



BECOMING IRON

BY LUKE HARPER

At some point in each of our lives, if we're lucky, we'll encounter someone who is able to defy limitations in order to complete something truly extraordinary. These people are exceedingly rare and, being rare, they have the power to make a deep impression on those around them. Bonner Paddock is just such a person. He's also damn tough to keep up with on a racing bike.

These are the alternating thoughts that fill my head as I charge uphill, stomping on the pedals of a borrowed Cannondale with my legs quivering. It's a long incline and soon another thought enters the mix: visions of Sunday brunch followed by a nap. I weigh the option of spinning around and heading to my car. After all, the interview is over. It's not like I have to finish this ride.

Bonner turns to face me: "This is the

hardest part," he grins. "You're about to get a great view though!"

I force a smile through gritted teeth—and manage to keep pushing until the hill flattens out. At the top we ride in lazy circles, sipping on high-powered energy drinks and talking about motivation. To the southwest, the mini-mansions of Newport Coast unfold in terraces. Further off is the endless Pacific Ocean blanketed in a thinning marine layer.

...TO THE KID WITH CEREBRAL PALSY, THE KID WHO WANTS TO KNOW THAT MAYBE THEY ARE CAPABLE OF MORE THAN THEY THOUGHT, THE IDEA OF ME FINISHING DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

"I set small goals for myself," Bonner tells me. "Did you notice that blue fire-hydrant we passed? I'm always telling myself, 'just make it to the blue fire-hydrant.'"

There's a definite truth to the idea that setting small goals is a good training tool—but the mere suggestion that Bonner Paddock sets "small goals" for himself is laughable. To the contrary, Bonner sets huge goals, then he goes out and smashes them. Unlike me, Bonner does have to get to the top of the hill, every hill. These hills are his practice facility, his mini-tests and his time trials as he trains to become the first person with Cerebral Palsy ever to complete the Ironman World Championships in Kona, Hawaii. As if this isn't aiming high enough, Bonner has his sights set on raising a million dollars for charity in the process.

There's a lot to unpack in that last paragraph. First, there's the passing mention of Cerebral Palsy. Cerebral Palsy (CP) is a physical disability brought on by a lack of oxygen flow to the brain of a fetus or infant. In Bonner's case it developed when his umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck in the birth canal. Bonner's Cerebral Palsy affects his balance and leaves him with a stiff gait.

"For me, it's like the muscles in my legs are always flexed," he says. "But they're also underdeveloped and they take longer to recover, plus my balance is bad." And yet, he's training to swim, bike and run in the Ironman World Championship. Ironman Triathlons are made up of a 2.4 mile ocean swim, a 112 mile bike ride and a marathon (26.2 miles) over the course of a 17 hour day. But even among those who participate in the worldwide Ironman circuit, the Kona event is thought of as an entirely different beast.

"The elements over there can be nasty," says Australian Greg Welch, Bonner's coach, 1994 Ironman World Champion and member of the Triathlon Hall of Fame. "There's heat, humidity and the trade winds are treacherous. They'll blow you

right off your bike."

"People tell me that it's the hardest single-day race in the world," Bonner admits with a wry smile, "but that's why I chose it."

The Ironman (which is held in October) won't be the first time that Bonner has pushed his body to extremes. In 2008, he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro—becoming the first person with Cerebral Palsy to do so unassisted. Like the coming event in Kona, the ascent of Kilimanjaro seemed custom made to highlight Bonner's disability.

"Climbing requires balance and leg strength," he says, "two things that I don't have. I took aim at my greatest weaknesses when I climbed Kili."

As Bonner prepped for that trip, his doctor expressed trepidation. "We're not talking about an isolated injury that affects just one muscle," physician Afshin Aminian says, "For him the majority of the muscles in the lower half of his body are affected."

Knowing as much, the other climbers on the expedition made it very clear that turning around was an option. Donors and sponsors went out of their way to specify that

the mission would be considered a success even if Bonner didn't reach the summit. With 2,300 feet still to go, the team took a long break. It was a moment of truth—and Bonner needed to make a call.

