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THE GOLDEN BOY

**He runs for his father, swims for his lost mate.
Can ironman Shannon Eckstein crack the Coolangatta curse?**

By Will Swanton



Photography Kenny Smith

OUR GREATEST IRONMAN IS BACK IN THE RACE FOR THE TITLE THAT'S ALWAYS ELUDED HIM. CAN SHANNON ECKSTEIN OUTFRAN HIS GHOSTS?

By Will Swanton

HEART OF GOLD

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hannon Eckstein dives into the lane he shared with Dean Mercer a fortnight ago. It's 5.30am. He expects to be swimming until seven. The morning is clear and crisp. The water in the Olympic-sized pool is warm, 27 degrees. Steam drifts

skywards to form the sort of mist you'd expect of somewhere more mystical, maybe a hot spring. To the east, the sun is coming up. To the west, the moon is going down.

A small building has a sign on the roof: Miami Swimming Club. Backpacks, tracksuits, thongs, towels and T-shirts are strewn about. All the colours of the rainbow. Eckstein's coach, Alex Beaver, is in a hooded jacket and tracksuit pants. He's cold. He's clutching a coffee. He says the sun and the moon spend a little time together before they go their separate ways for the day. "They're saying good morning to each other. How beautiful is that?" he grins, without waiting for a reply.

Eckstein swims until seven. On the dot. He rips off his cap and exhales. *Phwoar*. Five-and-half hours later, he'll be wearing something altogether more formal. The Australian lifesaving community is about to bury a mate.

At a red light outside the Q Super Centre in Mermaid Waters, the Gold Coast suburb where he lives, Eckstein turns the radio down as if he wants to concentrate on all this, piece it together. Directly in front of us is the wall that Mercer, 47, ploughed into after suffering a fatal cardiac arrest. He'd been driving home from the shopping complex behind us after grabbing a few groceries. The red light lingers like it's staring at us. Eckstein glares at the wall, his brow furrowed. He tightly grips the wheel as if he's bracing for impact. His knuckles are white. "There it is," he says. "That's where Dean died, right there."

"I don't get it," he adds. "He's driven straight into the fence. Four lanes of traffic and up the footpath. It's hard to make sense of it. His wife and his sons – those poor kids. There's still a lot

of shock around here about what happened. I'm still like, 'Did that really happen?'" He goes quiet. "He must've had a green light," he says before turning the radio up and driving away.

Heard of Shannon Eckstein? Probably not. He sucks at self-promotion. If you follow him on Instagram, there's been nothing to see since his last half-hearted post in June. And his website should come with cobwebs: the most recent "Latest News" update was posted in December 2014. He's the most under-rated, over-achieving athlete in Australian sport. The eight-time time Australian ironman champion. The six-time world ironman champion. The nine-time Kellogg's Nutri-Grain Ironman Series champion.

When he climbs the stairs at the Northcliffe Surf Club in Surfers Paradise, he passes a huge framed photograph that calls him the G.O.A.T. (Greatest Of All Time). When he stands at the bar at Northcliffe for an amber-coloured refreshment or the \$11.65 salt and pepper calamari, above him is an honour board that lists every Australian and world title attained by the members of this breezy little joint. The 2008 Male Taplin Relay: Shannon Eckstein. The 2010 Male Surf Race: Shannon Eckstein. The 2016 Male Ski Race: Shannon Eckstein. The list goes on and on. When he turns right then left for the dunnies, another poster lists his Australian titles, complements each title with a photograph and proclaims him THE GREATEST EVER. There's a trophy cabinet next to the bistro, which is near the TAB, which is near the Keno booth, which is across the room from a large piece of silverware marked "The Billy Eckstein Memorial Award for Athlete of the Year". It's named in honour of Shannon's late father. He's won it seven times. Pictures of his old man are on the walls. The resemblance is uncanny.

Eckstein, 34, has won everything there is to win around here – except the Coolangatta Gold. This weekend, the on-again, off-again event is on again. And after a 10-year absence, the G.O.A.T. has decided he's in again.

Donna Eckstein is a bright-eyed woman sitting on the back lawn of the Mermaid Waters home where she and Bill raised Shannon and his brother Caine, a five-time winner of the Coolangatta Gold. "Bill coached them from the word go," she says. Before he started Nippers at 12, Shannon was a state and national cross-country runner. "Bill would have him out the back here, running round the streets behind us. Bill marked out 1000m, 1500m and 2000m on

the streets. He'd be on his bike and Shannon would be running next to him.

