

Race of Decision

A Mountain Bike Racer Gives Up a Win, but Finds a Far More Meaningful Victory

By Susan Dawson-Cook

My opportunity to step back into the competitive arena had presented itself, and instead of clamoring to jump in, I was fabricating every excuse not to enter.

"It will be fun," said Dante Luciano, referring to a mountain bike race sponsored by the International Club.

"Yeah right," I thought, attempting to mask my scowl. I believed my skepticism toward his prediction was well founded. He had touted high altitude archaeology, telling me it would be the adventure of a lifetime; that as a geologist, I would make an excellent addition to Jose Chávez' team of scientists, who were amidst a series of expeditions, searching for mummies in southern Peru. My hike up 19,000 foot Misti volcano earlier that year had cleared up that myth rather quickly. Dust in the eyes, a headache so bad you pray for death, and cold that penetrates your skin, your organs and slowly transforms your skeleton into solid ice. Not my idea of fun.

Not always quick to learn from experience, I found myself nodding my head to his next suggested "fun"

excursion. He knew of this "great little picnic spot" south of Arequipa, where the children could relax in the sunshine beside a babbling brook. Indeed.

On the journey, I had heaved my guts out as we navigated a treacherous road and, upon arrival, my kids had screamed bloody murder, as I had wished to do when, alongside the "brook of tranquility," we quickly became lunch for tiny black blood sucking insects.

Fortunately, the children had managed to escape relatively unscathed, but by day's end, my calves had swollen to twice their original size. The next morning, I had flown to Lima for a business meeting, clad in the most translucent pantyhose and longest skirt I could find, spending most of the day in the bathroom dousing my legs with Calamine lotion.

But now I was a few months older

and much wiser, I thought. Dante said the ride would be fun, which meant it would be sheer hell. We would ride through every shantytown in Arequipa and I would inhale more exhaust than mountain air. And everyone would be clipping along at a reasonable tempo, while I would cross the finish line dead last.

But at the same time, I wanted to enter. Not because of Dante's suggestion, but because I loved competition. As a youth, I had found solace in the sport of swimming and all that it represented. A safe world where I could dominate. Beyond my collegiate years, I had occasionally taken home medals and trophies in other athletic events, such as 10K runs and triathlons.

But not every race had yielded the thrill of victory. Even though I had won a triathlon once in Greenville, South Carolina, my performance in the biking segments had been less than spectacular. Everyone I had left behind in my bubbles had breezed by me on their bicycles, which left me to depend on the running segment to win — rather frightening since I run like Daffy Duck, with my short legs and tendency to over pronate.

I had once placed dead last in a Clemson University triathlon. The biking segment had been such a fiasco that, as I jogged by Tiger Town I had been tempted to