"Everyone told me it was okay not to finish," he admits, "but to the kid with Cerebral Palsy, the kid who wants to know that maybe they are capable of more than they thought, the idea of me finishing does make a difference."

He rose to his feet and, despite crushing fatigue, continued walking to the top of the mountain.

"I don't really like being told that I can't do something," he shrugs, looking back at those

difficult moments. "I thought 'maybe things like this can make people shift the way they think about the disabled.'"

He's done more than just that, the Kilimanjaro trek raised \$262,000 for Bonner's 1 Man 1 Mission Foundation (OM Foundation). The money was used to start a center in Tanzania for mentally and physically disabled kids. Bonner and Doctor Aminian went back last year to visit and another trip is planned for March. One of the girls from the center will soon travel to Orange County for surgery and therapy that she can't get in Tanzania. Bonner has another of these "Life without Limits" centers in Irvine, supporting United Cerebral Palsy. Similar centers are underway elsewhere in Africa as well as in Austin, Texas.

Asked about his continued involvement with the OM Foundation, Dr. Aminian says, "Bonner's enthusiasm sweeps you up. Of course after Kilimanjaro I thought 'you did it! Let that be the end.' Now he wants to do Ironman."

Bonner isn't going into Ironman blindly however. He knows how hard the race will be and has coach Greg Welch to help him prepare. "The pain will be like nothing he's ever had," Welch says. And Welch knows a thing or two on the matter—in 1993 he was leading in Ironman Japan when a truck hit him and crushed his bike. Luckily, his wife Sian was also racing and gave her husband her tire (she was only planning on doing the swim and cycle). Welch got back on the bike in 60th place and started to make up time. He finished in third. Later he learned that during the wreck he had sustained fractures to his elbow and collarbone—so it says something significant that Welch believes in Bonner's ability to complete the Kona race.

"There's one point in the DVD of the Kilimanjaro climb where you can see that he was really struggling," Welch says. "But he dragged himself to the top of the hill—if he's already experienced something like that I knew I could help him achieve this next goal."

Dr. Aminian isn't quite so gung-ho. "I worry about Ironman, I really do," he says. "The race already poses huge physiological risks. In him those risks are tripled. By making it his ultimate goal to finish during the seventeen hour window, he's increasing the danger again."

One thing that everyone agrees on is that the race will push Bonner to a whole new furthest limit. He's quite aware of this, saying "This is going the biggest

test of my entire life, I know that." When he has those thoughts, his mind travels to one place for inspiration.

"I think of Jake," he says and immediately his voice grows soft.

Jake Robert was the four year-old son of one of Bonner's friends. Jake also had CP and when Bonner ran his first half marathon, Jake ran too—crossing the finish line in his father's arms. Tragically, the boy died that same night. By all accounts, Jake's death was a major turning point for Bonner. "After that," he says, "I knew I wanted to keep doing events. To prove that disabilities don't have to be as limiting as people often think and to try to raise money so that kids like Jake could have a fighting chance."

From the half-marathon, Bonner moved up to a full, then he began to plan the Kilimanjaro climb. All the while he was formulating the mission for his foundation and raising money and awareness.

"It humbles me, and my family, that Bonner is putting so much time, energy and resource into helping these kids," says Steve Robert, Jake's dad. "And even more humbling that he holds Jake with him in his heart."

A week after our bike ride I go to Bonner's house to watch the telecast of the 2011 Ironman. The show focuses on special interest stories, like Bonner's. Near the midnight cutoff the camera zooms in on entrants collapsing and getting back up again, doing their best to fight their way to the finish line.

I turn to Bonner and ask what will happen if his body begins shutting down and the clock is ticking. "Jake will carry me," he says, "just like he did on Kili."

The question, then, is will it be enough?

For Steve Robert, and the dozens of friends already packing their bags to support Bonner in Hawaii, there is no doubt.

"I don't know anything about the time limits or how that works," Robert says, the lump in his throat clearly audible, "but unless he leaves on a stretcher, Bonner Paddock will finish that race."



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