



In the mid-1970s, Kal Szkalak weighed 240 pounds. Today the five-foot 10-inch 57-year-old from San Juan Capistrano weighs 170. Was he a “Biggest Loser” reality TV show participant? Hardly.

In 1976 the 23-year old Szkalak was a professional body builder, colleague of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mr. America winner. A year later he took the heavyweight Mr. Universe title. Today, he is one of the most-feared competitors in masters bike racing.

The transition from bodybuilding star to bike racing champion did not come easy. Szkalak was born in Hungary and fled the country as a 4-year-old in 1956 with his family. After the Hungarian Revolution, Russian tanks squashed the country’s attempt at independence. Szkalak recounts that his family “managed to make it out under fire, on foot, across the Austrian border.” Relocated to a refugee camp in New Jersey, the family settled in Delaware, where the teenage Szkalak found work in a health club.

Because of his already impressive physique, Szkalak’s boss encouraged him to enter the Mr. Delaware contest. Bodybuilding became Szkalak’s life, and in 1975 he drove a self-built camper van to bodybuilding’s Mecca. “I trained at the original Gold’s Gym,” Szkalak recalls. “At the time there was only one—in Venice, California. All the top guys were there.” In May 1976 the Delaware/Hungarian transplant won the Mr. California contest. “So I decided to continue on with training for six more weeks and entered the Mr. America contest in June and won that too.” After taking the Mr. Universe title, and a tumultuous period when Szkalak tried to unionize bodybuilders and crossed swords with the tight-knit bodybuilding establishment, he retired from the sport in 1980.

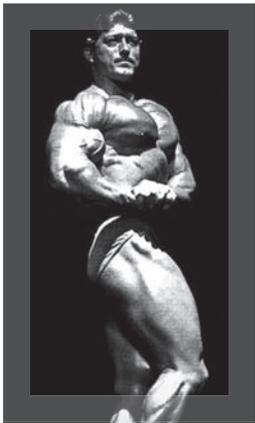
At the time cycling was of so little interest to the gym-bound athlete that when the 1984 Olympic road race passed by his condo in Mission Viejo, Szkalak recalls that “I didn’t even turn the TV on, let alone walk a block and watch the race. I regret that greatly.”

In 1985, Szkalak, then a health club owner, was dating a triath-

KAL SZKALAK

FROM MR. UNIVERSE TO MASTERS WORLDS

Story and photos by Mark Johnson



lete. “Basically she was kicking my butt both in the pool and on the bike. I was pretty fed up with that and decided to start training with her. The next thing you know I’m doing some triathlons.” Flashing the sly humor that seems to always lie in wait in Szkalak, he says, “I ran like a slug and old ladies passed me at the end, but I came out of the water with the front group and came off the bike with the front group.”

“I was a terrible runner. When I was doing triathlons I managed to train and do a 38-minute 10K, which is almost respectable. Problem was the guys I was racing against were doing

31s and 32s.” Reconciled to the fact that running was his Achilles heel, Szkalak turned his considerable focus to cycling.

“One of the first guys that got me fired up was 1984 Olympian Steve Hegg. Steve gave me some coaching and at the same time I actually trained him in the gym while his professional career was going on.” Thanks to Hegg’s influence, “I really got motivated to start racing in 1987.”

Szkalak had spent his entire life adding muscle mass, and now he found himself immersed in a sport that welcomes excess bulk like a busload of Walmart shoppers stumbling into Paris Fashion Week. The problem that defined his previous sporting life—gaining bulk—now defined his new athletic passion, only in reverse.

He says that because of his size, for the first 10 years of his racing career he only did criteriums. These flat multi-corner races around tight circuits reward power over lightness, so Szkalak’s muscle served him well. In long, hilly road races, however, the weight worked against him like stuck brakes. “Once I became interested in road racing and actually tried to make it up over the hills, I decided, you know what, I need to start losing some of this muscle.” By modifying his diet and gym workouts he managed to lose about five pounds a year, finally settling at his current 170-pound racing weight.

When he first started racing, Szkalak recalls that his size worked to his advantage because it cowed his wispy-thin cycling competitors. “Oh yeah,” he remembers with a chuckle. “Some of the guys tease me about how much smaller I am now relative to back then. My arms were so large back when I first began riding that

guys were surprised I was able to make it at all through these races.”

Mike Mueller, Szkalak’s 55-year-old teammate on the San Diego-based UC Cyclery/JW Flooring cycling team, has raced with Szkalak for 20 years and admits, “When I first met that guy, I was intimidated.” He notes that even today Szkalak’s fierce musculature gives him an edge in crit racing. “People just give him an extra-wide berth. They don’t want to tangle with that guy.”

