

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

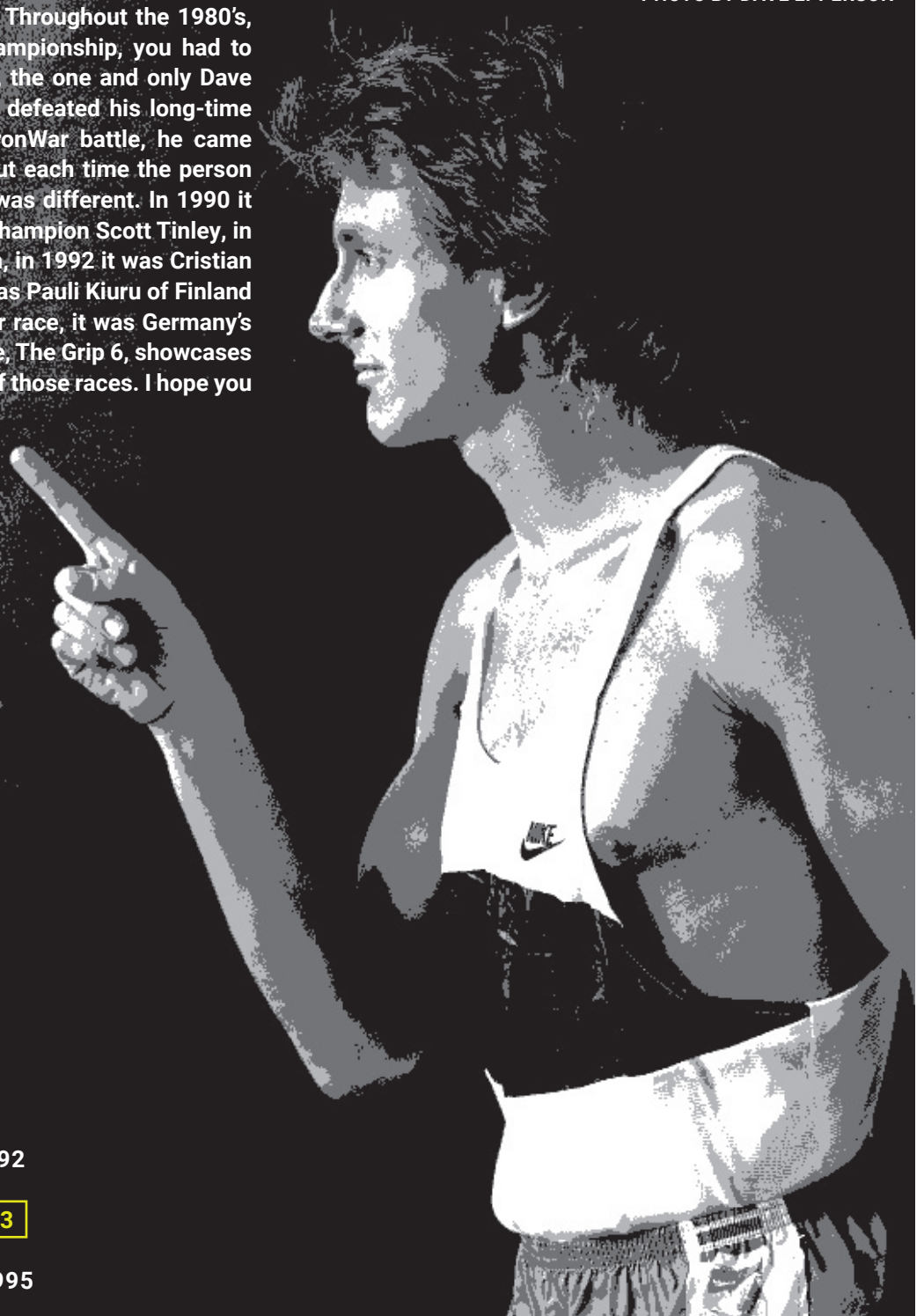
THE EQUALIZER / 1990

CHECKMATE / 1991

CON MUCHO BUSTOS / 1992

THE KILLING FIELDS / 1993

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE / 1995





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THE KILLING FIELDS

BY BOB BABBITT

AS THE CANNON KICKED OFF THE TOUGHEST DAY IN SPORT, MARK ALLEN AND PAULI KIURU WERE AT THE FRONT OF THIS AQUATIC MOSH PIT OF 1,438 STARTERS.
PHOTO BY RICH CRUSE

