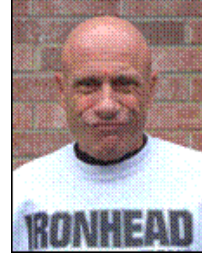


# IRON JACK

## *WOULD YOU TRUST THIS MAN?* *You should!*



**By Chris Phelan (copyright *The Phast Times News*, February 2010)**

In a recent column about race directors by Greg Lautenslager in *RunnerTriathlete News*, one photo was used to represent all race directors. It was a silhouette of **JACK WEISS** speaking (yelling?) into a bull horn at one of his races. The photo was in essence saying Jack was the iconic, consummate race director. It was a tip of the hat, a compliment. But there is so much more to “Sergeant Jack”, as he is affectionately called by friends, than just a race director.

In her Aug 7, 1998 column on running, *Dallas Morning News* writer **DEBBIE FETTERMAN** wrote, “Jack Weiss has a stubborn personality and a die-hard dedication to multi-sport training. Those traits earned him the nickname, ‘Ironhead.’”

There is very little of anything Jack hasn’t done in the triathlon arena: participant, volunteer, race director and producer, trainer and coach, sponsor, club president, team director, and regional and national board president. But he insists, “I never had a goal in the first place. We never saw this coming.” His career found him.

His triathlon career positions are stellar and enviable. I seriously doubt anyone will hold as many offices, or accomplish as much he has, for many years to come. Among his many offices, he was on the four state regional USA Triathlon South Midwest Board of Directors from 1989-1996 and its Treasurer from 1990-1991. He was President of USAT/SMW region from 1992-1995. He was on the national USA Triathlon Board of Directors, 1997-2002, 2003-2005. He was its Treasurer from 1999-2002, and the USAT Race Directors’ Commission Chairperson from 2006-2009. In addition, he was the President of the now infamous Tri-Dallas club from 1998-2001 and was selected Triathlete Magazine’s Race Director of the Year in 1993. He was also the first USAT certified race director, and first one to achieve Level II as a race director. In 1993 he formed Ironhead Race Productions and currently produces 25 events per year.

“There are probably more [positions], but I can’t remember,” he says. Currently, he is the Treasurer of Tri-Cowtown Tri Club, and CEO of Ironhead Race Productions.

The man is legendary, on the tip of every running or triathlon magazine publisher’s tongue in the state, and most in the nation. He’s been named “Mr. Triathlon” in *The Phast Times News* many times over the years, sharing that title with one other person, **AHMED ZAHER**. His breath of knowledge and experience is overwhelming, daunting. Journalists, attorneys, authorities, and rookies have all sought his opinion and private audience on everything from pros, to

supplements, to race courses, to equipment, legal or otherwise. (His memory for detail is also legendary.) He has always appeared at the top of his game, never appearing to falter.

To add on top of everything else, he's retired from the military (a 24 year career in the Air Force, joining in 1963, he developed several unique mission related financial projects in support of the Ground Launch Cruise Missile Program in the 1980's. He retired as a Senior Master Sergeant, an E8.), and is a cancer survivor. Though I was initially surprised, once I thought about it, it made sense to learn Jack once used to be a referee for Little League baseball and Pop Warner football. A three hour film could easily be made about him.

### **BEGINNINGS**

He was born in Brooklyn, NY, June 17, 1945 to a dad who was also retired from the Air Force after 20 years, and a mom who worked clerical jobs. He has a sister, Mical, who is 16 years his junior. He's been married to Ester since 1977, and has two children; Samantha and Norman, who is a Major in the Air Force. This is his third marriage. Being Jewish, Jack says he keeps his religious views "pretty much to myself."

Growing up all up and down the eastern seaboard (New York, Virginia, Florida, New Jersey, Delaware), he really liked rock 'n roll music, the Yankees (he's been a fan since he was six), and always maintained good grades. In 1989, he graduated Magna Cum Laude from Angelo State University, San Angelo, TX, with his Bachelor of Science degree in Kinesiology, and worked at the local YMCA as a Fitness Director afterward.

He ran cross country and track at North Syracuse High School in Syracuse, NY ("The late Ernie Davis was one of my sub teachers."), and Willingboro High School in Willingboro, NJ, weighing 155 lbs. He also had a penchant for history, a topic that requires a good memory. ("Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." – George Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense, The Life of Reason, Vol. 1*)

Not shockingly, Jack says nothing scared him as a kid and he was never shy. He's well known today for filling a room with his voice, without a microphone.

He has sad eyes that are deeply set. His long, oval shaped face is rubbery like actor Jim Carey, the lines getting deeper as the years pass. He can twist his mouth around almost to the back of his neck. His Jersey accent is still thick, but smoother than it was, having been out of the northeast for nearly four decades. During our conversation, he would occasionally rub his bald head, as if pulling the thoughts from it.

His voice is loud, but controlled. Meeker people think he's constantly yelling. When he laughs, he laughs big and heartily, like Santa Claus.

Jack's bulkier now than the skinny guy in the photos from 20 years ago. He walks with a slight limp due to knee surgeries, with his legs far apart, shoulders back. His body leans back to support himself. When upset, his eyes and mouth narrow, his nostrils flare, and his head and

body lean in with great intensity. No matter what, his feet always stand a couple of feet apart, shoulders back, hands at his side at the ready.

### **RUNNING, BIKING, THEN SWIMMING**

Jack hadn't run since high school when he began running again at the age of 31 (1976) to lose weight. Though at 5'6" and 152 pounds today (his lowest was 143), at the time he was up to 190. (He used to have a ritual the night before races where he went to an "all you can eat" Chinese buffet. "I haven't done much of that lately.")