"Bill always instilled in him, 'You've gotta do the work.' It had to be quality work. Bill made their sessions short and sweet," says Donna. "He told Shannon you had to be consistent. No cutting corners. Bill would tell Shannon that technique was important with his running. He'd pick out a famous athlete and try to get Shannon to copy him. He'd be on his bike going, *The Carl Lewis arms! The Carl Lewis arms!*"

In 2003, at Kurrawa Surf Club, Billy Eckstein watched Shannon win his first Australian ironman title. Three years later at the same place, he dropped dead from a heart attack. He was 55. "Bill had his first cardiac arrest when the kids were quite young," Donna says. "He was in a boat of lifeguards when he collapsed. He had to have a valve replacement in his 30s. Around the time of Shannon's 21st birthday, it started playing up again. The valve was disintegrating. A year later it clotted up and caused the aneurysm. He collapsed at the surf club down there at Kurrawa and couldn't be saved.

"Shannon was always the kind of person who planned everything out pretty meticulously," she adds. "He worked out what he had to do and how

he could do it. He's always written notes for himself. When we lost Bill, it was pretty noticeable to me that he kept himself busy. He had routines that he got back to. He was back at the Miami pool a couple of days later."

"Everyone grieves differently," says Eckstein. "There's no right and wrong way. I wanted to get on with it. Maybe that was just my way of coping. Tricking myself. Going back to the same routines. But there's still times when someone rides past on a bike and I think, 'Jeez, that looks like dad. There must be some part of my memory that thinks he was always on a bike, there's a guy on a bike, that must be him. There's a lot of times I look twice."

Attention to detail is Eckstein's thing. He's nicknamed The Professor for his clinical ability to pick a race apart, piece by piece, as if he's ticking off the items on another of his to-do lists. Photographers complain about his lack of emotion, about his head being down when they want it to be up.

Ironman captures the public imagination when it's dramatic. When there's one bloke in front during the board leg, three blokes scrambling for the wave behind him and another four blokes latching onto the biggest wave of the set that will put all eight blokes on the same wave before a

mad sprint up the sand. Sport needs a plot twist as keenly as a movie does, yet when Eckstein won his eighth Australian ironman title at Maroochydore last year, the commentator said he was making the rest of the field look like Nippers. Which is the problem for Eckstein's potential sponsors and the sport itself. Good blokes don't always get the big bucks. His supremacy and understated nature is at odds with what image-conscious corporate backers are looking for.

"You train hard," he says. "You give yourself every opportunity. I'm not on a rollercoaster during or after a race. If it happens and I win, it happens. If not, I'll suck it up. I don't get that emotional and sometimes that means you might not get much credit for what you've done. You're not the story because you've made it look easy."

No need to pass the hat around. He has long-term backers who have stuck with him and kept a roof over his head – sponsors such as Kellogg's, Finz Swimwear, Dolphin Surf Craft and Endura, and the Northcliffe club – but they're lifesaving, Gold Coast-oriented deals. "I've had sponsors tell me, 'You're not good for the sport. You keep winning and you're making it boring.' That's hard to cop. I'm like, 'Tiger Woods kept winning. Roger

Federer kept winning. Their sports promoted the hell out of them because they kept winning.' I'm not saying I'm Tiger Woods or Roger Federer. But every time I race, it's bloody tough. You hurt. There's pain. People want to knock you off. Your guts still churn when you're expected to win. You still have your sleepless nights. Don't turn around and tell me that winning is boring. Don't tell me any of this is easy."

Still, social media is huge for sponsors. "I'm not into all that, really, and sometimes it means sponsors aren't into me," he says. "I find it hard to self-promote. It can be part of a contract these days: they want you to post two Instagram photos a fortnight, something like that. I see a post from an athlete that says, 'I had a good run today.' And there's a photo of him from down low. I'm thinking, 'You took someone with you to take a photo of you running? What is this?' I just want to go out and win races and be a good reflection on the companies I've had long relationships with. But that's not the era we're in today."

Eckstein is having juice, mocha and a bacon and egg roll. He's wearing Ugg boots. Deep scars, like rusted nine-inch nails, run down the back of

his calves. He says please and thank you to the waitress. He looks like an ironman should. The square jaw. The wide shoulders. The broad chest. An older guy on the next table leans over and says, "Are you doing the Gold? Hope you win it, mate. You deserve it." Eckstein is embarrassed. Not sure about that, he says. Thanks for that, though.