HE LIES ON A COT, AN IV REPLENISHING A VEIN IN HIS LEFT ARM. HIS BREATHING IS SLOW AND METHODICAL. CHEST IN... CHEST OUT. THE LEFT EYE IS CLOSED, THE RIGHT AT HALF-MAST. HIS QUADRICEPS SPASM SPORADICALLY, FIRST THE RIGHT, THEN THE LEFT. THE WHITE REMNANTS OF SALTY SWEAT SURROUND HIS SINGLET AND THE TOP OF EACH RUNNING SHOE IS COATED WITH BLOOD.

MARK ALLEN LOOKS LIKE HE WAS JUST BEATEN UP IN AN ALLEY.

A PRIZEFIGHT LEAVES VISIBLE WOUNDS. A LUMP UNDER THE EYE, A SWOLLEN CHEEKBONE, LEGS THAT WOBBLE AND CEASE TO FUNCTION, A GASH ON THE FOREHEAD. THE PURPOSE OF THE GAME IS TO SEEK AND DESTROY, AND THE ONE WHO INFLECTS THE MOST DAMAGE WINDS.

The Gatorade Ironman is more subtle: 2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of cycling and 26.2 miles of running in the

heat and wind of the Kona Coast. It seems like civilized torture, just a case of Yuppie excess. But if you look close you can see beyond the veneer. The pain is there, and the blows are real.

Don't kid yourself. Up front where the rewards are huge, the demands and the pressure are immense. The purpose is to debilitate, to intimidate... to annihilate.

As the four-time defending champion, Mark Allen, was a moving target all day long. A moving target who dug so deep into his reserves, into his soul, that he had absolutely nothing left.

It began early. The cyclists were just settling in. The 48-minute swimmers were gobbled up whole by the 50-minute swimmers and, before you could say peloton, a lead pack of 15 formed along Queen Kaahumanu Highway. The winds were gentle, the skies cloudless and the sun omnipresent.

All the players were there. Wolfgang Dittrich, Mark Allen,

Pauli Kiuru, Ken Glah, Mike Pigg, top swimmer Nate Llerandi, the Russian Alec Rukosuev, Holger Lorenz of Germany and last year's second-place finisher Cristian Bustos (to name a few). Even the sport's new fashion plate, the two-foot Mohawk man Chuckie V., was riding with the big boys. The Who's Who of Ironman was accompanied by a motorcade of journalists that outnumbered the leaders two to one.

"I had kind of a slow swim," says last year's fourth-place finisher Wolfgang Dittrich. "But it doesn't matter. If you swim faster, they'll just catch you on the bike anyway." He's learned through experience that it doesn't pay to go off the front on the bike either. "It's a runner's race," he insists. "You need to be with the lead group, not off the front."

Mike Pigg had won a race in St. Thomas the weekend before. A hard, hot race. No way he was going off the front. Chuckie V.? He took the lead for a bit, but he was just hoping to finish in the top 15.

Jurgen Zack was willing to take the wind in his teeth and go for it. One of the top pure cyclists in the sport, the German caught the leaders at mile 70 last year and put together the fastest bike split of the day. He feels that if you just sit in with the lead pack, you're conceding the race to a great runner like Mark Allen.

The only way to beat Allen, reasons Zack, is to hurt Allen. "I think the key to how to beat Mark Allen is to make him suffer on the bike," says Zack. "If he was dropped from the lead pack and had to ride by himself, it would be very hard for him to catch up."