His running partner, **SKIP GEE** introduced Jack to long distance racing and training. Jack ran 3:28 at his first marathon at the 1982 Dallas White Rock Marathon, then 2:54 at his second DWRM in 1983. "Both were on the old DWRM multi-loop course at White Rock Lake. I missed qualifying for the Boston Marathon by four seconds and one year." The next year, 1984, Boston relaxed their standards to three hours.

He once went three years and three months (39 months) without missing a day of running. Until he turned 50, Jack ran over 3,000 miles per year for 10 consecutive years. His largest mileage week was 140 miles training for the 1979 Dallas White Rock Marathon.

His running PR's are note worthy: 2:43:16 marathon (1983, Berlin), a 33:13 10K, 15:59 5K, and 4:55 in the mile at age 40. He owns 15 sub-three hour marathons.

In 1980, when a runner got injured, the medical field would say, "Don't do it!" That didn't fly with Jack. After incurring an Achilles injury that year, Jack began cycling to maintain his fitness. Friends **TOM BAIN** and **TIM SCHOENY** became his mentors on the bike. Currently, he rides a minimum of 200 miles per week, 52 weeks a year. Six times per year, he rides 300 miles a week. Jack's averaged 11,000 miles cycling per year for the last 12 years. He is well known for his cycling prowess, holding the Texas State 40K Time Trial record for the over 60 age group at 58:25 (25.6 MPH), the USA Cycling State Time Trial age group champion twice, completing the Ironman Florida 112 mile bike course in just four hours, 57 minutes, and the Arkansas DeGray Lake Half Ironman bike leg (very hilly 56 miles) in 2:26:00 in 2005.

Together with his running, is it any wonder Jack was a USAT All American Duathlete in 1994 and 1995?

Through all of his training over the years, Jack never suffered from over training, or burn out, a malady most athletes find themselves in at some point in their careers. At one point, he says, he had to stop for two weeks because he was injured. "I was a bear!"

Slowly the pieces began to come together to a destiny calling. That same year he began cycling, a flyer appeared on his desk for a triathlon in Mississippi. He took a leap that would define the rest of his career and life. He entered his first triathlon at a first year event, the 1980 Heart of Dixie Triathlon in Philadelphia, MS. It is the oldest triathlon in the U.S., other than the Ironman in Hawaii. Jack finished 11<sup>th</sup> out of 160 finishers.

But what about Jack's swimming experience? Though he learned to "swim" well enough at the age of seven for the local pool or lake on an occasional summer's day, he never swam competitively. No one would ever confuse Jack for a swimmer. That's not a criticism, but rather a fact of many youth of the time and that environment. Swimming was an elitist sport. At his peak, he was swimming six to eight miles (9,600-12,800 meters) a week in the mid 1980's.

But along with coaxing such achievements from his body, are the injuries. His BS Degree in Kinesiology has come in handy. He stress fractured the tibia bone twice (no easy task!), and had a nagging Achilles tendon that had to be put in a cast.

And then there's the infamous bike crash, September 11, 2007, during the Honey Tour bike rally where the course narrowed just before crossing a bridge. Jack was forced into a guard rail and fell over the bridge, landing at the bottom of a ravine. It took EMT's awhile to find him, get to him, and then Care Flight him out. He broke four ribs, sustained a three inch gash in his arm, and severed his right hamstring (50 stitches). Surgery took 11 hours to put him back together.

(After being released from the hospital, Jack went immediately back to work. He had a half Ironman race to direct in less than a week! Despite being injured, Jack would not be still. He was active on his four wheel Gator, supervising and managing the race!)

## *The Different Sides of Jack*

### CANCER

But there was a silver lining to the crash. The bike accident was unfortunate, but it was then and there that his cancer was discovered. A CT scan done at the hospital showed a growth on his right kidney, which turned out to be cancerous. The cancer was removed at the end of September 2007. He is currently in remission.

As a survivor, he says he was very lucky. His cancer was a renal cancerous cyst. If there is one kind of cancer you have to have, this is the one, he explained, because of the survival rate. Cancer runs in his family. It's been two years since he had 30% of one of his kidney's taken out. "The things that go wrong," he said with a thoughtful look, "you can't control. You should control the things you can. Being fit in your 30's, pays dividends in your 60's."

The 2007 bike crash now has mixed blessings for him, he says.

At the same time he was fighting cancer, his good friend and team member, **BRONDA STARLING** was also fighting cancer. If the two were close before, they got closer. Bronda was a well known and well liked triathlete, board member, and race official. She died in 2008. Jack spoke at her funeral and considers her a hero and wears her helmet on his training rides in remembrance.

## **TRAINING**

His training now resembles his personality, straight forward. He'll swim twice a week for 4,000 meters total, bike 200-250 miles on the Compu-Trainer, "and, if time allows, run once or twice a week. But that usually does not happen much."

All of it, the running, the biking, and the swimming, are a means of staying fit and adding quality to his life. He says he realizes that now "more then ever."

"At 31, it was fun, and I lost 45 lbs. But at 64, it means quality of life and allows me to continue to work full speed as a Race Director."

His only steady training partner right now is **RAMSEY ELISSA**. On the weekends, they ride their Compu-Trainers together when Jack's not working.

When he's training, his mind races. And when he races, he's focused. Often during the long hours of solo conditioning, he thinks of how to improve a particular race, what he needs to do to that race that hasn't been done before, or he engages in training tactics, to improve his own performance.

What gets Jack out the door to train? "It's a habit. I just cannot imagine a day without training. It energizes me and allows me to do what I do, race and direct." Simple!