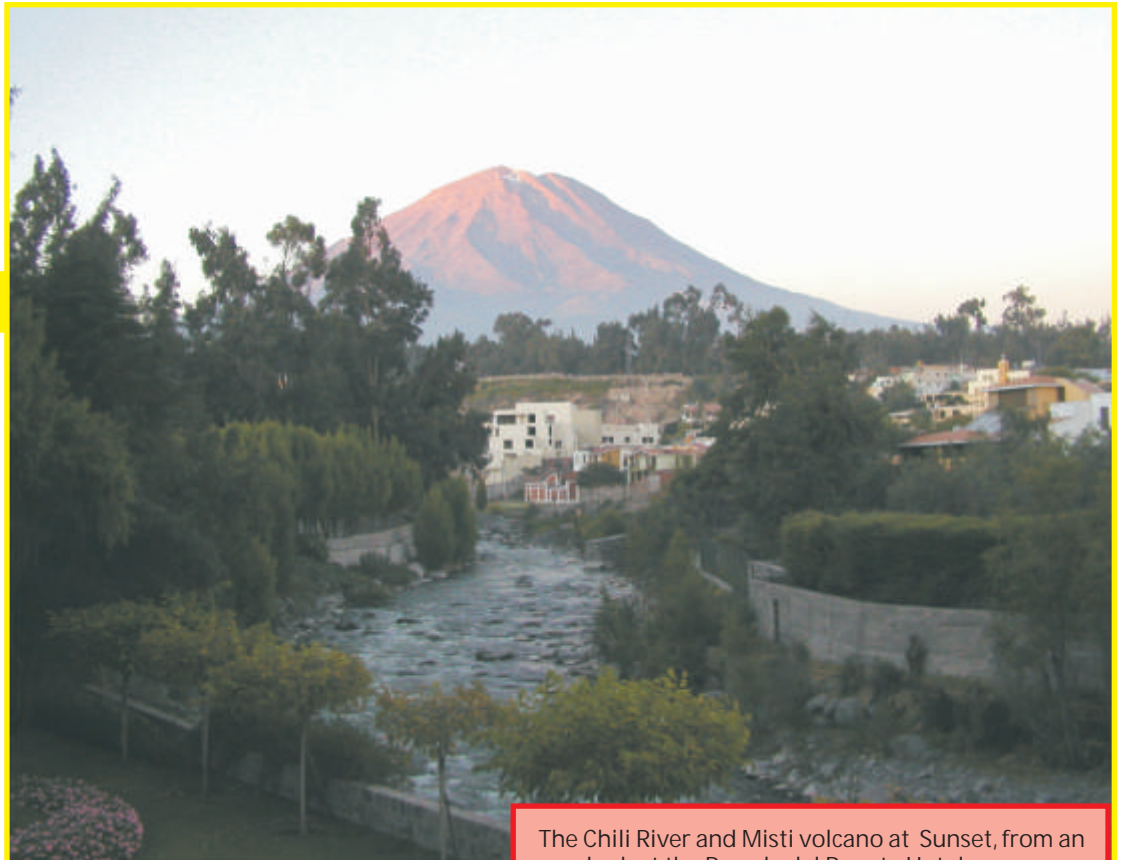
jog through the door for a beer. Or three or four. But I couldn't act so shamefully before my conservative parents, who were subsidizing my education, had driven all the way from Ohio to see me, and would be waiting for me at the finish line. So I had acted nobly, merely walking the rest of the race. Strolling in like an elderly participant in a March-of-Dimes stroll, it could have been worse, I had told myself. Still, I never showed my face at the starting line of another triathlon after that.

But what did I have to lose, entering a race in Peru? Even if I wiped out, took the wrong turn or finished last, it wouldn't be a major consequence. The International Club didn't have an annoying web site like the Southern Arizona Roadrunners, where they posted your time so that people could log on and see how badly you sucked wind for years after the fact. Once race day was over, my performance in the race would be forgotten.

"So are you going to enter or not?" Dante persisted.

I paused for a moment and then my lips curled up into a smile. "Sure, why not."

On race day, I stood amidst a mob of cyclists on the International Club track. The grounds no longer resembled the tranquil place where my friend Jane and I took leisurely morning walks. Hundreds of competitors of all ages were huddled in clusters, talking vociferously in



The Chili River and Misti volcano at Sunset, from an overlook at the Posada del Puente Hotel.
Photo by Susan Dawson-Cook.



The author at the Arequipa airport, with Chachani volcano in the distance.
Photo by Chris Ferko.

Spanish, decked out in brightly colored jerseys and cycling pants, standing beside sleek metal bicycles glistening in the early morning sunlight. From my bicycle to my attire, I was a pathetic imitation of the elite cyclist, clad in black tights, a Tucson Marathon T-shirt; my ride an extra-heavy special I had purchased for \$75 at Siglo Viente.

I stood alone. My husband Daniel had entered the race, but already had abandoned me, the same way he did in our domestic life. We lived in the same house, walking in different dimensions. Sometimes I felt as if I could walk right through his body and feel no physical sensation.

I had once despised myself, figuring my husband had deserted me because I wasn't worthy of love. And at one time, I had thought I needed a proxy husband, someone who could fill the voids in my marriage, in my identity. My bodyguard had always been around whenever Daniel had been absent. He had valued my athleticism, intensity, energy and enthusiasm, never suggesting that there were deficiencies, that I needed a little more of this or a little less of that. In many ways, he had represented the partner I desired, but I couldn't truly love another until I was free. Jose had been the right man at the wrong time. And so I had safely escaped the vice grip of my own foolish longings. Redirected them toward our friendship. Something that would have been lost, otherwise.

Age and sex seemed the logical method of division, but the race coordinators hadn't explained the procedures in a manner that anyone could understand. I asked a woman in a red and black jersey if I was in the right place. She shrugged her shoulders and said "No se." I don't know. When 10 a.m.

came and went, I wondered if they intended to begin the race at 8 p.m. rather than 8 a.m. This race gave a whole new meaning to the words "Peruvian time." After more than a year in Peru, I was accustomed to events running 30 to 60 minutes late, but certainly not more than 120.

