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Iron Men

Tackling extreme races together

BY JENNIFER OAKLEY, STAFF WRITER | JANUARY 1, 2018



WINNING THE DAY Scott Humphries, Shane Merz and Jeff Cotner (from left) meet up at the finish line of the 2012 Leadville 100-mile Mountain Bike Race, the first Leadville 100 race they completed together.

Somewhere near the top of Hope Pass, a 12,600-foot mountain peak near the middle of Colorado, in the middle of a 100-mile running race, a decision had to be made.

Jeff Cotner, Scott Humphries and Shane Merz, longtime friends and training buddies, were in the midst of the Leadville Trail 100 Run, and the trio was running short on time. The race has a 30-hour time limit, and their carefully planned times were slipping. Although the three had planned to run as one, it was looking like only one of them would be able to finish for the three.

This is a buddy story. It's a story about running and biking and swimming. About traveling and competing and pushing the limits of physical and mental toughness. But mostly, it's a story about three friends from around West University who have traversed the globe together making memories that are greater than any path up or down a mountain.

Call him a reluctant hero. Shane Merz was the one in the group called upon to complete the race. "I fully expected to be a 'booster rocket' for Jeff and Scott and to flame out somewhere along the way. I was *not* prepared for what happened when we made the call to split up and really *not* prepared when we reunited after the course turnaround and realized that I had a chance – albeit a small one – to make it," says Merz, who was encouraged on by his pals after they had lagged behind his pace on the climb. "We had

fallen behind our carefully planned paces,” says Cotner, who carried a laminated card with 34 checkpoints and cutoff times and whose pace, along with Humphries, was behind Merz. “The best chance any of us had was to split up.”

To understand how emotionally charged that decision was, you have to look back to where the trio started. None of them are professional athletes. None were even star high school athletes. And you have to wonder, what would make someone be able to run 100 miles in one day, complete multiple Ironman competitions and become entrenched in the world of endurance racing? The answer, simply put, is friendship.



BREAKING AWAY Ironman Taiwan 2015 was the last race on the “one-per-continent” quest Jeff Cotner (pictured) completed with Scott Humphries and Shane Merz. (Photo: FinisherPix®)

It started with a bicycle. Back in 2003, Cotner bought a bike, and he and fellow attorney Humphries started a team from their law firm, Gibbs and Bruns, to ride in the MS 150 from Houston to Austin. The race was a success, so every year, they went back and rode again. Along the way, they became friends with Merz, who had started a team from his company, MRE Consulting, where he is a partner. From there, they decided to kick it up a notch, and the trio entered the Hotter’N Hell 100-mile bike ride in Wichita Falls.

They have an easy camaraderie, and their strengths complement each other. “That riding led to triathlons, and after racing the Half-Ironman in Hawaii in 2007, we committed to the full Ironman race in Brazil in 2008,” says Humphries, a partner at Gibbs and Bruns. “Shortly after Brazil, we convinced ourselves we needed to finish an Ironman on every continent – or at least every continent that has one; Antarctica doesn’t.”

To do that, they competed in Ironman (a one-day event that includes a 2.4 mile-swim, a 112-mile bike and 26.2-mile run) events in Germany in 2010, The Woodlands in 2011, Australia in 2014 and then South Africa and Taiwan, completed two weeks apart in 2015.

Those competitions went off (mostly) without a hitch except that Humphries was kicked in the head during the swim portion of the German event and wound up in the intensive care unit at the hospital with water in his lungs. Since he was unable to finish that one, Humphries went to Ironman Zurich in 2012 to check Europe off his list. Both Cotner and Merz went along as his cheering section.

“There is something special doing this together, and it would not have happened if we had not done these events together. We are the best of friends, and if you are there with your best friends, it is something you can plot and do together,” says Cotner, who is now retired from the law firm. “It’s all about teamwork and friendship. I can’t imagine any of us would do it if we didn’t do this together.” Merz agrees. “I always tell people I am an accidental Ironman – and that’s true! Cotner was the instigator of this whole mess!” he says, laughing. “I wouldn’t have gotten into this weird stuff if it were not for the buddy angle.”



