



# Cherie Gruenfeld:

Asking me to write a story about my wife is like asking one of Donald Trump's assistants to write about him: It's bound to come off as fawning, sycophantic and blitheringly mawkish. Given that Cherie Gruenfeld is also my editor, there's considerable personal liability attendant to the assignment as well. Instructions provided to professional bomb defusers come to mind: "Do your job, then step smartly away from the blast zone."

Nevertheless, I soldier on, because it's a story worth telling, not so much in the chronology of the evolution of a champion age-grouper but because of the opportunity to ponder the nature of seemingly contradictory tendencies in a single person.

I'll explain.





# OneFromTheHeart

By Lee Gruenfeld

**UNFAZED: LIVING WITH A TRIATHLETE.** I co-wrote Evander Holyfield's autobiography two years ago. I think his camp was expecting me to be bowled over by his work ethic, his ability to absorb pain, his dedication and his mental strength. There were more than a few puzzled looks when I seemed to take it all in stride, as if I see this kind of thing every day.

That's because I do. I live with a triathlete who has competed in 22 Ironman events and won her age group in 13, nine of them in Kona, and is the owner of a handful of world and U.S. records. She may not have gotten \$34 million for going three rounds with Tyson, but it was pretty obvious to Evander from the get-go that she had a lot more in common with him than I did.







But my intent here isn't to belabor the givens. Yes, she spent winters arising at 4:30 five mornings a week to make her way down a treacherous mountain road through various combinations of fog, snow and ice to a pool an hour away. But there are thousands of stories like that, all better left to the likes of mountain climbers who like to talk about who lost the most toes on K-2.

Inconsistencies are what fascinate me. Years ago I asked Cherie to call a client of mine and tell him I'd broken down on the road and would be late for a meeting, when the fact was I had overslept. She stared at the phone for a while, picked it up, set it down, picked it up again, dialed and hung up, then stared at it some more and finally froze altogether. That's when I discovered that she's genetically incapable of lying—at all, to anyone. Not to traffic cops, used-car salesmen, loan officers, potential employers, warranty adjusters, customer service agents, children ... not to anyone to whom the rest of us dissemble as easily as we sip coffee.

So what's inconsistent about that? Before becoming a triathlete, Cherie was one of the best software sales reps in the business. She'd risen to executive marketing positions in two highly advanced technology companies, including the Artificial Intelligence Corporation. It was said that she could sell you your own desk, and she was especially famous for having been named Salesman of the Year at database pioneer Cullinet by selling \$2.4 million worth of software that hadn't even been written yet.

That ain't natural. How can anybody sell like that without lying?

**A NATURAL ATHLETE.** Speaking of natural, is there such a thing as a natural athlete? Of course there is. I know this for a fact because I'm not one but can spot someone who is at a thousand paces. As it happens, that's how I spotted Cherie, walking into a crowded room at a corporate conference 33 years ago. While most traipsed through the doors in various degrees of stagger, lurch and droop, this one wafted in like the puck on an air-hockey table. Watching her walk was like watching a bolt of silk unfurl. "Bring me that one!" I said (out loud, as it turned out, much to my chagrin). Later that evening someone did, during an award ceremony for the various athletic contests for conference participants. Seems Cherie had entered the men's tennis tournament—and won it. The organizers tied two tennis balls together with a length of string and dangled them as they called Cherie to the podium, where they awarded her an "honorary pair of balls" along with the first-place trophy.

The next morning I played tennis with her myself.

Oh. My. God.

**THE SCORECARD.** The competitive spirit is traditionally spoken of in warrior terms. After all, competition is a zero-sum game. One wins, many lose, and the victory is as much about the vanquishing of the foe as it is about the ascension of the winner.

But there is an important distinction between "I won" and "I beat everybody."

For some, including Cherie, the point of competing isn't to trounce the opposition; it's to elevate yourself. Podium position isn't the goal; it's the scorecard.

Some years ago Cherie badly twisted an ankle about 2 miles before the finish of the Wildflower Long Course Triathlon in central California. While still on the ground she was passed by Barbara Warren, a good friend who would go on to win the race. Cherie got up and managed to finish second. At the award ceremony she put on

a pair of socks to hide the blue-tinged swelling and forced herself to walk to the podium without limping. All the crowd was to know was that Barbara was the better athlete that day.

