

Iron War: Dave Scott, Mark Allen & the Greatest Race Ever Run

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Writing an entire book about an esoteric athletic event, the 1989 Ironman triathlon, could be a daunting task. But the author eases readers into the nuances of the sport, capturing imaginations with a satisfying study of two exceptional athletes and what makes them tick.

Triathlons, in their infancy in the 1980s, were a curiosity for the hardier sort wanting to test his endurance and pain threshold by combining swimming, bicycling, and running. The Hawaii-based Ironman, the most grueling and longest, with a 2.4-mile swim in the open sea, pedaling a bicycle 112 miles throughout winding hillsides, and finishing with a 26.2-mile marathon run across stifling lava fields, quickly becomes the most formidable challenge—and the most-prized victory. The undisputed champion, Dave Scott, is the man to beat. Challenger Mark Allen, winner of several other triathlons himself, but never the big one, wants 1989 to be his big year.

This book chronicles Allen's training regimen and race strategy as he confronts Scott, a personality driven to ensure that the crown stays with him one more year. The author explores the two rivals' psyches to uncover the personal demons that make them push their bodies to the breaking point. Both Scott and Allen emerge as two wolves running neck-and-neck, viewing lesser contestants as helpless prey they hunt down as temporary entertainment.

"A runner up ahead is like a terrible itch that can only be relieved by a quick overtaking," the author writes about Scott as he spots a runner ahead of him. "Mark surges smoothly with him, thinking, 'If I go down, let me take him with me.'"

This sport doesn't surrender its secrets willingly. But the author lends his extensive background covering triathlons, having written seventeen books on endurance sports. Offering anecdotal information is Bob Babbitt, credited as being "triathlon's unofficial ambassador and spokesman." These coaches guide the reader to a satisfying finish.

KARL KUNKEL (Winter 2012)

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