***"Your race is only as smart as your dumbest athlete."***

## **TRIATHLON RACES**

This year, Jack is planning on entering at least five races: Strider's Duathlon, Frost Yer Fanny Duathlon, Redman Ironman Triathlon, Gulf Coast Half-Ironman Triathlon, and Wool Capital Triathlon. An interesting note is he will also be the race director for both Strider's, and Wool Capital, a very rare occurrence in the sport. His goals are more modest than years gone by. "Staying vertical," he says, "and enjoying the ability to train, work, and race."

His favorite races are: Buffalo Springs for its wetsuit and left handed swim; Ironman Florida for its fast bike course (He's done 4:57:00 on it.); and the old, point-to-point, down hill course three years ago of the Austin Marathon. Others include: Striders ("Long bike leg!"), and the Heart of Dixie Triathlon.

In 1982, sports fans watching ABC's "Wide Word of Sports" saw the grueling Ironman Triathlon competition in Hawaii for the first time. The emotionally charged broadcast of **JULIE MOSS** crawling across the finish line on her hands and knees to capture second place motivated thousands of runners, cyclists, and swimmers to enter a triathlon event. For others already running, biking, and swimming, the image inspired them to enter the Ironman. Jack Weiss was one of them.

Four years after completing his first triathlon, being stationed in Italy at the time and joining a local bike shop and club, the call came for Jack to direct a race. In 1984, the base commander at the Brindisi, Italy Air Force Base “requested” Jack produce a triathlon. But Jack had one request in return, that he be allowed to race in it, too. The sprint race was held without incident and won rave reviews. A race director was born. Oh, and Jack won the race to boot. He directed, raced, and won it the following year, too.

In 1984 and 1985, Jack did the long distance Nice, France, Triathlon. It was a two mile swim, 45 mile bike, and 18.6 mile run event. At this event, Jack met a man who had done Ironman, and asked him to compare the Nice course to Ironman. The man replied Nice was harder because of the mountains on the Nice course.

In 1987, Jack was number one on the waiting list for the Hawaiian Ironman. He got the call in September for the October race. Thankfully, he'd been banking on getting in and had been doing his training. At that point of his training, he had been running 3,000 miles and biking 10,000 miles per year for three consecutive years. There wasn't that much for him to do in Italy, he said, and there were very few races. Once, he biked 400 miles in 96 hours. He was ready. He crossed the finish line of his first Ironman race in a time that would be his best, 11:05:46. He went on to finish three more Hawaiian Ironman World Championship races in times of 11:25:29, 11:41:57, and 13:06:00 in 1995. In addition, he's completed the Florida Ironman three times.

### **IRONHEAD RACE PRODUCTIONS**

Jack has been the CEO of Ironhead Race Production for 15 years. But, he put on the Wool Capital Triathlon in 1988, now an annual event. Since then, Jack has put on hundreds of races of all distances, in all kinds of terrain and weather. “Hey, you're gonna get wet anyway!” he yelled to the participants through the rain at the start of last year's PrairieMan Half Ironman Triathlon at Joe Pool Lake.

But why did he continue this career and why does he do it today, long after his place in the pantheon of race directors has been secured, it being such a tenuous vocation, where pay is always questionable?

“We were always successful and our business always has grown, even now. We have never had a down turn in our business. We have had economically a couple of ‘bad’ events, but we never got in it for the money. So any money we made we thought was pretty ‘cool.’ Financial success was a secondary goal. Having fun and success at producing a safe race was our first concern.” Dollar for dollar, he feels they put on the best races; “We have the best races.” He also sees Ironhead Race Productions expanding.

He has a sense of urgency only gained through the military. As a result, it is with this focus, sense of urgency, and a “Just Do It” mentality, that Jack directs his races.

Anyone with military experience can recognize and appreciate his precision and delegating at an event. Civilians don't, can't, see this and think he's mad all the time. Not at all. He's the guy taking charge to make sure, one, no one gets hurt, and two, everything happens when it is supposed to happen.

**"I'm a caveman in the sport,"** he says. "Marketing has taken over everything. It isn't about racing anymore." He says the big thing now is "theme races." "I put on races for races. I put on a race how I'd like to see it done, comfortable for the athletes." He points out there wasn't certification or Tri-101 back then when he started putting on races. "Over 30 years of putting on races, I've evolved in putting on safe races. I still have deadlines, and rules."

His mentor was **CARL OWENS**, who used to direct the Texas Hill Country Triathlon, that later became the blue print for all triathlons, including the Hawaiian Ironman.

"I was impressed by his ethics." Calmer and shyer than Jack, Carl shared his thoughts about putting on races with Jack. "It was my blue print. I did my own case of copying."

He points out that some of the more important things for a race are prompt results and a good t-shirt. "Shirts are the single most important race item. Spend the extra change to have shirts. You're not going to carry your award with you. But you'll wear the t-shirt."

He's had his fair share of odd questions and perturbed moments. "I've had people complain they didn't have enough to eat. That's their responsibility." In the 1980's and 90's, athletes were savvy, he says, eating Fig Newtons and bananas before there was Power Bar. **"Your race is only as smart as your dumbest athlete."**

He feels athletes would want to do what he wants after an event. After a race, he'll drink water and Gatorade. When his business partner, Cliff, wanted something else at the races, Jack balked, but felt justified when he went to the Buffalo Springs Triathlon and that was all they had, water and Gatorade. Later, he likes to get together with friends, go out, and talk about the race. He does not expect a race to have a buffet table waiting when he crosses the finish line. So he doesn't provide that at his races.

