

William Clark Takes Over, by Nancy Shute

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# Outside

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# BEYOND TOUGH

*It's time to end the bickering. What's really the hardest, sickest ultra-endurance event of them all?*

By Jay Stuller

**I**n an event like the Ironman Triathlon, in which self-punishment is the theme of the day, all finishes are dramatic. Some stand out, of course—last October's duel between Dave Scott and Scott Tinley is a good example. A lot of people think the *most* dramatic finish in the event's six-year history came in February 1982, at the end of the women's race: National television audiences watched Julie Moss stagger and sprawl just short of the finish line, literally crawling to an agonized second place. It was the moment that made the Ironman. There seemed to be little doubt that in this instant some sort of human limit had been reached. The scene confirmed for millions that they were watching the most savage of competitive corporeal inquisitions, the ultimate endurance event.

But is it really? Today that conclusion is not so certain. With the multiplication of other triathlons, ultramarathons over incredibly brutal terrain, and bicycle races covering whole continents, putting a lock on the title of *the* maximum ultra-endurance event is a problem. For instance, Kathleen McCartney, who beat Julie Moss in that 1982 Ironman, says the event she would just not want to compete in is the Western States 100—a 24-hour footrace through the Sierra Nevada. Dave Scott, who by now virtually owns the Ironman title, says his idea of a really gruesome event is the Race Across America, an extremely cruel transcontinental bike ride. "It would be too devastating for me,"





says Scott. "It's run nonstop, and I'm useless without sleep."

Everyone has an opinion on what's toughest. "The thought of a marathon," says John Marino, the competitive cyclist with the dubious honor of having invented the Race Across America, "doesn't seem to me like that big a deal." The director of one ultramarathon blithely told me that competitors in his race have been found to suffer remarkable levels of tissue narcosis—as if that were a biophysical badge of courage. One of the new ultra-endurance events bills itself outright as the World's Toughest Triathlon, while another is the self-proclaimed Ultimate Endurance Triathlon. Obviously we're getting into an area of some sensitivity and physical one-upmanship.

It's a tough question—the kind of question that can launch a thousand meaningless barroom arguments. How does the malevolence of a six-day race compare with the pain of a marathon swim? Or the agonies of the Ironman with a triathlon that is much longer in distance but held over several days? Given the considerable variables within all the ultra-endurance sports, we're dealing with Einsteinian levels of relativity. Aerobic capacities, anaerobic demands that can quickly drain an athlete, mental pressures, injuries, and a dozen other factors all come into play. So how *does* one rank all these different events?

With a mixture of gall, a little trepidation, and an unlisted phone number, of course. A few years ago I did a story ranking various jobs in professional sports by degrees of toughness, an effort that earned me little amity and offended literally millions of athletic enthusiasts. Few readers quibbled when boxers won by a TKO, surpassing National Football League quarterbacks, hockey goalies, basketball players, and race-car drivers by a large margin. But later I found that I'd committed unspeakable sins of omission against rugby players, dirt-bike racers, and others not listed in the article. "You didn't even include low-level P-51 flying, where the G-forces will kill ya," wrote one man from Texas. "Damn, you're a dumb turkey." This was one of the kinder missives.

Having already been torched once, the editors of *Outside* figured I might as well be the sap to get burned again. Set loose on the problem of rating the ultimate endurance event, I not only had to develop a method of comparing these things, but also pick candidates from a dazzling plethora of contests.

The basic criteria were simple: Each had to be an event pitting one individual

"IF YOU GET INTO THE RHYTHM OF THE WAVES, THE IRONMAN ISN'T SO BAD."

against others. Solitary endurance achievements—climbing Mount McKinley, retracing Admiral Byrd's Antarctic steps, or dog-paddling the Tasman Sea—are remarkable, but we're talking about races.

Second, the event could not be something that was merely the gleam in the eye of a dastardly promoter. There are many new ultra-endurance events being planned, such as the Big Island Triathlon in Hawaii, which, had it been held by this writing, might have placed well in our survey. But it's tough to judge what hasn't been done.

Moreover, the event had to have been held more than once—or at least to have had a likely prospect of coming off a second time. Harald Johnson, the creative director of *Triathlon* and *Swim Swim* magazines as well as a noted endurance athlete, nominated a Southern California bike-run-row event that drew six entrants its first year but not enough to justify a second. Contests that die due to lack of interest, even though they might be *too* tough, cannot stand and be counted.

Putting together a healthy selection of ultra-endurance tests that reflected a variety of athletic skills was, nonetheless, relatively easy. Among established triathlons three stood out: the Ironman of Hawaii; the World's Toughest Triathlon, which is held at Lake Tahoe, California; and the Ultimate Endurance Triathlon, a three-day affair that starts in Sacramento and ends in San Francisco.

Giving due credit to the Alcatraz Challenge Triathlon, the Ricoh Ironman out of Santa Monica, and the Minnesota Border-to-Border—along with thousands of others, all of which can put an ache in anyone's muscles—these three were the worst. "The Ironman," says Johnson, "is the granddaddy of triathlons. It was the first, it's on television, and participants



All aboard the dog-meat express: scenes from the Race Across America (overleaf); Olympic Decathlon (above, left); Tour de France (above, center); Ultimate Triathlon (above, right); Manhattan Swim (below, left); Survival of the Fittest (below, center); and World's Toughest Triathlon (below, right).