIS EYE AND DECIDED THAT WE MUST HAVE BEEN GOING WAY TOO SLOW, BECAUSE HE PICKED IT UP.”

Welch, Allen, Dittrich and every press person in Hawaii with access to a motorcycle and a camera.

The entourage hammered north along the Queen Kaahumanu Highway, past Waikoloa and Kawaihae to the bike turnaround at the quaint island village of Hawi. It's a given in the triathlon world that on the way to or on the way back from Hawi the wind will swirl and the cyclists will whine, curse and slow to a crawl. It's one of the few certainties of life, like bears hanging out in the woods or Ross Perot wearing over-sized earmuffs. But for the first time in living memory, the wind in Hawi took the day off.

The men took advantage of the we-may-never-see-weather-like-this-again day. Out of the water not quite five minutes behind Wolfgang Dittrich, Cristian Bustos started the climb to Hawi two-and-a-half minutes down to the fab four of Kiuru, Allen, Welch and Dittrich.

The pace on the bike was intense, with Kiuru doing most of the pushing. "Pauli hammered the bike," remem-

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bers Greg Welch.

"Pauli seemed very confident," says Allen. "He looked like he could grind out that gear all day long. It seemed like he wanted to take something out of us on the bike."

He did. "In previous years, it was too slow a ride," insists Kiuru. "I decided to push the pace."

Behind them, Cristian Bustos was making up ground in big chunks. "I feel good on the hills," says Bustos in his broken English. "I was getting more close... more close."

"When I glanced at the leader board, I saw Cristian's name was there," says Mark Allen. "The next thing I knew he was with us."

Cristian, were you surprised to catch the lead pack on the bike? "No," Bustos says solemnly. A pause, brown eyes sparkling. A big grin. "Not surprised... VERY surprised!"

Fifteen miles later, Jurgen Zack of Germany joined the Ironman Express as it flew back down the headwindless Queen K Highway. Kiuru flatted a few miles outside of town but the technical support team was right there to get him a new wheel.

"I got a new wheel," says Kiuru. "But it was 26 inches

and I ride 27 inches." Plus, it didn't have much air in it. I had to push hard to catch up. When I started the run, my legs were very tired."

Along Alii Drive, Zack rode off the front and put a minute on the chase group by the end of the ride. He was already out on the run by the time the others arrived. Bustos was quickly in and out of transition, followed by Kiuru, Allen, Welch and Dittrich.

Of that group, Mark Allen was only worried about one person. "Welchy didn't look himself," Allen admits. "He was spinning easily on the bike, but it didn't seem like he had any strength. I didn't think over the long haul that any of the other guys could put it together on the run like Cristian could. He was the one guy I was concerned about."

Allen ran off after Bustos, not feeling particularly good. "It took me two miles to make up 15 seconds on Cristian," he says. "That's when I realized that he wasn't very tired from the bike ride."

"When you come up on most people from behind, you're moving much faster," explains Allen. "If they try to match your pace when you catch up, usually they can't hold it very long. When I caught up to Cristian, he just looked at me out of the corner of his eye and decided that we must have been going way too slow, because he picked it up."

Put yourself in Cristian Bustos' racing flats. He'd never led a race as prestigious as the Gatorade Ironman before. Basically, he was waiting for his tour guide to show up. "I tell myself I have 26 miles to go so be careful," says Bustos. "I wait for Allen... wait for Greg... nobody... nobody... what happened? I wait... wait... wait. Then Allen catch up. I listen to Allen. Sometime he not sound very good."

Greg Welch didn't sound — or look — very good. He dropped back quickly and was never a factor in the marathon. He started spitting up blood early and was bleeding out of both his nose and mouth at one point. Three weeks before race day, he had hemorrhoid surgery. Obviously, he wasn't fully recovered come Ironday. "I had no strength in my hamstrings," he says, shaking his head. "I just lost all my strength."

By the time they reached mile nine and headed up Pay



CRISTIAN BUSTOS HAD HIS BEST RACE EVER IN KONA, BUT IT WASN'T ENOUGH TO KNOCK OFF MARK ALLEN, THE NOW FOUR-TIME IRONMAN WORLD CHAMPION, WHO WAS THERE AT THE FINISH TO GREET HIM. PHOTO BY LOIS SCHWARTZ

& Save Hill, Bustos and Allen had put 2:45 between themselves and Welch. Kiuru was stalking Welch, who looked pale and drawn.