### **FAVES**

His favorite moments over the years do not include those races he did well at, or even his PR's. Instead, showing Jack's soft heart, those favorite times include training with friends, **CHRIS GUNDERSON** and **LAUREN MAULE SMITH**. [ In the late 1980's and early 90's, both were extremely talented and well known local triathletes, bordering on professional. They have since moved away. Chris went to Austin working at first for Run Tex, then coaching high school. Lauren moved to Florida two years ago where she won the 45-49 age group at the 70.3 World Championships last fall.]. "We'd run negative splits, each loop getting faster as we ran in Bear Creek Park."

Lauren and he rode 100 milers together twice a week, continually, years ago. “We developed a little game where we’d sprint all the 45 MPH signs on the course, to break up the boredom. After years of doing that, one ride I decided to count how many there were in our 100 mile rides. There were 60 signs! Hell of a workout! We rode in the small chain ring for the first 70 miles, then finished up with the wind in the big chain ring. We made it up as we went along. And it worked!” Hinting at a time before heart rate monitors, “We trained and raced using the ‘Puke Factor,’ going until we were ready to barf.”

### **TRI-DALLAS**

Tri-Dallas was Dallas’ first foray into triathlon clubs, something that has continued, but with much less impact today. For a club with very humble beginnings in 1987, it became the most powerful triathlon club in north Texas, setting the standard for all multi-sport clubs. At its peak, Tri-Dallas was “the” club in the city. *The Dallas Morning News* only sought out Tri-Dallas leaders whenever a triathlon story was running. It was so powerful, all the other triathlon clubs in the area merged with Tri-Dallas, over time, one by one. There was talk between Tri-Dallas and the number one running club, **Cross Country Club of Dallas** (now Dallas Running Club), to work together closely on common causes, and membership as well. CCCD was not doing well at the time, experiencing a lack of focus, membership, and enthusiasm. This was something Tri-Dallas had and many others wanted. But it didn’t stop there. **Lone Star Master’s** (later **Dallas Aquatic Masters** or **DAM**), and the bike club **Mirage** were interested in being part of Tri-Dallas, in some form or fashion, as well; or, at the very least, tapping into Tri-Dallas’ membership, who were mostly affluent, single adults with discretionary incomes, several of which were nationally ranked. One of its members was **Chann McRae**, who went on to fame on the bicycle as Lance Armstrong’s childhood buddy, best friend, and foe through the Tour d’France. **Rick Crawford** was another elite athlete who was part of the “Super Club.”

(For the full story, see the April 2008 issue of *The Phast Times News*, or go to: <http://phasttimesnews.com> where you can see this and past interviews.)

Jack became President of the club in 1997, but not by his own doing. There was some controversy in his election. The club was showing signs of stress, having just merged with all the other area clubs, becoming a “super” club of sorts. It may have been the club having growing pains, or getting too big for its own britches. But, true to form, his military sense of urgency came to the surface. There was a job to be done, and it was going to be done.

From 1997 to 2001, the new club settled in for some of the best times of its life. It was the “Golden Age” Jack says.

According to member **JOHN RICCA**, there were club swims, bike rides, runs, and track workouts (**TNT-Tuesday Night Track** was started 10 years earlier under Tri-Dallas) not just on the weekends but also during the week, “not much social stuff, but pretty good attendance at local events and winning the triathlon club championship.”

With Richardson Bike Mart the title sponsor, the club prospered with revenue, and membership. Tri-Dallas was powerful, with members elected to high positions on various sports and Dallas boards. It was recognized the state over as influential and talented, if somewhat aggressive and cannibalistic, in comparison to other area solo endurance sports clubs and triathlon clubs from the four-state region. With club membership well over 200, and another estimated 300 that came on each year but didn't renew for a variety of reasons, it was a "Who's Who" of area endurance athletes with members highlighted in area media magazines almost every month for four years.

It also had a great 20 page newsletter organized by **LORRAINE SNEED** with various writers. The club successfully sponsored six events per year, despite Dallas' crowded sports calendar. It launched several area athletes to professional levels and was the first club to go on-line, creating a web site. The web site was recognized for its professionalism and portrayal of the sport in North Texas.

Jack, however, doesn't think the club set any standards during his Tri-Dallas tenure.

But, the problems that were underneath the club began to surface. There were problems of infighting, control, and conflicts of interest.

"The demise started," Jack says, "when you and I had our falling out. It really divided the club on several levels, those siding with you, those siding with the club's board, and those who really wanted no part of the whole mess or argument, and felt the club was no longer fun.

The club eventually withered and died in December of 2007, just a shell of its former self.

"There had been clubs before and after, and what I learned, as personalities change, so do clubs, that they rise and fall on the commitment of the membership and leadership. I think 'clubs' like Dallas Athletes and Play-tri with professional, full time 'leaders' have made clubs like Tri-Dallas outmoded. Folks don't want to be intuitive. They want guidance on training and race selection; not camaraderie."

### **ESTER**

Ester Weiss is the total compliment to Jack, helping him to see reason and balance when it is needed. Being married to Jack, she became involved in the sport.

**JOHN RICCA** met Jack and Ester in 1991. Living only three miles from them, he and Jack would train together. John volunteered and competed at many of Jack's events. Together they help the Mid-Cities Triathlon Club and were both active in Tri-Dallas. While saying Jack is knowledgeable and active in the sport, he adds, "Jack is fix-minded on the way to do things, but fair in his dealings with people. He sets a high standard for race administration and safety." John also mentions how encouraging Jack is to the youth sector of the sport.

John presented Jack and Ester with the region's 2008 President's Award, given to the person the President of the region (in this case, Candy Cheatham) thinks is deserving of special recognition.

