

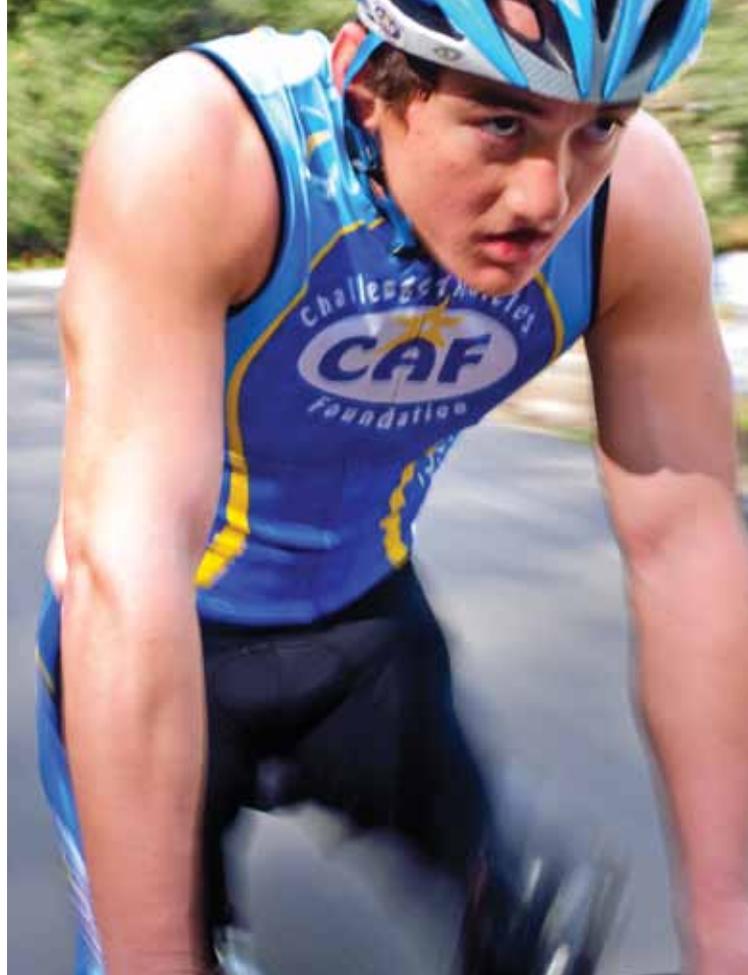
Better Off Together

When Rudy Garcia-Tolson missed the bike cutoff by eight minutes in the 2009 Ironman World Championship, his first shot at becoming the first double above-knee amputee to finish an Ironman ended sooner than he had hoped. Undeterred, 21-year-old Garcia-Tolson, with the help of coach Muddy Waters, was able to train in six weeks to finish Ironman Arizona and meet his goal.

BY BETHANY LEACH

PHOTOS BY NILS NILSEN





During a training ride near San Jose, Calif., Rudy Garcia-Tolson rounded a corner in the road and saw a group of cyclists in front of him. He accelerated to catch and then pass them.

"I thought, 'That little son of a bitch is going after them,'" his coach Muddy Waters says. "That's when a lightbulb came on. He's competitive ... If he had legs, he'd still be doing this."

It was day three of three crash training weeks to prep for Ironman Arizona last November. Just a few weeks earlier in Hawaii, 21-year-old Garcia-Tolson had attempted to become the first double above-knee amputee to finish an Ironman, but he had missed the bike cutoff by just eight minutes.

Garcia-Tolson lost his legs when he was 5 by his own choice. Born with multiple birth defects, he endured 15 surgeries before he asked his doctors if he could ever run on his scarred, deformed appendages, and they replied that his best bet would be prosthetic replacements. That was all the convincing Garcia-Tolson needed.

MOVING PAST KONA

After Kona, Garcia-Tolson returned home to Bloomington, Calif., and searched the Ironman website for the next race he could enter. It was Ironman Arizona, a mere six weeks away and already sold out. Under the special circumstances, he signed up with the help of race director Paul Huddle.

"I probably didn't even know the race existed. I thought I'd finish Kona, take a break, be just chillin' after that," Garcia-Tolson says. "But Kona didn't go the way I wanted it to, and I was disappointed."

When Rudy's mentor and friend, Bob Babbitt, co-founder of the Challenged Athletes Foundation headquartered in San Diego, heard that he wanted to race Arizona, Babbitt called up his pal Waters.

Waters says he felt thrilled and honored to be asked to coach Garcia-Tolson not only because it would be the first challenged athlete Waters coached, but also because, from watching videos of him race, Waters had already spotted things he could help Garcia-Tolson change. Waters

has a particular gift for being able to spot and correct any athlete's mechanical problems. And after studying Garcia-Tolson, Waters knew that he needed to change the bike.

"Muddy's the best coach around," Babbitt says. No one who has trained with him has been unsuccessful, he claims.