In sports like golf and bowling, you can compete without competitors. The sport comes with built-in quantification. Shoot 79 when you've never broken 80 or bowl 12 above your average and you're getting better. I used to make a lot of friendly golf bets with Cherie's brother, Larry. Sometimes we played against each other two or three times a week. Thing is, I only actually see the guy once or twice a year because he lives in Washington and I live in Palm Springs. It doesn't matter that we play 1,500 miles apart because we just compare scorecards by e-mail.

Triathlon isn't like that. The conditions aren't repeatable and absolute numbers are largely meaningless. That's why some years will see a dozen age-group records broken in a race and others might see one or two. Your only measure is how you stacked up against everyone else in the same race.

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This is especially true of older athletes. The difference between them and younger ones is that the older ones are being negatively affected by age. The younger ones aren't. They're still getting better.

Cherie is graceful about many things in life, but aging isn't one of them. The decline in her abilities was sudden and, despite her considerable intellect, she truly doesn't understand why that should be so. It just didn't seem to be a given that, even at 65 years of age, she should have fallen that far.

In a way, she's right. It started with a senseless accident at the 2002 Ironman Utah that shattered her clavicle, broke five ribs and tore up her hamstring. It continued with another bike crash a few years later that wrecked her shoulder. Both involved questionable diagnoses, delayed and unorthodox surgeries and difficult recoveries. A third incident that was "solved" with cortisone in her knee may have been the cause of her current inability to lift her right foot high enough off the ground when running, to the point where the rubber on the sole of her right shoe literally disappears after 25 miles. To any dispassionate outside observer, these are all obvious proximate causes of her compromised performance.

But not to Cherie. She doesn't believe any of those should have brought her down that fast. Aging shouldn't have, either.

So what did?

"I don't know," she'll tell you. "But I should be doing better than I am."

This from a woman with three college degrees.

I should have known better. Once when we were in Panama we rented a couple of surfboards and headed for the beach. I'd surfed for years as a teenager and was having a blast riding the near-perfect waves, but Cherie couldn't manage to stand up for more than a second or two without falling over. This was strange from someone who was so coordinated. A few months before that we were visiting a friend who'd just gotten one of those training golf clubs with a shaft





consisting of three hinged sections that flop around independently. The idea was that if you made a perfect swing, all three sections would stay aligned and look like one solid shaft. My buddy and I had been struggling with the thing for half an hour and it was like trying to shoot pool with a rope. Cherie picked it up, took her stance and swung it just once. It looked as though all three sections had been welded together into a solid steel beam.

So here she was, flopping around helplessly in the Pacific while her clumsy husband was doing the “Endless Summer” thing a few yards away. After about half an hour of this she was pounding her fist on the board and howling in frustration. Clearly she’d had about enough so I came over just as a wave came in and flipped her board over. Sure enough, all three fins on the triple-skeg design board were missing. Duke Kahanamoku himself couldn’t have ridden that useless piece of junk.

When I explained that, she wasn’t a bit mollified. “Should have been able to ride it anyway,” she muttered.

There was no convincing her. Then I gave her the board I’d been riding. Oh. My. God.

**SPLIT PERSONALITY.** So what’s it like to live with her day to day? If she’s not injured, fine.

Cherie has a thriving coaching business consisting of both private clients and others via Ian Murray and Jamie Silber’s Triathlon Training Systems. When one of those clients gets injured, Cherie counsels patience and a rational, careful approach to recovering and getting back in the game.

If I were to tell you what Cherie is like when injured and how she approaches getting back into the game, it would not only put the zonk on everything I’ve said about her but would also wreck her coaching business.

So the only thing I’ll say is this: When she’s been hurt and unable to train or compete, rabid Rottweilers have been known to skitter fearfully to the other side of the street when they see her coming.

**LOOKING BEYOND HERSELF.** If there’s one common trait that characterizes champions, it’s unapologetic self-absorption. It’s necessarily that way. After all, there are hundreds of thousands of people

who are genetically wired to be great runners, boxers, swimmers or triathletes. What turns some of them into champions are discipline, unrelenting drive, an off-the-scale work ethic and a willingness to sacrifice others to their own cause.

How does that square with an expansive generosity of spirit toward those less fortunate?

Usually, it doesn’t, which is why celebrities fork over millions to public relations agencies who make a living by painting their clients as something they’re not, because if they were, they wouldn’t need a public relations agency in the first place.

