

VALERIE SILK - THE IRONMAN'S MAGIC

By Lyn Van Ert

This spring Ironman Race Chairperson Valerie Silk left Hawaii to venture into Canada's cold north. Her demeanor, charm, and honesty literally melted hearts as well as the late spring snow of Canada's Okanagan Valley.

"I want to duplicate the Ironman experience for as many athletes as I can," Valerie explained as she continues to take her Ironman around the world, "It's unfortunate that I can't accept the entry of everyone who applies, but I just can't sacrifice safety, particularly in the swim."

Bedding down the Ironman in foreign countries isn't a job she approaches casually. It requires many months of investigation as well as hours and hours of conversation with race directors, race committees, ~~and~~ event organizers and sponsors. What Valerie is looking for first and foremost is safety and security: Race organizations that stage safe races for the athletes and can provide financial security that will continually ensure quality races year after year.

It was Valerie's first trip into Canada. She was scouting the country in much the same way other pioneers and inovators have in the past. "I'm here to learn for myself what's happening with triathlons in Canada; where they are, what the response is, and how they operate. My strongest first impression is of the beauty and challenge of the courses I have seen so far." She pointed out that as is the case in the continental United States, the west seems to be taking the lead in both the number of events as well as the number of endurance triathletes in training.

Even beyond scouting a home for an event which could legally boast the Ironman name and trademark, or setting in motion a Canadian Ironman Qualifying series, Valerie is considering the future of the Canadian triathlete himself.

"The time will come when I can no longer accept every Canadian who applies for entry into the Hawaii Ironman, but I'd still like everyone who trains to have the Ironman experience," she explained.

That's truly the lady's style and strength. Her triathletes come first in every instance. Spend five minutes with her and there will be no doubt. She actually does protect the Ironman athlete like a swan providing protective escort for its cygnets. Again and again during the week I was touched by the obvious affinity she shares with the competitors, even the more difficult ones. In almost every conversation she mentioned how she wanted to be able to give more: more to the athletes, more to the volunteers. And if Valerie can swing it, there will be even more rewards at the Finish Line, and rewards rather than awards seem to be the more accurate word. The lady plays no favorites - she is tenaciously unyielding when it comes to evenhanded fairness. Everyone must make application, everyone must stand in line, everyone is treated the same, because to Valerie, everyone is special.

A very conservative lady who wheels and deals with the 'big guns' of the corporate world, she is all the things she thinks she isn't and initially doesn't appear to be. She is a classic and masterful negotiator, very clear on what she wants. The clarity is arrived at through detailed objective investigation. The soft-spoken, always smiling, enormously gracious lady cannot be manipulated. She spots it and stops it with a velvet hammer before it begins. She's full of funny stories and admits to being so busy one year that her Christmas tree didn't come down 'til May! She is easily and often hurt by the controversy arising over the prize money issue. Somehow I wasn't convinced when she told me, "I'm getting thicker skinned now. It doesn't hurt me half as much as it used to." Surely those who push her for prize money don't understand the essence of the Ironman - they don't recognize the implied transcendence of the phenomenon itself. Who best could explain and define the Ironman than his mother - Valerie Silk? "The Ironman is ordinary people accomplishing extraordinary things".

"The Ironman story is one of volunteers and spectators, as well as athletes, reaching, and stretching, and achieving. Every year on Race Day lives are

suddenly altered, even transformed by the spectacle of the huge event. So many people watching around the world say to themselves, "I bet I could do that - I know I could try!" The Ironman creates a Gestalt experience in the pure sense of the word. It teaches that while not everyone can win, everyone can try and its the trying that is the finest prize. There's no crime in trying and failing, but only failing to 'try'.

As with any new expression of the human persona, it is conceptual, and often too abstract for some. The only real explanation available is: for those who understand, no explanation is necessary; for those who don't, none is possible. There is a magic about the Ironman. The magic is Valerie Silk. Erich Fromm stated that no great idea can survive unless it is embodied in an individual who lives the message. I'm betting each challenge will make her stronger and that the Ironman won't be an only child.

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