Just past mile 35, much earlier than expected, the Jurgen Zack Express arrived and all hell broke loose. Ever play tag when you were a kid? Ever find out that the guy right in front of you is "it"? Well, Jurgen Zack was "it" and everyone was scrambling for cover.

"I could feel the shock going through the pack when I showed up," remembers Zack with a smile. "Some guys panicked and started shifting gears. I think they expected me to pick up the pace." He laughs. "I did pick up the pace."

The goal was to repeat what he did last year when he turned up the throttle and splintered the field. "My game plan was to get rid of all the competitors," explains Zack. "I got rid of some guys, like Cristian Bustos, but I couldn't get rid of Mark Allen, Wolfgang or Pauli."

But he sure did try. After the turnaround at the quaint

little seaside wind tunnel known as Hawi (Ha-Vee), there is a long gradual downhill that brings the athletes back towards Kawaihae. Before the race, Zack added a little gearing to his Ironman Softride bike to help him on the downhill.

For the first time in memory, it was raining in Hawi. Zack couldn't care less. The guy was stormin'. He shifted up into his secret weapon, a 61x11, and simply left everyone behind. "Last year I had a 56x12, but that wasn't enough," recalls Zack. "I lost a bunch of time on the downhill."

Not this time. With fellow German Holger Lorenz on his tail, Zack gapped the field by 30 seconds. The pace was intense and everyone scrambled to make up ground. The pack caught up before Kawaihae, but Zack wasn't deterred. He was the magnifying glass, they were the ants. Every time he picked up the intensity, he zapped their legs just a little bit more. Every time he glanced back, the party was a tad more intimate. Bustos, Pigg, Chuckie V. and Llerandi were soon off the back, cycling in the no man's land between the first and second group.

Mark Allen felt the squeeze. He prepares himself before race day by visualizing every race day possibility. He must have realized the pace would be intense this year, because he didn't take time after the swim to get comfortable and put on bike shorts. Nope. Just 112 miles in a Nike swim suit. Mark Allen obviously had a premonition that this was not going to be one of those hangin'-out-with-the-fellas kind of day. There would be no free lunch.

"Last year was nice," jokes Allen. "We had a social group up there on the bike. Yesterday it seemed everyone forgot that we had to run a marathon. Jurgen just tried to hurt us."

And he was doing one helluva job. At the 1992 Powerman Duathlon in Switzerland, he put seven minutes on Allen and Ken Souza on the bike and then held them off in the final 30K run. "I wanted to get two, three or four minutes on him on the bike today," says Zack. "At the European Ironman this summer, I rode 4:20 and was still able to run a 2:53 marathon."

They reached the first of two Timex Primes at mile 80. The first one to the prime line won \$1,500 if they finished the race. The second prime was at about mile six of the run. Pauli Kiuru asserted himself and went by Zack to win the cycling prime.

