

# MORE THAN A TRIATHLETE

BY SCOTT TINLEY

**P**eople come in all shapes and sizes. Thank God for that. Imagine if we all were trim and fit. Imagine if we all possessed the same morals and beliefs. Imagine if we all wanted to grow up and be teachers (a pleasant enough thought) or lawyers (a horrifying thought) or Lambda instructors (hmmm). Indeed, it is the variety, the contrast and the realization of individuality that makes life a truly wonderful experience.

As athletes, we bring with us our own personal style and thought about what sport means to us. Stand on the starting line of any event from San Diego to Stockholm to Sydney to Boulder and you will witness one of the most eclectic of all social gatherings. Every walk of life can have representation. The only common denominator is a desire to cover the distance in a race against the clock. Two athletes wishing to break 40 minutes for the 10k may appear to have the same end in sight, but closer examination will reveal that variables such as genetic make-up, current life situation, and time and effort invested in that mystical 40-minute mark make it valuable only to the individual himself.

Look at it this way. In America there is a law that we must attend school until a certain age. Failing to finish high school does not guarantee a dubious future, but it does generally mean that attainment of things such as a well-paying job and upward mobility will be more difficult. Thankfully, most well-reared children understand the benefits of school. But graduation from an institute of higher learning means something different to each and every

student receiving a diploma, not so much for what they are going to do with that education but for the experience they had in receiving it.

The same is true with athletics, especially individual endurance sports. You and I may have the same finishing time, but what it represents to us may be as different as wheat grass and Twinkies. One man's exalted victory is another man's shameful defeat. So much has to do with the twin sons of approach: attitude and appreciation.

A few months ago I was sitting in a small airport near Lubbock, Texas, awaiting my flight home after a particularly painful and taxing event. Not wanting to rehash the day's race with the small group of triathletes loitering in the area, I sunk deeper into my chair, deeper into my book and deeper into my thoughts. Still, I couldn't help but notice the guy sitting across from me who was by himself. He was about my age and was wearing a smile that seemed to be permanently fixed on his face. As I glanced up and turned the page, his eye caught mine long enough to prevent looking away without a kindly response.

He spoke first with the safest possible line. "How was your race?" he asked. "Oh, it was OK I guess," I replied. "A bit hard but I didn't suffer too much." He smiled even bigger, so big, with these giant white teeth, that I found myself willing to engage in conversation despite my mood. I didn't know this fellow. I didn't know why he knew I had done a race. Hell, I didn't even know if he had raced too. But something drew me to inquire



about him.

I looked for the shaved legs and tell-tale race numbers. I looked for the finisher's T-shirt. Nothing. I didn't want to appear presumptuous, but I didn't want to be rude either. So I asked him straight out, "And how did you do today?"

Now, I don't recall his exact reply, but the gist of our conversation stuck with me. My new friend told me how his job required him to be on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. He said he loved the work but enjoyed going out of town from time to time to race in triathlons where he was just another guy out racing. In addition, the training and racing that he did gave him some good material with which to work. I told him a bit about my own challenges in finding a new path that holds the same passion for me that racing once did. He smiled and said he could relate. And without knowing why I believed him.

He then excused himself, got in line to board the plane

and dropped a business card in my hand. I sat on the plane that night and looked out the window for a long time, thinking about how many fascinating people I had met through sport over the past 25 years. I thought about how each one of these individuals had their own goals, their own story and their own spirit. I thought about how winning had come to mean so much less now than it did some time ago, and shuddered at the thought of the pedestal it once occupied.

That night, safe at home, pouring the weekend's contents onto my desk, a singular card fell away from the pile and landed face down. There was a short quote handwritten in faded pencil on the back. It said, "Let us run with endurance the race marked for us." Hebrews 12: 1-3.

I turned the card over. It belonged to my new friend, the minister of a church in New Mexico. His name is Scott. He is a triathlete, but he is so much more. As are all of you. ▲