In his speech, John listed Jack's 2008 accomplishments (Frost Yer Fanny Duathlon, 1<sup>st</sup> place age group; Striders Duathlon Long Course, 1<sup>st</sup> age group - which he also directed; Wool Capital Triathlon, 2<sup>nd</sup> age group - which he also directed; and finisher at the Ironman Florida Triathlon), and said the following: "He still managed to find time to promote youth development programs, which has always been near and dear to his heart. He has been promoting multisport in Grapevine Colleyville ISD, encouraging the development of duathlons there. He has produced several Youth Races in the DFW area. He acknowledges and supports some of the exceptional multisport athletes in our region through Team Ironhead. So despite the rough exterior we may see, deep down, under it all, he has a heart for our sport and he more than deserves to be honored with the President's Award."

Then John moved on to Ester. "Even though Ester was working full time in 1987, she became very involved in the management side of the multi-sport business, helping Jack produce events. She became active in officiating and she was instrumental in helping many new officials get started. I'm one of those. Ester officiated her first event in May, 1993. She was a very active USAT Official, having officiated 79 events in 15 years, including four Ironman World Championships in Kona and the National Duathlon Championships in 1998. March 1997, she progressed up the officiating ranks to Category 1, which is the highest level. She was made the USAT South Mid-West four-state Regional Coordinator for officials and served in this capacity for two years, 2001-2002. She was recognized for her many efforts in 1994 as Official of the Year. In 1996 she was recognized for Distinguished Service in Officiating by USAT, national. They are a team, and tonight we are honoring both with the 2008 President's Award."

## *“I’m a caveman in the sport”*

### HISTORY

One would expect a man of Jack's talent and experience to have a lot of trophies and memorabilia. He does. But besides that, the walls of his warm, modest home are also lined with books. Books and books and books. A real library, tombs of history, particularly U.S. history, and its conflicts. He minored in history, with 21 hours and a 4.0 grade point average. "My particular interest is 20<sup>th</sup> century history, including WWII and Soviet History. But I read a lot of early American history as well. I love history."

Currently he's reading, or just finished, "War Lord," the military history of **Winston Churchill**, and "A Traitor To His Class," a biography on **Franklin D. Roosevelt**. Also well represented are his heroes, both when he was growing up (**MICKEY MANTLE, ELVIS PRESLEY** and **JOHN F. KENNEDY**) and now (**BARAK OBAMA**) and those he admires (**HILLARY CLINTON**, and "all those serving our country"). Among Jack's heroes are Ester, Ramsey Elissa, and his business partner **CLIFF DIEROLF**.

When asked who he thought he resembled the most in history, he replied he wasn't sure, and asked me. "As to whom I am most like, I have no idea. That would be an interesting poll to run in **The Phast Times News**, who do your readers think Jack Weiss most replicates in history?"

When he reads this story, he'll be happy to see I picked out two, in my opinion. Winston Churchill for the agony of decisions, of making sure he's doing the right thing; and George Patton, because of the way Jack commands both a race he's directing and meetings he heads up. Both of these are meant as a compliment to "Ol' Ironhead."

When spare time allows, he likes reading (surprise!), the movies, Fleetwood Mac, and K-LUV 98.2 ("Music today, not my thing and as I never listen to it."), baseball ("Go Yankees!") and eating out at JR's Steak House in Grapevine, First Chinese BBQ in Arlington, and the Cheese Cake Factory.

### **CLIFF**

In 1993, Jack and Ester moved to Euless where they currently reside. Jack and Cliff met at the 1995 Richardson Bike Mart Christmas party. They began working together in 1996. As a volunteer, Cliff would have a task and they would work together to make the race happen. In late 1999, he became Jack's first and only full time employee. "Our relationship is what some call opposites are attracted," Cliff says. Often he was able to anticipate what Jack needed and do it before Jack asked. "If you ever compete at an Ironhead event, you know what to expect at his races. Some don't seem to understand it. A few don't like it. All Ironhead races are consistent and no one person gets any more or less than the next person."

### **THE SPORT**

His opinions of the sport are important because of his experience on both sides of the finish line banner, participant and race director. Add to that Jack's governing experience, and his perspective is worth considering.

While believing the area level of multi-sport races is strong and doing well, he also says there might be too much overlap of races. "But, ultimately, that's a consumer issue."

As for the level of competition in Dallas, "I think relative to the rest of the state it could be better. The heart of this sport competitively is Austin, where almost all the Pros live or develop. Austin is a much more friendly environment for training and racing. It has a bigger talent base. Except for Richardson Bike Mart, there really aren't any triathlon shops in the Metroplex. There are at least three in Austin. There are good shops in the Metroplex, but most are one dimensional or carry minimal tri products. Except for running shoes, Richardson Bike Mart has it all."

He thinks the sport has become "very main stream," and "has become way too commercial. Ironman went a long way in causing that." While that can be thought of as being good for the sport, "the level of knowledge and ability to discern quality has diminished over the years. This may offend some, but I don't see athletes necessarily being the most astute consumers when it comes to picking events. Participants might be getting more sophisticated, but I don't think they're getting any smarter. They're listening to too many voices."

“Athletes approach me all the time complaining about various events and the lack of safety. Yet they continue to patronize these same events.” He says the secret to changing an event is to boycott it. “If race directors see a drop in attendance then they make adjustments.”

The biggest problem he sees among athletes is the fixation on doing an Ironman race. “In my day there was only one Ironman: Kona. And most of us spent years training and racing before we embarked on that journey. Now it’s a resume ‘punch card’ on the road of life. No one does it for the challenge. They do it because it’s there, and their friends are going.”

Most athletes treat the desire to compete as a ‘fix’ and look more to convenience than safety and organization, treating their need to race almost like an addiction.” Jack stands by his own races, saying, “I think we put out the best product based on safety and organization.”

Area support of triathletes, its individual disciplines, and the races is good, he says. So he doesn’t understand why local athletes run off to distant races when they can do a race of equal distance right here. “But I guess travel is part of the game.”