The equatorial sun intensified. I wiped the sweat from my forehead, longing to be home where it was quiet, rather than surrounded by chaos. It had been too long since I had used the restroom and there were no Port-a-Potties in sight. Up until that moment, I had thought Depends undergarments were for old ladies.

As I shifted uncomfortably from left to right, I heard the "bang" of the starting gun. My feet were nearly crushed by nearby riders as I struggled to mount my bicycle. A neighboring rider warned me that the race was proceeding in heats. We would move up little by little, until they started our group, she said, before she pedaled into an open gap in front of me. There were nearly 20 riders in my age group and I studied them closely, trying to take a mental snapshot of their bicycles and apparel. Even though I wasn't taking this race seriously, I told myself, it couldn't hurt to know who my competitors were.

The gun sounded and I surged out in front. Like a penned up horse, once I escaped the imprisonment of the crowded track, the intense exertion invigorated, cleared my mind of troubled thoughts and elevated it to a plane where I reigned. On the Sunday rides I had always excelled on the climbs, and after months of riding my legs were strong. I cleared Yanahuara, the upper-class suburb where the race had begun, and entered the



Inside the walls of the famous Santa Catalina de Sena Monastery.
Photo by Susan Dawson-Cook.

Daniel wasn't

shantytowns, leaving the other riders far behind me. I couldn't believe I was actually leading.

After several rugged upward miles, the course descended into the Chili River valley, where the air felt suddenly cool, like a plunge into cool water. I had to cross the river to continue, so I dismounted and lifted my 10-ton bicycle up on one shoulder.

Jose stood beside Daniel, helping him walk his bike up the river bank. He had dropped out of the race, I realized, when I saw his scornful look. Once again, my success merely angered him; it marred his fragile ego, making it impossible for him to applaud my efforts. I couldn't walk a lifetime with a man like this and shouldn't have to. Marriage was a duty but it was a partnership, a privilege, a status to be earned, not merely taken for granted.

worthy of me, that much I knew. When I returned to the States, I intended to break away from him forever. To live alone until I found a man that was sliced from the same loaf of bread that I was.

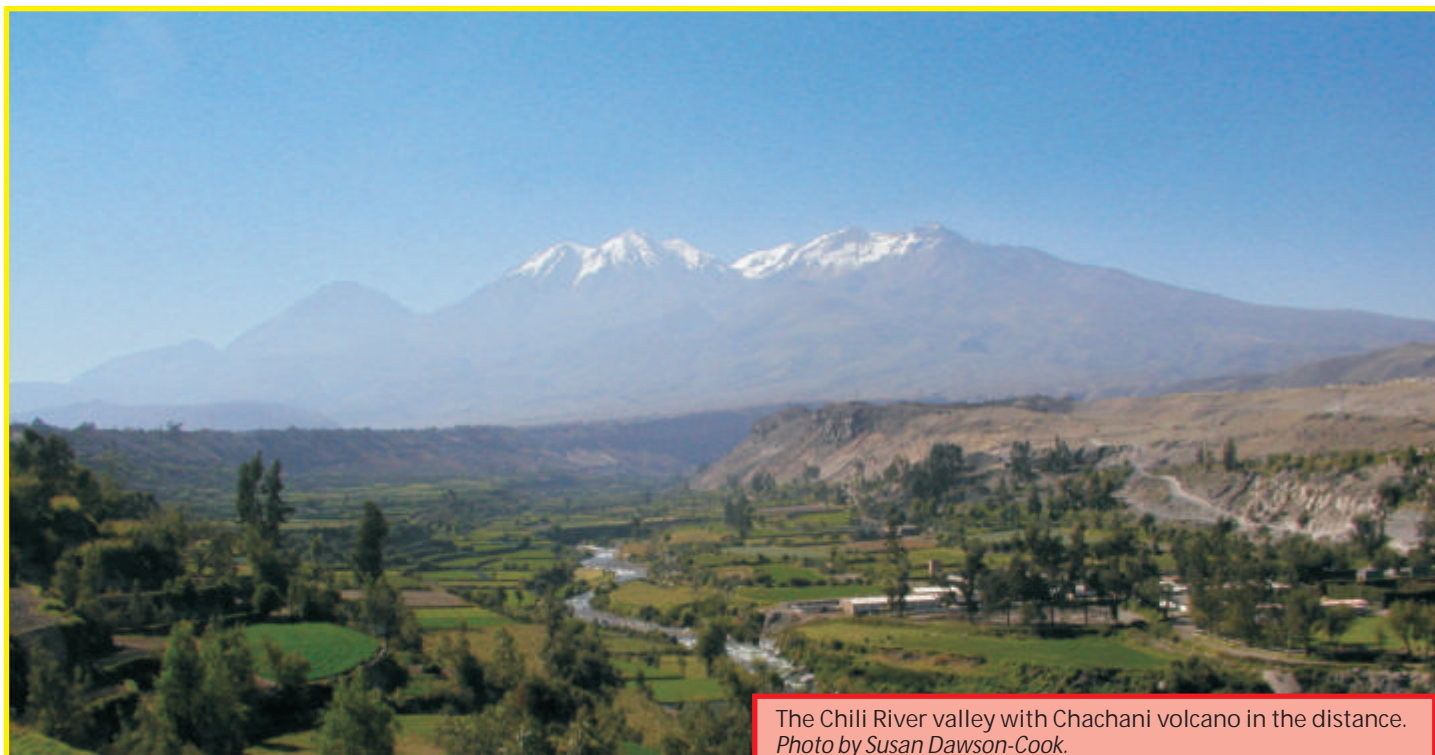
The gray-green water was moving swiftly, bouncing up into little frothy waves wherever rocks were close to the surface. For once, the weight of my bicycle seemed like an asset. When you weigh only 110 pounds, it doesn't take much current to sweep you away.