He's never won the Gold. In 1984, his father came seventh in the inaugural made-for-movie edition that was won by Guy Leech. His brother Caine has a handful of mentions on the honour board. The G.O.A.T. has always given precedence to the Australian titles, world titles and annual Kellogg's series but the Gold has a certain ring to it in the final phase of his career.

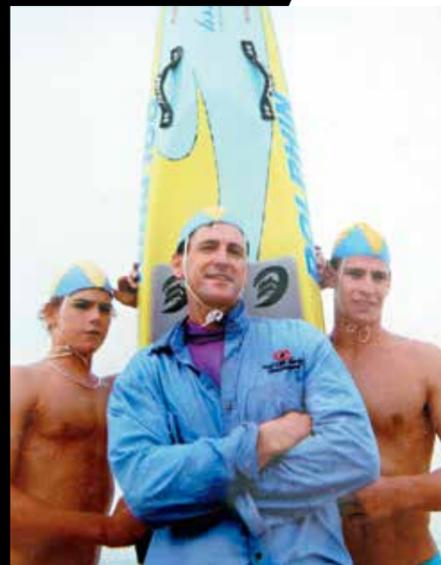
"Shannon could hang up his cozzies right now and go down in history with what he's done," says Leech, seven-time Uncle Toby's Super Series winner who also took the 1985 Gold. "But I think he'd love to pull the pin on the sport having won the Coolangatta Gold. He's your ultimate professional ironman. He's cut out from that old-fashioned breed of doing as much work as you need to do to win. He's probably as strategic and cunning as any ironman we've seen. He's old-school. I like that about him. He's a quiet guy. He just lives his life but has this incredible success.

"He's been unlucky with the decline in the profile of ironman," Leech adds. "He's come in at a time when the kudos and the amount of eyeballs on the events aren't there like they used to be. He's been stiff with that. He's not out there telling everyone how good he is. I'm not saying he should be. He's being true to himself. But that doesn't mean he's not as good or better or fitter or stronger than any other athlete in the world."

Leech says he remembers Billy Eckstein from the '84 Gold. "I got introduced to him before the race by a guy he was mates with. Billy had a few years on me but I remember thinking how incredibly fit he was. He looked like a tough beach bloke. He was one of those ironmen. You see Shannon now and there's a definite likeness there."

The Carl Lewis arms! The Carl Lewis arms! The problem for Eckstein at the Coolangatta Gold is that he's had Norman Gunston's legs. His surf skills are unmatched but his running, of all things, has tripped him up. He's barely been able to put one foot in front of the other at his three previous attempts. He's had a second and a third place. And while traditional ironman events are water-based, the Coolangatta Gold's extended foot racing is Eckstein's real Achilles heel. The Gold is 41.8km of hard yakka. A 23km ski leg

Mentor: Billy Eckstein in 2010 with Caine (left) and Shannon; Shannon in training; the brothers with their mum; Mercer



from Coolangatta to Miami. A 2.1km run from Miami to Burleigh. A looping 3.5km swim off Burleigh. A 6.1km board paddle from Burleigh to Currumbin. A 7km run from Currumbin to the finishing line at Coolangatta. A few sherbets at the Coolangatta Hotel.

"I did the Coolangatta Gold for three years from 2005," Eckstein says. "In all of them, I pretty much led with about 5km to go in the run. And then my feet would go numb. My legs would go numb. I couldn't run. I was tripping on my feet. I was thinking, 'What's going on here?' Running was the thing I did best when I was younger – I was a better runner than swimmer. And now all of a sudden, I can't run?"

"I was as fit as I could be in '07, but the same thing happened. The numb feet, the numb legs. With three or four kilometres to go, I just couldn't run. I came second and thought, 'I'm not doing this again unless I get it fixed.'"

It wasn't a fitness issue. Or fatigue. He was diagnosed with popliteal artery entrapment syndrome, which affects the large artery that runs behind the knee and feeds the lower leg. "When I planted my leg and put pressure on my toes, the calf muscle would contract and the popliteal artery would get squeezed," he says. "No blood or oxygen was getting to the lower leg. It was like having a tourniquet wrapped tight around it. I saw a few different surgeons. There was an element of risk to the operation, and I decided to keep doing what I was doing with the Australian titles, the Kellogg's, the world titles.