Waters is known among triathletes as a very hands-on coach; he motorpaces with athletes on the bike, and doesn't mess with heart rate monitors, wattage or whatever the newest fad in endurance training is.

"Some people left Muddy because he wasn't precise enough with numbers," says pro Brian Lavelle, whom Waters has coached on and off for 10 years. "He's very old-school—you just go out there and do it. If you care too much about threshold and pyramids, it takes away from the fun of the sport."

Babbitt met Waters while he was playing baseball, and he eventually convinced Waters to go into multisport. Waters admits that he was always more of a duathlete, but he knows he's gifted as a coach.

"I take a whole different approach," Waters says. "I cry and laugh with them. I dive in head first and work as hard as they do."

To prepare for Kona, Babbitt sent Garcia-Tolson to San Jose, Calif., to live with Waters, a coaching style he refers to as the "Muddy love." For a little less than a month, Waters and his wife, Barbara, washed the 21-year-old's clothes, cooked his meals and kept him from sticking to his normal habits such as eating hot Cheetos—a staple food for Garcia-Tolson—and staying up late playing video games.

"I knew he was part of the family when Barbara asked him, 'Hey are these your socks?'" Waters says with a laugh.

"I don't wear socks," Garcia-Tolson explains.

Coach Muddy's style was just what Garcia-Tolson needed. The two worked four to five hours a day, seven days a week. Garcia-Tolson needed no help with his swim—he had won gold medals at the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens and at the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing.

So they focused on the bike. They had to re-evaluate Garcia-Tolson's form. Waters got rid of the aerobars and gave the bike a standard front end. Because Garcia-Tolson only has his glutes to power the bike, he needed to sit upright to churn more energy into the pedals. Garcia-Tolson spent hours on a CompuTrainer working with Elliott Doyle, head fitter at Concept Cyclery in Morgan Hill, Calif.

Waters had also noticed that Garcia-Tolson had lost about five minutes in T1 trying to get his cleat in his bike, so he changed cleats for Arizona. They also worked on building up his core muscles to make them better able to take postural stress of his lower back during many hours in the saddle.

Waters changed a few things on the run, such as helping him to run up hills efficiently on his C-shaped prosthetic legs, but he put more emphasis on helping Garcia-Tolson overcome his disappointment in himself because of missing the bike cutoff in Hawaii. "Kona was obviously a big challenge, and that was the first time I didn't meet my goal."

Waters reminded him to remember that day, but to also remember that he was better than that. "You can't change the past," Waters told him. "You can only better it."

Garcia-Tolson and Waters came out of the training camp closely bonded. "We're always looking for something to improve," Garcia-Tolson says, "and I can almost sense what he wants—like if he wants me to go faster or do something different. He doesn't have to talk."

Babbitt has witnessed the relationship firsthand: "They were there for the same goal, and their communication is, well, a lot of it is unspoken communication. They just know. They're better off together."

ACHIEVING THE GOAL

At Ironman Arizona on Nov. 22, Garcia-Tolson conquered the swim, despite breaking his goggle strap minutes before the start. He placed 141st out of 2,400 athletes. The cold water, though, added an extra 15 minutes to his transition as he tried to warm up for the bike.

He cruised through the first lap of the ride, but flatted on the second. His lower back also became painful. By lap three, he says, "I thought, 'It's not going to be cool if I miss the bike cutoff again.' So I really hammered the last lap. I didn't want Ironman to have two victories over me." He finished with half an hour to spare.

On the run, his first marathon ever, Garcia-Tolson ran the first few and the last few miles well, despite hitting a wall around Mile 17. There was a point at Mile 23 when he lay on the pavement, mentally and physically drained. He looked for motivation and found it in the other athletes and in the spectators cheering him on. Being just a few miles from the finish, he says, "There was no way in hell I was going to stop then." Rather than walk to the finish, which he had time for, he decided to book it out.

The finish made all the suffering worthwhile. "My body was so wasted, so tired, but when I finished, the tiredness went away," he says. He was greeted by Huddle and fellow coach Roch Frey at the finish line with a large bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

After finishing his first Ironman, Garcia-Tolson talks about Kona as if it's a given that he'll finish the race this year; it's just a matter of how fast. "We're going to go back in 2010 and show the world that it's not about just finishing—we want to compete," Waters says.

Until October, the plan is for Garcia-Tolson to get more Muddy love—to live with Waters for two weeks out of every month—so that he can fine-tune the young triathlete's form and push him in his training. They also hope to get Garcia-Tolson new prosthetics. After Kona, Garcia-Tolson will be back in the pool for a shot at another medal at the 2012 Paralympic Games.

The Muddy love is the same treatment he's given other triathletes over the years, such as Aussie Craig Walton. "Muddy didn't treat Rudy any differently," Lavelle says. "The guy does pour himself out emotionally, and it really is more than a job. For Muddy, it's a life and he loves it. He'd do anything for his athletes." ▀