Allen wasn't feeling much better. He'd spent his entire Ironday reacting to other people. Not exactly the way he envisioned things beforehand. First, Welch picked up two minutes during the swim, forcing him to play catch-up. Then Kiuru continually hammered the bike, forcing Allen to ride maybe a little harder than he would have liked.

And now? Cristian Bustos was driving him right to the brink.

"For 10 miles, I was holding on by the skin of my teeth," remembers Allen. "I was just wondering how soon I could drop out of the race and still save face. Maybe I could break an ankle or something. Anything to take the pain away. Cristian doesn't get intimidated... he doesn't give it up or crater like some of the other guys. He just goes. I wasn't sure if I could even finish the race. I was really starting to have my doubts."

Doubt is the vermin of the endurance athlete. It creeps around the edges of the subconscious before making its full frontal assault. Mark Allen could feel the heat building up in his body. He knows what it's like to blow up at the Ironman. And now he was running shoulder-to-shoulder in the midday heat against a 2:16 marathoner who looked like he could go all day long.

"I tried a few little surges," Allen says, shaking his head, "but we were running way too fast. The pace was really uncomfortable. I thought to myself, 'This is too fast. I'm going to blow up.' Inside my body, I felt the same sensation I had in the years when I've blown up. I thought, 'He's going to pull away and then I'll walk and catch a van back to town.'"

Bustos could sense that Allen was struggling. "I'm thinking... wow... maybe win," he says. A long look skyward. A short pause. "I don't think so."

One-on-one racing evolves over time in a long race like the Ironman. One move, then another. Allen likes to test his opponent's resolve on Pay & Save Hill about nine miles in. With the wind at the runners' backs, the heat can be stifling.

Bustos didn't budge.

The stark nothingness of the lava fields awaits the runners after a left turn at the hill's summit. The crowds diminish and self-doubt flourishes. The cheering of the spectators along Alii Drive is a distant memory. That was

miles ago. Now there are only telephone poles that go forever, aid stations that are too far apart, endless empty black lava and the sound of your feet hitting the scorched pavement. If your inner resolve isn't rock solid, the lava fields will crack you like a peanut.

Ask Mark Allen. He's been the crackee more times than he cares to remember. He knows the feeling. After years of crumbling to Dave Scott in these same lava fields, Allen has learned to use them to his advantage, to make them his friend. In a matter of a few miles, he went from potential crackee to cracker-in-waiting.

"I kept having to draw inside myself," confides Allen. "I had to find my own strength. Then around 11 or 12 miles, I could feel the momentum shift."

If you sense that your opponent is starting to fall apart a little, the tendency is to move quickly and try to finish them off. Allen has learned not to rush things, to stay on pace and to let the other guy fall apart a little bit more.

Dave Scott taught him well. Never go too early. Remain patient. "If you surge and they stay with it, there goes your surge," says Allen. "You've wasted it. But if you wait, they're not only further down on their energy level... you've been resting."

Allen could sense that after 14 miles of hard running, Cristian Bustos could be had. On an upgrade between miles 14 and 15, Allen picked up the pace and Bustos fell off. "People kept yelling at me, 'You've got to make a move!'" remembers Allen. "But you really have to wait until the time is right. And then when you make the move, you have to stay on it until the finish line."

Bustos tried to respond but there was no way. "I stayed a long time with Mark," he says proudly. "When feel bad, feel very, very bad. More slow feel more comfortable." He stops and gestures with his hand. "Mark going... going... going. I thought 'Maybe catch Mark later.'"

Right. Like maybe next year. Allen's 2:42:18 marathon gave him a seven-minute cushion over Cristian Bustos at the end and a record-breaking overall time of 8:09:08.

"When I was running with Cristian, I told myself, 'Look, why do you do well in races? Not by looking at anyone else. You do well when you draw energy inside yourself.'"

And have the self-confidence to put that energy to use.

"It's funny," says Allen. "But in a race of eight hours it usually comes down to one moment, to a few footsteps. It's a matter of knowing when to make those footsteps count." **THE GRIP6**