It’s a question that plagued Cherie not long after she discovered her long-distance running abilities and began winning medals. The more she won, the harder she worked, placing the kinds of demands on herself that anyone who reads *Inside Triathlon* is already well aware of. Things that didn’t fit in the training schedule didn’t get scheduled. Even things that did were often amended, sometimes inconveniently, to accommodate.

It was a conscious choice, and I was all for it. But it bothered her. She wasn’t used to it. And something was missing.

About nine years ago she was invited to speak at an elementary school in a troubled part of the troubled city of San Bernardino, Calif. It was in connection with an underfunded, essentially desperate program to try to bring some light to young lives who had seen very little of it. Cherie, an avid proselytizer for her sport, talked about triathlon and then asked who among the listeners would like to try one. Several hundred hands shot up, and at a tryout a few days later, she chose a small group to see who among them might take it seriously.

Out of that humble beginning grew the Exceeding Expectations program. Much has been written about this extraordinarily effective effort to turn around lives given up for dead, so I won’t belabor the details here. Suffice it to say that she brought the same zeal and dedication to that endeavor that she had to everything else she’d done in her life and career.

But let me be clear: Cherie isn’t out to change the world or start a movement and she’s not on a special mission at the behest of some inner voice. She simply fell in love with these kids. She saw lives that had essentially been discarded, not out of conscious malevolence





on anybody's part but out of the same despair that afflicted their families, their neighborhoods and, depressingly often, their schools. Experts, armed with statistics and experience, took Cherie aside and warned her that she was not only wasting her time but risked giving false hope to the hopeless. "A third of these kids," she was told repeatedly, "are going to be dead or in jail by the time they're 18. More than half will never make it to their senior year in high school, the girls mostly because they'll get pregnant."

Cherie, as usual, cut to the heart of the matter. "If their lives are hopeless anyway, what's the harm in trying?"

"Oh, I'm not worried about them," one counselor replied, waving dismissively at the school building as though writing off every kid in it. "I'm worried about you. You're going to get your heart broken. I guarantee it."

After nine years and 80-some-odd kids, two dropped out of school, two got in trouble with the law and one got pregnant. One was killed by a hit-and-run driver and another was killed in a drive-by shooting.

cated by any of the hundreds of people who have called Cherie over the years and asked how to start one in their own communities. "There's no magic," she explains patiently. "Talk to every kid every few days. Every single one, and if you don't see them, call them. If they don't have phones in the house, buy them cell phones. You have to get their report cards and crash down on them if they're sub-par. You have to be in their faces constantly, one on one, and be willing to go into their homes and negotiate with their parents if you see things going south. You have to make them understand that there's at least one person in the world who isn't going to let them get away with doing less than they're capable of and make it your business to know exactly where that line is.

"You have to take them out for training, get them to races, bargain with race directors to get entry fees waived or discounted, round up volunteers who will be in it for the long haul instead of once in a while, arrange for transportation for every event, and when you have all of that covered? You have to beg for money from your friends, your family and just about

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But Edgar is in the U.S. Marines, Jose is in the Army stationed in South Korea and Marvin is in the Navy. Nik, Carlos and Mikey are in college, Nik at the University of California, San Diego. Marlene is finishing her last three years of high school in college, with two full years of college credit, as part of a special program for highly motivated students. Vianey has been chosen to participate in an exclusive summer camp for future leaders of California. Josh and Damien—both adopted by the teacher who co-founded Exceeding Expectations with Cherie—are in the San Bernardino County Schools Honor Orchestra, and Josh is in a special school for gifted children. Those are the highlights; across the board, grades are up, behavioral problems are virtually nonexistent and the kids are learning to set goals and work to achieve them.

Why? For the same reason that the program hasn't been successfully dupli-

everyone you come into contact with. You have to do it constantly, and shamelessly, because no matter how humiliating it is for you and how annoying it is for them, the alternative is to do less for the kids, and that's simply unacceptable.

"Oh, and one other thing: You never, ever give up on a kid, no matter what he does. Ever."

Exceeding Expectations isn't about supplying money and building athletes; it's about supplying yourself and building people. If you're a kid on the EE team, you show up for training and races on time and prepared. At races, you'd best be looking people straight in the eye when you tell them your name. You say thank you to the race director who comped your entry and to the volunteers who showed up to run or swim with you. At the annual EE Swimathon you make the fundraising calls yourself. Cherie doesn't care how much you raise. She cares



that you picked up the phone, made a call, stated your case and then followed up with a letter.