### **CYCLING**

Twice, Jack has been hit by a motorist while cycling. Oddly, both times occurred during a local triathlon. “We’ll leave the race name for another time.”

He is not fond of local motorists, however, giving comment on the recent sentencing of the driver, drunk and high at eight in the morning, who killed two cyclists near the Joe Pool Lake. Though convicted, the driver was given two years of jail time, as the defense made the case it was the cyclist’s fault. “The State of Texas has very little regard for human life. When you can get 25 years for smoking or selling pot, and only two years for killing someone, then we all should realize we live in a state where the laws and officials have their values distorted.

Personally, anyone who knowingly drinks and then drives a vehicle should be convicted of premeditated murder and be given life in prison or the death penalty. It’s premeditated because you knew what might happen and still chose to drink and drive.”

In contrast, Jack tells the story of being caught after dark while riding in Italy. “We were on the way back from town, it was getting dark, and as we were racing for home, the base, a car came up from behind, slowed down, put on his headlights, and ‘rode’ behind us until we got back to the air base gate. We were doing 20 plus mph. I doubt if this would ever happen in the USA.”

### **DISAGREEMENTS**

One of the stories that always seems to come up with the name of Jack Weiss is about some disagreement he had with some one or some organization. His tiffs and arguments are legendary. But the inquiry to Jack’s friends and those involved in disagreements with him, are met with down cast eyes, a smirk, and a tilt of the head, as if to say, “That’s Jack. If these poor souls had simply known and accepted that, life would have been much easier for them.”

I asked Jack, "Would you say you had/have a temper, or are simply passionate about triathlon?" His one word answer said a lot. "Both," he answered without anything else to add. OK. Got it.

A fallacy surrounding Jack Weiss is his gruffness. Like the tarp covering his prized possession, it is a covering, hard on the outside weathering storms, keeping the inside comfortable, inviting, and running like new. Many interpret it as meanness, or unhappiness with life in general. What they don't know is his kindness knows no boundaries, as well as his willingness to support local athletes and charities, those he believes are part of a good thing. Many of his donations and support are not made public, at his request.

But, also, there is his loyalty to his volunteers, his fierceness to back them up, no matter what, when an athlete or organization decides to level criticism. No one will ever pick on an Ironhead Race Productions volunteer. He knows all too well that it is because of volunteers there is a race at all. Jack knows a race can do without everything else – food, finish line, race director, athletes – but without volunteers to man various stations throughout a race, there is no race.

His wife, son, and **DAVE YOUNG** (current President of USAT South Mid-West four-state region) all have been telling him the same thing lately. It was a rumor that circulated three to four years ago. "**I'm getting mellower,**" he admits. This is a bit of a surprise because of the iron fist "ol' Ironhead" appeared to rule with for so many years.

"As we get older, the perspective changes. When you're young, you're materialistic and selfish. Jim Hoyt and I met yelling over the phone at each other. Now, he's my best friend. Ester and I are grandparents now. ...We all end up on the same road at the end."

Jack went on to explain the change of perspective he mentioned that exists while racing, that it's less about "the last person standing" and more about companionship. "You have a good race, you want to share with some body. It's about the sharing."

He says this gruffness others see stems from expectations. "My passion is my integrity. If I say I'll do it, I'll do it. I expect the same." His conflicts with other people, he says, is with their lack of integrity. They don't do what they promised.

Jack claims it's a compliment when other race directors want to knock him. "If you're the most successful, others want to take shots at you." But, he doesn't like it when others are "making a buck off my work."

"Jack is Jack," Cliff said. "And that makes him unique. I know Jack Weiss better than any one on this planet, except maybe his wife Ester. What I know may some day be the making of a book of my own."

There was a charge that Ironhead Race Productions was trying to be the only game in town in the late 80's and early 90's. "I wasn't trying to monopolize the sport. I don't care if others put on races. What bothers me is when a race is dropped on the same date as mine. I get a little angry."

In the old days, he says, *Runner/Triathlete News* had calendar clearing days, when all the race directors would write down the dates for their events, to ensure there were no conflicts. That doesn't exist anymore, and Jack misses it.

He says he has "buried the hatchet" with **SCOTT EDER**, the wunderkind coach who one time trained **LANCE ARMSTRONG**, giving him his start. Jack speaks kindly and admiringly of Scott. "He had a lot to do with the sport and its growth." Currently, Scott manages Team Loncar Triathlon Team and supports the Ironhead races with his team.

**OLEN PENN** was a triathlon board member and has known Jack for about 10 years. He says he's "bumped heads with him on numerous occasions. But I've never hated him. In fact, I've copied his style and learned from him. It's just that we were on opposite sides of the fence in the past."

When Olen discusses Jack to others the first thing he says to them is they have to understand that triathlon and Ironhead Race Productions is his business. "Once you understand that," Olen says, "you can understand why he does what he does, whether you agree or not."

Defending Jack, Olen says it was suggested his terms on the national and regional board were "self-serving."

"Being a board member is usually a thankless job. You have to deal with a lot of crap that 99% of the athletes have no idea about and couldn't care less. Sometimes it can require many hours of work each day. But it's a job that someone needs to perform, paid or not. I would have never served on the board if not for Jack challenging me. 'Step up or shut up!' Jack's words.

"Jack KNOWS that he is a pain. He also knows that he produces a good product. People around here take it for granted. Ironhead races don't offer much outside of a good race. But he also doesn't charge a fortune to do his races. You never have to worry about the results being accurate. You don't have to worry about the course not being marked properly. These are all things I've had to deal with at other local races. Jack is a pioneer of the sport. He is known nationally. He brought multisport to the area when athletes had very few options. I'd say the Dallas area is a Mecca because of him. If not for the Joe Pool events 10 years ago, what multisport venue would have brought hundreds of athletes together from Oklahoma to Austin?"