Shane Merz crosses the finish line of the Leadville 100-mile Mountain Bike Race in 2013, just minutes after his friends Jeff Cotner (in background) and Scott Humphries. (Photo: Dot Short)

It’s apparent that the three have not just a physical interest in the competition but also enjoy the mental aspects. Their analytical minds (Merz, 51, has a master’s degree in science in ocean engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, while Cotner, 52, and Humphries, 47, both have their law degrees from Harvard Law School) come into play with everything from planning to packing their gear. Normal discussions cover topics like working geometric equations to plot time and distance around buoys when they swim to applying their math skills to figuring out the exact splits they need to make for timed events.

“If you had a component where brain power counted, I would want those guys on my team,” says Humphries. Cotner says much of what they do is mind over matter. “As our history indicates, if every year or two, you add a few miles, it doesn’t seem that crazy. Once you have done a 5k, a 10k does not sound all that outrageous, and after you do a Half-Ironman, then an Ironman does not seem out of the question.”

Which brought the friends to Leadville, a former mining town that is now a major North American destination for endurance events in biking and running. “Along the way through the continents we got distracted by Leadville,” says Humphries. In the past few years, the guys have competed in different endurance races there. Cotner even ran the Leadville Pack Burro race, a 15-mile event which teamed him up with a different kind of running partner: a burro.

The holy grail in Leadville is the title of Leadman and Leadwoman, which is earned after completing a series of events in one summer, in order: a trail marathon, a 50-mile mountain bike race or run, a 100-mile mountain bike race, a 10k run and then the 100-mile run. The trio set their sights on becoming Leadmen and spent the summer of 2017 competing in and completing each of the events, which ultimately qualified them for that final race: the 100-mile run.

Which is why, after a summer of hitting their marks together, it was difficult to have to split up.



Scott Humphries celebrates Texas-style as he finishes Ironman Cairns in 2014. (Photo: FinisherPix®)

“Toward the top of the climb up Hope Pass, about mile 45 or so, it was clear Jeff and I were holding Shane back, so we emphatically told him to go ahead,” says Humphries. “At the time I remember thinking that if even one of us could finish, the whole summer would be a success.” Merz forged ahead, knowing he would meet up with the other two after the course turnaround – the place where, at mile 50, competitors turn back to where the race began, in downtown Leadville. At that point, it was evident that Merz had to go it alone, and the reunion was not what they had hoped for.

“Jeff didn’t hesitate for a second,” Merz says, “and I think he knew somehow the emotions that flooded over me. He barked a few orders, and we hugged and in the blink of an eye I was all alone. It was kind of emotional. After about 20 minutes I came to grips with the situation and decided that it was my responsibility to try for all of us and that if I could somehow pull it off, that Jeff and Scott would be waiting at the finish line, and it would be almost as if we finished together what we started.”

And so he did, completing the race (which is equivalent to running almost four marathons) in 29 hours, 42 minutes. “I was bawling like a baby, when I crossed the line,” he says. “I kissed my wife, and Jeff and Scott were there. Then we all hugged. I remember hearing my name announced and folks in the grandstands cheering. But mostly I remember that I felt really proud of what had just happened. I kind of felt like Max must have in *Where The Wild Things Are* when his mom brought him his dinner. I felt content. ”

As a finisher of the summer's worth of competitions, Merz earned the title of "Leadman." He received a pick axe, and his name will be engraved on a plaque in Leadville.

With the start of 2018, there is the promise of new events to enter. There is much discussion on whether to consider New Zealand a separate continent, and perhaps they need to complete an Ironman there. And, there is some talk about starting Adventure Racing, which places the competitors on unmarked courses they have to navigate with a compass. There is also the possibility of running the 100-mile Leadman race a second time.

"I certainly don't want to do it again," says Merz, laughing. "But if they want to run it again, I will run with them."

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