In spite of his formidable presence, Mueller points out that Szkalak often puts the team’s interests above his own. Mueller, who won the highly competitive 2010 San Dimas Stage Race in the 55-plus division with Szkalak riding in support, says his teammate is “always thinking of other people. He does like to win, but it’s more important that the team wins. He is very gracious.” Mueller recounts a criterium in early 2010 when UC Cyclery was dominating. On the bell lap of the pancake-flat Imperial Valley course—a race more suited to the powerfully built Szkalak than the whippet-thin climber Mueller—Szkalak, Mueller and a third teammate were ahead going into the final sprint. “And he just goes, ‘Take it home, Mike’ and I just rode on in.” The fact that Szkalak would sit up so his teammate could notch a victory is indicative of the thoughtful core beneath his otherwise menacing frame.

To comfortably land victories in Southern California masters races, which are often loaded with ex-pros and Olympians, takes serious dedication to an athletic craft. Comparing bodybuilding to cycling, Szkalak says that both “require a 24-hour commitment.” As a bodybuilder he spent about 14 hours a week in the gym. Today he trains 25 hours a week on the bike and still hits the weights three days a

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p. 43/→ week to keep his upper body in shape. He admits the two types of training create a different sort of tiredness. “The fatigue lasts a little bit longer with the cycling training. It takes a little longer to recover. Of course, I’m sure part of that is just age. I’m very thankful and blessed. I still can say at my ripe old age that I continue to improve a little bit. I have measured improvements even this year over last season, and I’m no spring chicken.”

The measurability of cycling appeals to Szkalak because it was missing from his previous career. He felt the absence of a hard finish line in bodybuilding, where winners are decided by the subjective opinion of judges—people Szkalak says could be more influenced by personal and business interests than a bodybuilder’s superior form. In cycling, “I do appreciate the fact that when you cross the line first there is no question about who won.” While he believes the training required of bodybuilders is as rigorous as any sport, it lacks cycling’s “quantifiable, clear definition of the best.” And because of this, “I don’t feel bodybuilding is a sport, per se.”

While cycling and bodybuilding have different metrics for victory, one of the sports’ unfortunate similarities is doping. Szkalak is not afraid to admit that when he was a bodybuilder in the 1970s he, like most of his pro bodybuilding colleagues, had an assist from drugs. “Back in my day not only was it legal, it was encouraged,” he recalls. Retiring gave Szkalak a degree of relief because he could leave the artificial muscle-building substances behind. “I was more than cautious, I was fearful.”

The intense drive to compete burns just as brightly today as it did in 1975, when it moved Szkalak to pack up and move across the country to join the world’s best in Venice Beach. Yet ask him to name his biggest cycling wins and he reframes the question in terms of second and third places. “I don’t think of it that way,” he says, and

then points to his biggest losses—not having won a masters world champion title yet, after half a dozen attempts. “A big goal is to win the world championships. I’ve come close now, close enough that I can win it. I believe I have the ability to win it. I just have to put everything together at the right time to do so.”

“I’ve had a lot of wins and I’ve won a lot of pretty good races,” Szkalak continues. But winning isn’t what drives him—losing is. “I am not so much a good winner as I am a bad loser. I can’t stand being beat when I thought I should have won.”

This intense self-examination and recrimination is reminiscent of cycling greats Lance Armstrong and Mark Cavendish. Like these famous riders, the fire Szkalak gets from not winning springs from the fact that he is exhaustively detail-oriented about preparing for racing. When he mentions putting everything together to win, he speaks quite literally; training, rest, nutrition, race transportation—all are puzzle pieces Szkalak endeavors to own completely. Teammate Mueller says, “When that guy comes to a race he treats it as a professional. He has a plan and he executes it.” This attention to detail even extends to Szkalak arriving at races days ahead of schedule to recon the courses and settle into his VW van. That way, when the race day dawns there’s no chance for parking scrambles or equipment mishaps. “He’ll be there at a race site for two or three days and the guy looks fresh as a daisy,” Mueller observes. “He’s really paying attention to the whole picture. He treats things so seriously and so professionally that it’s pretty amazing.”

Asked about his minute obsession with cycling, Szkalak happily summarizes it this way: “I love my life. As far as I’m concerned I lead the life of Riley. I’m a cycling bum; I just revel and take joy in the idea of it. I love it, it’s so much fun for me. It’s what God has given me and I’m going to enjoy it as long as I can.” **CM**