"He's not unrealistic. He just doesn't let anyone run over him. Before you get upset with him, look at things from another point of view besides your own. If not for Jack's attitude, I think he would be praised by EVERYONE."

"Even though I know that he continues to tick people off, to this day I can say that he has been friendly to me when doing so served him no benefit. Even after all of our conflicts, we still are able to sit down and talk. Even when we were at odds, he told me several times that if I have a

problem with him I should call him and discuss it. There has never been a time when he was too busy to take my call or respond to an email.”

In reply, Jack said laughingly, “One of the things I learned is staying off web site forums and message boards.”

He cites specific McKinney and Denton area coaching groups that have “a problem with integrity,” going bankrupt. And what was the TexasMan Triathlon is now the PrairieMan Triathlon because of Dallas University, “partners didn’t come through with sponsors.”

His disagreement with The Baylor-Tom Landry Triathlon resulted in his being fired as race director. According to **BARBEE EBERHART**, the Aquatics Coordinator at the time (she has since left for colder climates), Jack was making the race one of his own, part of Ironhead Race Productions’ property. Barbee said they wanted to make sure it belonged to Baylor-Tom Landry Center. Jack insisted he “was fired for telling the athletes to be careful while crossing the railroad tracks because we had two people hit out there the year before.”

In retaliation, Jack started the Benbrook Triathlon and placed it on the same date as the Landry race. “Benbrook was started to stick it to the Baylor-Tom Landry Center after they cancelled a race while taking cash registrations, and then not returning it.” Today, the Benbrook race continues, and the Landry race is long gone.

Then there was suggestion that Jack was upset for not being chosen as the race director for the 2000 Triathlon Olympic Trials held in Irving’s Los Colinas. In March 1999, he attended a USAT national board meeting in Orlando, Florida. He was very supportive of the professional athletes who would come to the trials. He had been on the national board for eight years, and “never voted for, or did anything, that benefited just me. Only if it was everyone, benefited a lot of other people. Never.”

When the question came up for where to host the trials, “I said Joe Pool Lake. I had already had the first International Triathlon Union [ITU] World Cup Duathlon there. It made sense.”

Along with **NEIL** and **LINDA NASH**, who were heading up the Tri-Dallas triathlon club at the time, Jack and Ester put on the world championship race for duathlons right here at Joe Pool Lake. “We put that on at a time when duathlon needed a lot of help.” It was a lot of work, and it was “awkward” he says. “There were no computers.” Of it all, like most of his life, he says, “The world championships found me!”

He then met with the “Dallas 2012” people who were trying to bring the Olympics to Dallas in 2012. They wanted to host the trials at White Rock Lake. “I said, ‘Can’t do it. There’s no place to swim.’” The team wasn’t interested in Joe Pool Lake, despite being the location for a world class event previously, because “It didn’t show case the city.”

Jack suggested a date in early April, knowing it would be similar to the same weather the athletes would experience in Sydney, Australia where the 2000 Olympics would be held. In the end, the race committee decided to host it at Los Colinas, in late May, not knowing north Texas weather can be brutal in late May with both heat and humidity, conditions not too favorable for finding the best athletes.

"I went to Kona, Hawaii on that date," Jack said. And USAT lost a lot of money on the race.

At the 1993 Farmer's Branch Olympic Distance Triathlon, held at the Double Tree (now the Omni) on 635, immediately west of I-35 and across from the Xerox building, a male participant died within a 100 meters of the start of the swim. It was his first triathlon. He was in one of the larger waves, and presumably when he began to have trouble and went under in the throng of other swimmers, he was never seen by the canoeists or kayakers supervising.

Jack was the President of the region at the time. According to Jack, it was his testimony that forced the family to settle out of court.

After that dark day and in its aftermath, is when the famous old tongue depressors were used for swimmer accountability.

Interestingly, a search on the internet "Farmers Branch Triathlon" shows nothing at all.

## *"I'm getting mellow."*

### **THE TEAM**

Jack has sponsored a team of athletes for seven years. Local up and coming duathlete and speedy runner, **WES RADETSKY**, brought the idea to him first. "You should have a team." Then Cliff. Jack was reluctant ("I didn't want to charge anyone."), but gave in. He loses about \$5,000 in entry fees alone, not including clothing.

The team started with 12 athletes (six men, six women). Today it has 25. His requirements are simple: 1. "Podium" – place in your age group; 2. "Support Ironhead Race Productions" – that means compete in them or volunteer at them; 3. "Be a role model, hang around for awards/results, dress accordingly, and work kid's races." In return, he treats the team like adults. The "dress accordingly" rule harkens to college level sports (and high school sports from a gone by era) where athletes were expected to wear a sports jacket on game day. Could you imagine that today?

The team can pick out whatever clothes they want to race in so long as it's black, white, or grey. "But they have to wear it!"

Of his team members, he is most impressed with **JACOB EVANS** (February 2009 *Phast Times News* cover story), but there have been some disappointments, too, he says. He remembered Bronda as being the most persistent. "We retired her number, number five."

“Jack started Team Ironhead prior to any other racing teams around,” Olen said, who was also an Ironhead team member. “All he required is that the people do or work his races and not bad mouth him. He gave recognition to those he felt were worthy of it.”

### **SUCCESS/FUTURE**

Jack is by any standard, a success. He will only say he’s “successful.” Ironhead Race Productions is continuing to grow. “We’ve improved our personal lifestyle. But, I don’t get to race as much as I want to. I enjoy doing it.” He says his greatest pleasure is when the gun goes off, watching the athletes follow the instructions he’s laid out for them, and the volunteers. He’s put on about 300 races and “The ‘WOW’ is still there,” he says. “It never stops.”