By the time they reached the airport, the group had

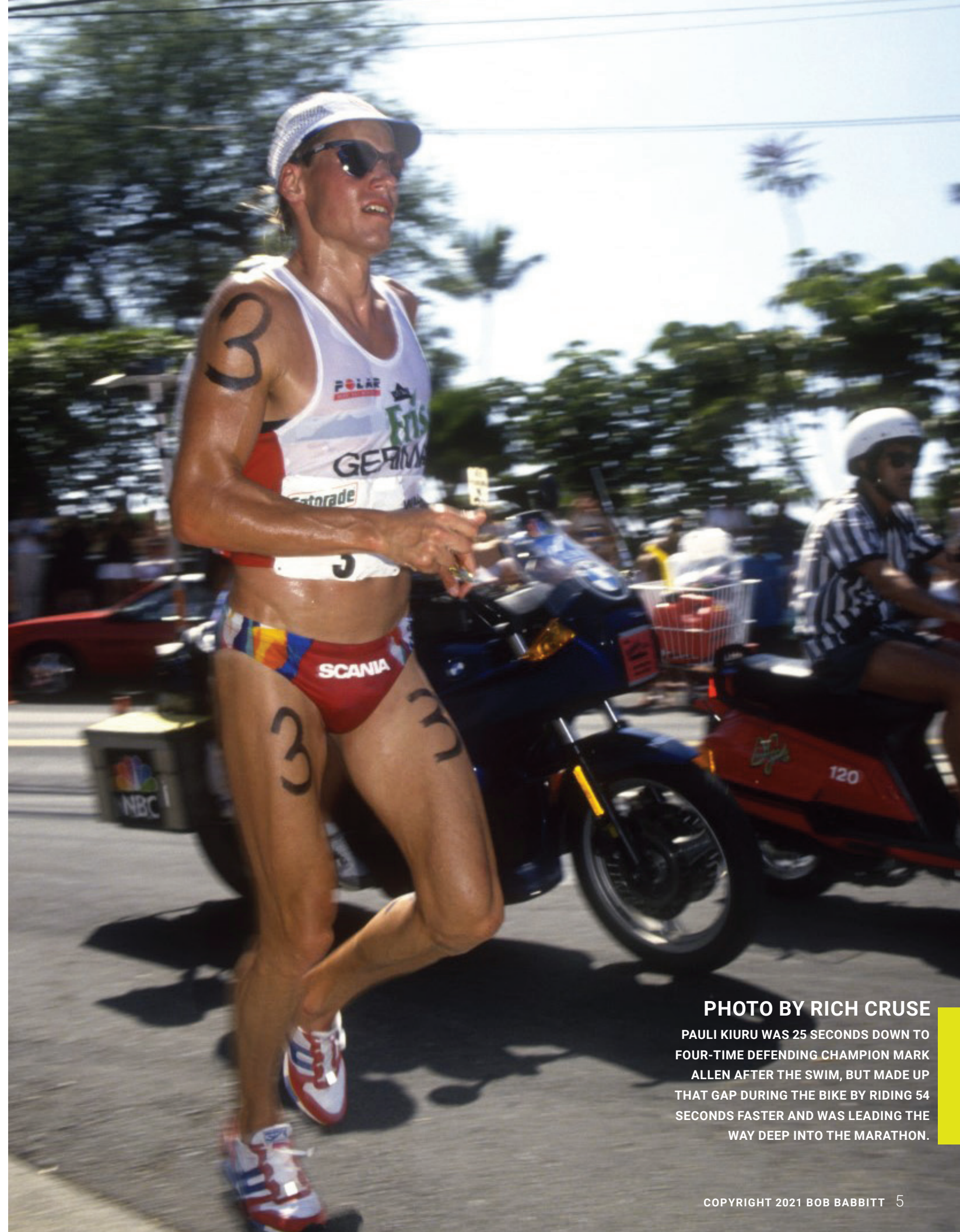


PHOTO BY RICH CRUSE

PAULI KIURU WAS 25 SECONDS DOWN TO FOUR-TIME DEFENDING CHAMPION MARK ALLEN AFTER THE SWIM, BUT MADE UP THAT GAP DURING THE BIKE BY RIDING 54 SECONDS FASTER AND WAS LEADING THE WAY DEEP INTO THE MARATHON.



PHOTO BY RICH CRUSE

PAULI KIURU DID EVERYTHING RIGHT AT THE 1993 IRONMAN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP. HE CAME OFF THE BIKE AND RAN AN IMPRESSIVE 2:55:16 MARATHON. UNFORTUNATELY FOR KIURU, ALLEN RAN 2:48:05 AND CAUGHT HIM IN THE NATURAL ENERGY LAB TO WIN HIS FIFTH STRAIGHT TITLE.

been Zack-attacked down to four: Dittrich, Allen, Kiuru and Zack. "I like the wind," grins Zack. "I like tough conditions. I wish there were more headwinds, more crosswinds. It was a bit too easy for me out there."

Getting off the bike, however, it was Kiuru who took off in hot pursuit of prime number two.