Medaling in a local triathlon isn't going to get you through life; having a basic set of social skills will.

Interestingly, when it comes to certain life skills, EE kids have it all over their more fortunate counterparts in mainstream society. They've learned that complaining doesn't work; taking matters into your own hands does. At the Desert Triathlon a few years ago, we saw a 14-year-old from affluent Brentwood, Calif., throw a temper tantrum when his bike computer didn't work that ended with him throwing the bike at his mother's feet and storming off without finishing the race.

About an hour after that, when Cherie went to retrieve 12-year-old EE team member Brandon's bike from transition, she discovered that it wouldn't shift.

"How'd you change gears?" she asked him.

"I didn't," he replied nonchalantly. When he couldn't get it to work, he simply hunkered down and did the entire bike course in one gear, playing the hand he was dealt as best he could because it never occurred to him that it could be improved.

Cherie's own education has been interesting. There was the time young Enrique heard her lamenting that we didn't have a bike for one of the kids. (All the bikes are donated by friends of the program and are kept in a trailer we haul to races and workouts. If the kids took them home, we'd never see them again.) He went up to her and said, "What kinda bike you need?"

"Why?" Cherie asked. "Do you know somebody who has one we can use?"

"Didn't say that," Enrique replied. "What I'm asking, what kinda bike you need?" I stifled a giggle. "And how many?"

Cherie was still all wide-eyed innocence. "But ..."

I pulled her away and explained. Then she turned around and explained a few things to Enrique. It was a pretty funny scene.

Enrique was the boy killed in a drive-by a year later.

**WELCOME HOME.** The other big preoccupation of Cherie's life is Kona. It's the preoccupation of a lot of triathletes, and all the reasons have been well-documented.

But in addition to the usual, there's one added attraction for Cherie, and that is that she's hopelessly, head-over-heels in love with athletes. Any athletes, no matter the sport. It's why she's the one who has the *Sports Illustrated* subscription and the one who devours the *L.A. Times* and *N.Y. Times* sports sections each morning before they even make it upstairs. In Kona, she doesn't have to admire them from afar. She gets



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to rub elbows with pros and age-groupers, hear their stories, watch them compete. On race day the ritual is always the same: finish her race, get a quick massage, run up to the condo (she insists that we stay within a seven iron of the start-finish line, so we've been ensconced next to the stone church on Ali'i for about 12 years), shower and change, then get back down to the finish area and marvel at the rest of the finishers until midnight.

In her book "Become an Ironman," Cherie tells the story of someone standing invisibly in the shadows of some bushes on the last corner of the race before the turn onto Ali'i. As each exhausted runner went past, he'd softly call out, "Welcome home." He did that for years, then suddenly disappeared. She was always sorry she never got a chance to find him and thank him.

I'm starting to wonder if he was ever really there.

**ONE BY ONE.** Cherie's is a life filled with wonder and accomplishment, all of it informed by purpose. She's convinced that life has to have some meaning, that one's existence can't possibly be an accident of molecules, lightning and chance. That deep conviction doesn't spring from religion or any special inclination toward esoteric philosophy, but from her innate ability to cut directly and logically to the heart of things without discursions into self-indulgent navel-gazing. If life has no purpose, she concludes simply, then there would be no purpose to life.

In other words, the fact that we're here is all the rationale we need for assuming that there's a reason.

A lot of the kids in Cherie's program are Hispanic. Despite the close proximity to the ocean of many in that community, there's an odd but deep-seated fear of water, which presents a bit of a challenge when you're using triathlon as the vehicle for trying to transform their lives.

They didn't trust the water, but they trusted Cherie, so to get them accustomed to being in a pool she put the littler ones on her back and carried them, one by one, through the swim leg of a race. At the Highland YMCA Sprint triathlon a few years ago, a buddy of mine snapped a shot of her carrying Brandon, the kid who did an entire bike race in one gear, just as they both glanced up before making a turn.

Of the thousands of photos taken of her, it's by far my favorite. It's hard to tell which of the two, Cherie or Brandon, was radiating the purest joy in that captured instant, or if the joy was in the sharing and therefore inseparable.

Either way, it's impossible for me to look at that picture and not be profoundly thankful for having her in my life. ①

For information on how to donate to Exceeding Expectations please visit [Eefoundation.org](http://Eefoundation.org)