When asked about directing Ironman, his response was quick. “Naaaa!” He doesn’t see Ironman ever coming to DFW, citing the area as having no infrastructure. Besides, the state already has three 70.3 Half Ironman Triathlon Series races in Texas. “They’re looking for cities with a population of 250,000 that don’t have sports teams.”

He’s 64 years old. “I don’t feel like I’m 64.” People are already asking how long he will continue doing what he’s been doing. His wife warned him, “I’m not doing this in 10 years.”

“Cliff said I have to keep doing it until I’m 69 for his retirement.” Jack pauses. “I’m at a point where I’m dealing with my own mortality.” The bottom line is he doesn’t know how long he will continue. “I don’t think I can work for anyone else... When I worked to train, I trained to be fit, and race well. Now I train to work, to do my job well. Race directing, it’s a hard thing. It’s a physical thing. We’ve trademarked everything, so that if we ever sell it, the person is getting a company, and not just a bunch of cones and bike racks.”

He predicts the current economic recession will appear at the Ironman races first, then trickle down, but won’t affect the races locally for at least a year. “Locally, people have toys, bikes they already bought and paid for. They need recreation, and now these people have extra time.”

### **EPILOGUE**

Every once in a while a writer gets the opportunity to write about someone or something he has looked forward to for years. In terms of fishing, it’s catching the big one at the lake everyone in town knows about. It’s the chance to interview a boyhood hero. I enjoy all the stories I do, and admire them greatly. But this story,... This is one I’ve looked forward to since meeting Jack somewhere back in the mid- to late 80’s. Over the years, we’ve been great friends, bitter rivals, and, I say this with disappointment and sadness, even sworn enemies. \*sigh\*

This writer was one of those unfortunate souls who crossed swords with “Ironhead.” Over the next seven years, awkward silences and purposeful distances were the rule of the day at events. This writer knows first hand both sides of the fence. Neither of us “won” in our disagreement. There were only degrees of losing.

When I started The Phast Times News, I swore I'd never even mention him in this publication. So it is, with honor and glee I am able to write about someone that has become part of my life again, one whose character is almost bigger than life itself. Years later, his photograph and interview appear in the same issue in which he lists his races.

I am happy he agreed to have his story told to us. (As far I can tell, no one has done a story as detailed as this one.) I predict Hollywood will one day come knocking to do a story about him, or at least base a character on him.

It was overcast, grey, and in the 40's, on December 11, the day I met Jack at his home on the corner of Fuller Wise and Ash streets in Euless, and to take pictures. He's wearing a grey Ironhead Race Productions sweatshirt, sleeveless and baggy. Once inside, he changes into a black Ironhead Race Productions t-shirt. The black bike style shorts remain constant. On his feet are an older style of Asics light weight trainers. "I don't run enough to wear out shoes," he grumbles.

We shook hands next to his pride and joy. Most would quickly think it was one of his bikes. Or maybe his wife, Ester. Or his dog, Kuma, who romped near by. All are true in a sense, but not the target of his real affections, the soul of Jack, reminding him of a different person than most know him or see him as.

Underneath a tarp covering laid a dormant, but very well tuned and polished 1972 Corvette, which he purchased brand new, before he met his wife, a point made very clear. It has only 35,000 miles on it and looks great just sitting there in the garage, a few feet away from his bikes, helmets, and tri-gear. This was another side and life of Jack. "What you don't know about me is I am a car enthusiast." He has owned four Corvettes.

Before we got inside to talk about him, he chatted happily and confidently of this piece of machinery. He knew every part of every mile driven, with tales of speeds of 145 MPH. He's never received a ticket with this car. The tarp covering this prized possession was indicative of the "Jack Weiss" many people don't know.

We toured the rest of his home, the registration room, which would be a breakfast nook for another middle aged idle couple, and a room where trophies, posters, and two bikes on trainers stood at the ready, Jack called the "I Love Me" room.

We then talked for well over three hours, pulling ourselves away, and back to the demands of the day that was quickly slipping away.

Doing this story, it was hard to know where to start because of his complicated and multi-faceted life, personality, and dealings. There are very few big names in sport he hasn't rubbed shoulders with. Along with his wife Ester, Jack has one of the largest race production empires of any director in the history of north Texas, stretching from Dennison to Waco, and San Angelo to Athens, for about 20 years.

There were also times (as I write this, I'm close to finishing) I worried Jack would be angry or upset that I may have exposed his foibles, his warts, or maybe too much of him for the readers to devour, touchy subjects about his disagreements with others, Tri-Dallas, and the infamous 1993 Farmer's Branch Triathlon where an athlete died. It was, and still is, a real worry. But, I also want to do Jack justice by covering all these subjects, something I'm not sure other writers would have done by shunning his story. They may have the same fears I have, of finding myself on the wrong side of Jack, a place no man or beast wishes to be.

Just from what he's done, it is intimidating to go before him, shake his hand, and walk into his house. If one can do any of this with anything less than immense respect, the person is a fool. Like standing before a very large tamed animal, you know at any time you could be the animal's next meal.

Then I received the following email on January 19: "Thanks for doing this, means a lot to me. Was good visiting with you as well. A lot of history between the two of us. Very scary. Jack." The tarp over the 72 Corvette was pulled back just a bit when I met Jack and we began talking that raw December day. When I left, the sun had begun to come out and warm things up a little. And the tarp was pulled back on, tight and snug, to protect its prize procession: the engine, heart, soul, and leather interior.

Now, why was I scared?

*PTN*

THANKS, JACK!