One of the most consistent triathletes in the sport, Kiuru is Mr. Science, the guy who is as connected to his heart monitor as Trekkies are to a Captain Kirk, nerds are to Seinfeld's George and weasels are to Eddie Haskell. He simply does not deviate.

Off the bike, last year's third-place finisher was looking — and feeling — great.

"He just took off," remembers Dittrich. "I was thinking, 'What is going on here? Either I'm running real slow or he's flying.'"

Go with the latter, Wolfy. "When Mark came by, he wasn't running much faster than I was," continues Dittrich. "I thought, 'Okay, I'm not that slow.'"

Kiuru, on the other hand, was pretty darn fast. He was actually putting time on Mark Allen during the first few miles of the run. By the time he reached the Timex run prime on Alii Drive, his gap was almost three full minutes. "I felt very good at the beginning of the run," says Kiuru. "I felt really good off the bike."

Zack, on the other hand, was paying the piper for his course record bike split (4:27:42). There would be no 2:53 marathon today. "The first nine miles of the run, my feet were numb," he says. But his plan had worked. Mark Allen was forced to expend a lot of energy to stay with Zack. "I asked him afterwards why he didn't let me go at the end of the ride," remembers Zack. "He told me that he didn't want to give up two minutes in the last 20 miles."

But now Allen gave up three minutes in the first six of the run, and his legs felt like they'd taken more direct hits than Joey Buttafuoco. "When I got off the bike, my legs felt as if I'd already run 20 miles," recalls Allen.

"They weren't sore... just dead. My dream of winning was slipping away and Pauli was putting the hammer down."

But he'd been there before and hoped that eventually things would get better. "This is the closest I've come to dropping out," Allen continues. "There were seven or eight or 10 moments when I thought, 'This is it. I'm going to have to stop.' This race is so unforgiving."

Out of town and back on the Queen Highway, Kiuru

looked smooth and easy. Then, out of the lava fields, Allen's patience started to pay dividends. "It's a lesson I've learned over and over with Dave Scott," comments Allen. "The race really happens during the middle to later part of the run." A short pause. "My legs started feeling better and my energy came back."

Just as quickly as the tug of war momentum started to ease over to Kiuru's side of the pit, Allen yanked it back. "I started thinking," remembers Allen. "Nothing's given to you out there. You have to take the opportunities when they're there and go for it. This race is tough for everybody."

Past mile 10, Allen started eating into Kiuru's lead; 2:45 became 53 seconds by the time he reached the Natural Energy Lab. "After a few miles on the Queen K Highway, I thought, 'No way Pauli can outrun me,'" says Allen. "But he was."

Just before mile 17, Allen eased by Kiuru, patting him on the back as he made the move. "I started to cramp and it was hard to breathe," says Kiuru.

Mark Allen was back in front. One step at a time, every minute an eternity. He broke the course record and took home a \$5,000 bonus.

Last year, Mark Allen was up and around right after the race, coming back at midnight to honor the last finishers, to dance and to immerse himself in the Gatorade Ironman experience. This year was different. He lay on a cot while medics worked to refortify a depleted body. He quivered and shook as if he had just gone 10 tough rounds. Jurgen Zack was across the medical tent on another cot, a big I-just-ate-the-canary smile on his face. He came away with fifth place and a course record on the bike.

Zack also came away with the knowledge that he had spotted a chink in the Mark Allen armor. With a boxer, you work the body and the head will fall. Take away Mark Allen's legs on the bike, make him suffer, and you can take away the run.

Allen's run split was 2:48 this year, five minutes slower than in 1992. And he came this close to throwing in the towel.

"To win the Ironman," says Wolfgang Dittrich, "you have to have physical and mental strength. And everyone has physical strength."

To dig really deep. To overcome the pain and the self-doubt. To absorb the punishment. To be the target five times in a row and emerge victorious.

Mark Allen is as tough as they come. **THE GRIP6**