I stepped cautiously, but kept losing my balance on the rounded stones, which were as slick as ice. I noticed another competitor gaining on me and in my haste to cross the river, I ceased my mindful stepping from stone to stone and plunged into a hole that soaked me to mid-thigh. The icy mountain water numbed my leg instantly and water dripped from my tights, splashing mud onto my legs as I stepped up on the river bank.

I mounted my bicycle and began to descend a gently down-dipping stretch of dirt and rock, which passed beneath a forest of towering eucalyptus and pepper trees. I could sense the presence of the other rider. She was gaining on me, I knew. The path suddenly steepened and the trail was blanketed in jagged volcanic rocks, which made popping sounds as my tires rolled over them.

I leaned back and heard the wind in my ears reach a whining crescendo as I accelerated faster and faster. My tires began to slide from side to side and at one point, it felt as if my back tire might slip out beneath me. I found myself reaching for the brakes.

Why was I doing this? On every other ride recently, I had taken no notice. For two years, I had run heedlessly into the arms of risk,



The Chili River valley with Chachani volcano in the distance.
Photo by Susan Dawson-Cook.

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embarking on dangerous adventures that could have easily landed me in the hospital or in the grave, each one an elixir to assuage my emptiness.

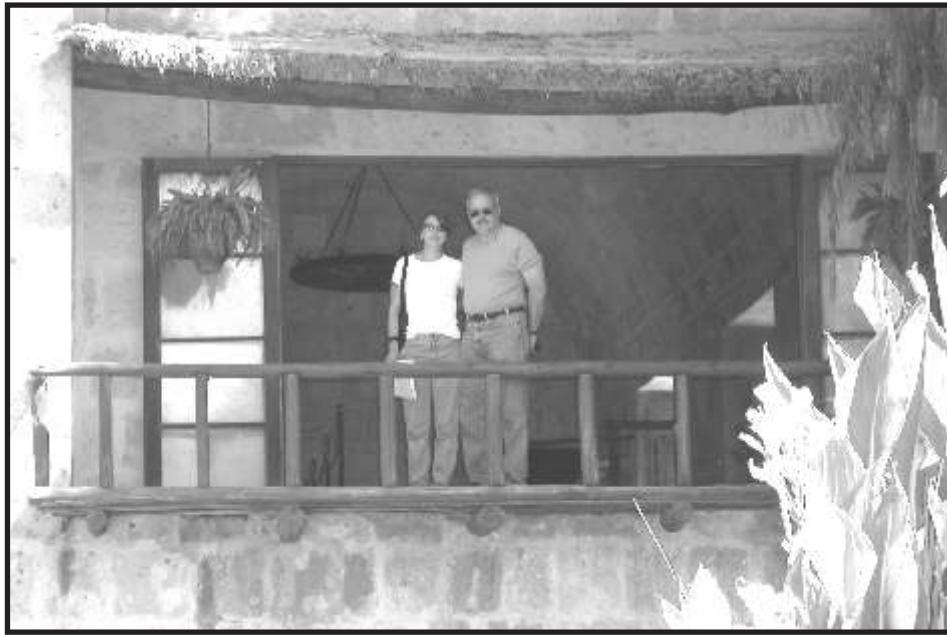
I had never considered the consequences, had not thought about the irresponsibility of my actions. In Madrid, my husband's cruel words had sent me fleeing from our hotel room in the middle of the night. My logic had been cannibalized by my suffering. I would have preferred to be robbed or murdered or raped than to listen to him insult me for one more minute. A person I didn't know could only have destroyed my physical body. But his words were like sulfuric acid, rapidly eating away all faith I had in myself. I had walked the streets at 2 a.m. until my body felt weak and numb, but despite my exhaustion, I had failed to anesthetize my heart. One night in Arequipa, I had left the house at midnight and run for miles, barely noticing where I was going, so blinded I was by tears, by suffering. I had huddled alongside a stone wall on my haunches, sobbing, not noticing passing cars, not looking to see if strangers approached, not caring what would become of me.

