athlete's journey

ATHLETICS SHAMANISM

by DEBORAH CROOKS

Mark Allen was flipping through a *Yoga Journal* before the 1989 Hawaii Ironman when he saw an advertisement for a shamanism seminar in Mexico. A man named Don Jose, whose weathered visage was featured prominently in the ad, would be leading the 10-day workshop. "I noticed Don Jose's toothless smile," says Allen of the Huichol Indian shaman. "He looked happy, happy at just being alive." Allen put the magazine down, forgot about the ad, and went on to perform the starring role in what would become triathlon's most legendary race.

To the outside world, that year's Ironman was characterized by Allen and Dave Scott, two of the fittest men on the planet, pushing each other to the best performances of their lives. But Allen had something that Scott didn't: a vision while racing of an ancient Indian amid the lava fields. The sight gave Allen the shift in perspective he believes unlocked the door to the one race he had been unable to master.

"Up until 1989, I wanted to *win* Ironman to feel more complete," says Allen, whose Ironman record until then included spectacular blow-ups and technical difficulties. "The vision gave me the opposite — it didn't matter. I was complete *doing*."

After his 1990 Ironman win, he enrolled in a workshop with Don Jose and Jose's student, Brant Secunda. "The first week, I kept thinking '*What am I doing here?*' " Allen admits. "I can be cynical about things. Then I let go of everything I was holding on to and it seemed to make sense." After a few months at home, Allen found he wanted to learn more, and so began his journey into the world of the Huichol Indian tradition of shamanism.

Now, after retiring from the sport, Allen has teamed up with Secunda to present a series of workshops called "Sport and Spirit." "I haven't been that public [about my spirituality]," says Allen, "and then I thought, 'Why?' "

Shamanistic practice centers around a connection to the planet. Through celebratory dances, exercises connecting with the four directions, hands on healing, chanting, drumming and journeying, that connection is found and strengthened. The Huichols honor all life — plants, minerals, "all our relations." Shamanistic practice, Secunda says, "develops the ability to heal body, heart and spirit."

Shamanism isn't so much a religion as a method for living, says Michael Harner, Ph.D., and co-chair of the Anthropology Section of the New York Academy of Sciences and founder of the Center for Shamanic Studies in Connecticut. He writes in the book "Shamanism" compiled by Shirley Nicholson: "...the focus is on what we can do to help each other with the problem of existence, of life and death."

Shamanism is prevalent in indigenous cultures throughout the world. The aborigines of Australia, Tarahumara Indians, Native Americans, and the Tamang of Nepal all can be said to be shamanistic, although the term originated in northern Asia. Common to all shamanistic cultures is a conception of the universe as having three levels: Sky, earth and underworld, which are all connected. The Huichols, believed to be the last tribe in North America to have maintained their pre-Colombian traditions, view the world as having four powers — physical, mental, love, and intelligence (right thinking) — and four directions. "You are the fifth direction," says Secunda. "Your heart is connected to all of life."

Secunda, who Allen describes as "the Michael Jordan of Shamanism," is not a native Huichol. However, like most shamans, he was 'called' into his work. Inspired in part by the readings of Carlos Castenada, Secunda left New Jersey for Mexico a day after his 18th birthday. In Ixtalan, he met a Huichol schoolteacher who gave him a written introduction to the Huichols, who number about 15,000 and inhabit the Sierra Madre.

Secunda wandered his way through the mountains of Jalisco to a point of life-threatening dehydration (near-death experiences are common to shamanic practice and initiation) until he was found by the Huichols. They took him on a five-day walk to their village where he met Don Jose. Secunda stayed, going on to serve an 12-year apprenticeship with Jose, who became his teacher and adoptive grandfather. (Don Jose died a few years ago at the age of 110.)

Harner writes that a shaman is someone "who enters an altered state of consciousness, usually induced by monotonous drumming or other percussion sound, in order to make journeys for a variety of purposes in what are technically called the Lower and Upper Worlds." There the shaman interacts "consciously with certain guardian powers or spirits, which are usually perceived as power animals."

The sole purpose of the shaman's journey is to draw help from these spirits to perform healing rituals for individuals and society. Different cultures work with different energies. In the Huichol tradition, Secunda utilizes "the spirit of the deer, which is [that] of the heart. Intuition really." In addition to Allen, Secunda has worked with actor and Akido master Steven Segal, and Chris Legh, who placed seventh at the 1998 Hawaii Ironman. Secunda's vision is to put people "more in touch with nature and natural life so that athletes are happier."

After beginning his shamanistic study, Allen would win at Hawaii four more times, often coming back from seemingly insurmountable odds — 13-minute deficits on the run, and beating rivals 10 years his junior. During his tenure dominating the Hawaii Ironman, Allen downplayed his spirituality, although it was his calm demeanor in races that competitors noticed as much as his impeccable fitness level.

At their workshops, Allen hopes to "give [students] tools they can use to improve the quality of their life, physically, emotionally and spiritually." For himself, the emphasis has been on living truthfully. The deeper Allen goes into shamanism, "the more I see where I've been kidding myself. Like Ironman, you get out there and go *ouch*. It's about learning."

Common aspects of shamanism are ceremony, sacred dance, vision quests and pilgrimages. Looked at this way, it doesn't seem accidental that Allen found his way to shamanism through triathlon. Triathletes, without realizing it, are already somewhat shamanistic. There's a ritualistic nature to training. A group of athletes gathering at a race start has much in common with a tribal pilgrimage, and altering consciousness comes with the territory of running a marathon after swimming 2.4 miles and riding 112.

"There's a parallel between Ironman and shamanism. Both empower you and that is useful for later," says Allen, who now studies with Secunda three times a year.

Venturing onto the shaman's path is hardly a requirement for improved athletic performance: In the end, Allen had to put in the physical training to achieve what he did during his career. But exiting the goal-driven path to performance makes every race — every day — an achievement worth appreciation.

"It's a time where people are thinking that there's a piece missing," said Allen. "You can only work out so hard. Then you have to draw strength from other sources." IT

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON SHAMANISM, WHICH HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, AND ALLEN AND SECUNDA'S SPORT AND SPIRIT WORKSHOPS, CONTACT THE DANCE OF THE DEER FOUNDATION, CENTER FOR SHAMANIC STUDIES, P.O. BOX 699, SOQUEL, CALIFORNIA 95073; 831/475-9560; FAX 831/475-1860 OR WWW.SHAMANISM.COM.