"In ironman you have your ski, swim, board and run, but the run is very short, so it didn't matter as much," he says. But now, towards the end of his career, he figured it was time to get the surgery done. Six months ago, he underwent the operation that gave him the scars on his calves.

"I was 50-50 about doing the Gold but I've done a heap of running and it's been OK," he says. "I'm 90 per cent sure the surgery has been successful. I'm pushing it time-wise because I'm basically still in rehab. But we'll give it a go. You don't die wondering."

"The rehabilitation from his surgery has been extensive," physiotherapist Brad Beer tells me after a session in which he's dug his elbow into the ironman's hard, knotted, battle-weary flesh. Eckstein's back, shoulders and Achilles tendon are giving him grief. "He's a humble guy," Beer says. But in just six months, "Shannon has basically had to start from a reintroduction to walking. His resolve to get the best out of himself under the most trying of circumstances has been extraordinary."

He's not the race favourite but he's the sentimental favourite. He's attempting to do what Mercer gave up trying for when he retired at 40 – win the Gold. "If I fall over and break my leg and never race again, I'll be happy with everything I've achieved," Eckstein says. "But I'm not going in it to come second."

Eckstein takes his seat at the Gold Coast Sports and Leisure Centre. It's 12.30pm. His expression is respectful yet fierce. He's quiet. It's a beautiful service. Dean Mercer is remembered as someone who was relentless. Committed. Tenacious. Persistent. Proud. Loyal. Kind. The sort of bloke who would give you the shirt off your back if you were turning pink with sunburn. Mercer's six-year-old son walks behind his father's casket, clutching his mother's hand and holding a teddy bear. What will become of those boys? Donna has been where Reen Mercer is today. "It's tragic," she says. "But they'll survive. The lifesaving community is tight. People really care."

Mercer has left behind a wife and four sons. Billy Eckstein left behind Donna and two sons. Shannon has become a father of two with his wife Belinda. They have a five-year-old daughter, Ellie, and a one-year-old son, Blake. They've bought a block of land at Mermaid Waters and plonked their dream home on it. Everyone and everything seems five minutes away. He can paddle his kayak to Donna's place along the

canal at his back doorstep. The same canal takes him straight to the Mercer family home.

"I knew Dean really well," he says. "I'm a couple of generations younger than him but I got to race him at the end of his career. He joined Northcliffe for a couple of years when he was training for the Coolangatta Gold. He was all grit. All determination. You talk about athletes who make it look easy – he made it look hard. But he was tough. He was still fit. Still training. Two Fridays ago, he was swimming with us down at Miami. The next Monday, he was dead."

Eckstein's father and Mercer both succumbed young to heart issues. "It does makes you think," he says. "I won a world title when I was 18 so I've been doing this a long time. I've put a lot of stress on my own body and heart.

"You look at some of the legends of our sport – a guy called Peter Lacey was before the professional era, he's got a statue on the Surfers Paradise boardwalk. He died at the Miami pool from cardiac arrest. Someone else drinks and smokes their whole life and they live until they're 75. What does it mean? It just means when your number's up, your number's up. What do you change? Nothing. You keep living your life. If you want to train, go train. It's in the back of my mind about how far I want to push it because I have a young family, too. But you've got to keep on living. You've got to keep on truckin'."

Here on the Gold Coast, memories are at every turn. Good memories. Difficult memories. Powerful memories. Interconnecting memories. Fourteen years have passed since Eckstein won his first Australian ironman title at Kurrawa. Eleven years have passed since he lost his father there. This Sunday, the Coolangatta Gold will take him back there: the ski leg goes straight past Kurrawa. Emotions will be running high for the locals; only six weeks will have passed since Mercer died. Eckstein is as local as it gets. He's been doing his laps at the Miami Swimming Club pool for 22 years while the sun's coming up and the moon's going down. Mercer has swum there. Billy Eckstein has swum there. How beautiful is that?

"People say, what did you choose ironman for?" Eckstein says. "It's a hard slog. It can be difficult to make a living. I tell them it's a good lifestyle. Ironman is under the radar but you can do it professionally and lead a pretty normal life. I don't get recognised when I go out. I don't have people videoing me or whatever. It's not bad, mate. All I want to do is win races. There's a Catch-22 with that but I've never done it to be noticed. I've just wanted to do a good job." ●

Wake-up call: "I've put a lot of stress on my body and heart," Eckstein says