The woman in the shiny navy blue leggings was right behind me now, veering to the left to attempt a pass. I grimaced as I accelerated, once again feeling my tires sliding from side to side.

The previous year, according to Dante, the leading competitor had died during the race. Riding without a helmet, he had fallen once, and, injured and bleeding, he had continued on, only to tumble again and strike his head upon a rock. The worse scenario I had envisioned was a trip over the handlebars, which I didn't relish, but I figured if you had to break a bone, you might as well do it in Peru, where your doctor would care for you in the comfort of your own home. Dr. Linares would wrap up my broken leg as I laid in bed sipping Chamomile tea. I would spend weeks lounging in bed, reading novels and making phone calls, sharing my dramatic tale of woe with my mother and anyone else who would listen.

But that would never do, I thought. I had been known to fidget when required to sit still for more than 30 minutes straight. A gold medal around the neck would be much more appealing than a cast of plaster around the leg. I decided.

I rode across the Grau Bridge to the other side of the river, meandering



The author and her husband, Chris Ferko, at the Sabandia Mill in Arequipa.
Photo by Alberto Arismendi.

through the streets of Yanahuara. If I could just hold on for five more minutes, I would win. As I turned a corner, the unevenness of the pavement caused a jarring vibration which I felt everywhere from my buttocks to my teeth. As my teeth clattered together, I plunged downward at nearly a 60 degree angle. An intersection with no lights or stop signs was rapidly approaching. Should I fly down the hill through the intersection and take my chances? Or should I be cautious and ensure my guts weren't going to be

splayed out on somebody's front bumper. If I took my chances, I could still win, I thought. But that was only if I didn't end up dead.

I felt the wind tickling my ears as I accelerated faster and faster. As I approached the intersection, instead of the familiar skin-tingling adrenaline rush, I saw my children's faces in front of my eyes. No, I whispered. Not this time. The pressure on my hand brake was instinctive, rather than premeditated.



La Compañía church, like many buildings, homes and bridges in Arequipa, is constructed of sillar, a whitish volcanic stone. Its door is constructed from pepper wood.
Photo by Susan Dawson-Cook.

Reality struck like a bolt of lightning. My caution was a sign of strength, not weakness. I knew I would never run away from Daniel again. I would stand there and dare him to try to hurt me. I no longer cared what he thought or said about me, and soon I would walk through his door for the last time. I would start my life over. He could spend the rest of his life wondering what had gone wrong.

Three cars passed before I was able to clear the intersection and by then, I was too far behind to regain the lead. I could have been devastated, but instead I crossed the finish line with a broad smile, one that remained as I watched the winner receive hugs and congratulations from her friends. Our races had each reached an unexpected end. She hadn't expected to win the

gold and I hadn't realized until that moment that my life was the greatest gift I could ever be offered, the most glorious prize that I could ever possibly own. *W*

Susan Dawson-Cook has been a group-exercise instructor since 1988 and currently works as an instructor and personal trainer at a northwest Tucson retirement community and a world-renowned resort. Her writing interests include personal essay, romance, health and fitness and adventure travel. You can email Susan at susan@corazondeloro.com.

This essay is one of the last chapters of her book in progress, "A Walk Through the Andes," a story about how the two years she lived in Arequipa, Peru with her now ex-husband and two young children reshaped her destiny. Ten years later, she reports, she is happily remarried, living in Tucson and still riding, swimming and running.