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"Nobody needs GPS watches, heart rate monitors and wattmeters"

Brett Sutton led Daniela Ryf to nine world titles and Nicola Spirig to Olympic gold. The Australian also looks after amateur athletes and warns them to learn something from their role models.



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Published: 05/16/2022, 20:31



“First: I'm always honest with the athletes. And secondly, political correctness is something for the gurus at the universities,” says Brett Sutton.

Photo: Daniel Kellenberger

Brett Sutton, you've trained animals, professionals, and amateur athletes throughout your career. Who is it easiest with?

Of course with the animals.

Why?

Because they don't speak. (smiles)

And that helps you as a coach?

Well, look. When you give instructions to animals, they follow them. But when they're tired or hurt, they won't budge, no matter if you yell at them or give them a treat. That's why I like animals, they are very honest. People are very different, and athletes in general are the worst.

How so?

Athletes lie. And the unbelievable thing is: Although they train for hours every week, they don't even know their own body, they don't listen to it and its signals. The hardest part is working with amateur athletes. They are usually ambitious at work, have a wife and children at home – and then they want to train until they drop. And when they're injured or tired, they lie to themselves so they can still train. That's where I come in.

How do you manage that amateur athletes don't expect too much and achieve their goals?

We are constantly in contact, they have to give me feedback on their everyday life, how they slept, whether they are currently under stress, how their last training sessions went. This way we can adapt your next training sessions. I don't believe in strict training plans at all, spontaneity is the magic word. It's the secret of my success.

They train around a dozen professionals. How can you still be in constant contact with amateur athletes?

I'm on my phone all day, from 6am to 11pm. It drives my wife absolutely insane but it works. Sport is my life.

How many amateur athletes do you look after?

Me and my two coaching colleagues in Australia have around 15 ambitious amateur athletes among us, for whom we are available 24 hours a day. In addition, other trainers, all of whom I have trained, look after around 200 other athletes according to exactly the same principles.

What are these principles?

I want them to get a feel for their bodies, to know their limits. But that is exactly what is difficult. Motivated athletes keep pushing themselves: No pain, no gain. You only get better when you are in pain. nonsense! That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. I want my athletes to know when they need to slow down. But the tendency is that most people always want more.

Why is that?

There are two reasons: either they are over-motivated and aim too high, otherwise they would not be able to cope with their miserable life. Or, even worse, they believe the gadgets.

Gadgets?

Yes, GPS watches, heart rate monitors, wattmeters on the bike. All nonsense, no one needs them.

And yet almost every runner has a GPS watch, every ambitious cyclist has a computer on the handlebars.

Believe me, I've tested all tools endlessly, taken lactate measurements on swimmers and trained cyclists by watts. It's useless, it's all just marketing. Even worse: The gadgets make the athletes despair and go crazy. They only bring stress.

"Save the money for all the electronics and lab tests, nobody needs that crap."

Why?

The numbers lie, it's as simple as that. If any training schedule says you have to run 10km at a 5-minute average, but you've had a stressful day or you're about to get injured, you're only going to overwhelm your body. So they either run slower and then have a medium-sized life crisis. Or they stubbornly stick to the guidelines and injure themselves.

How else should athletes train if they can't use numbers as a guide?

We have the best computer in the world, it's sitting up there (tapping his forehead) but that's not good enough for most. That's why I take the watches away from new athletes in my group and don't give them back until they've rediscovered their body awareness. Instead, we focus on four zones and train strictly according to them: easy, medium, moderate and mad, i.e. crazy.

As simple as that?

Yes, and my success as a coach proves me right. Everyone understands this system in every language, the Brazilians, the Czechs and even the Swiss. What should I tell my athletes about Anaerobic Threshold, Fat Burn and Watts? Save the money for all the electronics and lab testing, nobody needs that crap.

You said that hobby athletes usually expect too much. when is it too much

We have clear rules in our group: The longest bike ride lasts four and a half hours, even for the pros like Nicola Spirig or Daniela Ryf back then, not a minute longer. And the longest run must not exceed two and a half hours. We set clear barriers, the immune system simply can't take it anymore.

You mentioned many aspects that athletes fundamentally get wrong. What do amateur athletes do better than the professionals?

You plan more efficiently and organize your day better. In addition to sports, they take care of the family and have a job. As soon as one of my pros complains that he has to train too hard, I send him along with a hobby athlete for a day. What many of them are doing is incredible.

On the other hand, what can amateur athletes learn from the professionals?

(thinks for a long time) Not really much...

Are you serious?

I don't mean to be disrespectful to the pros, but there's nothing recreational athletes can learn from them.

Professional athletes certainly have an extremely good feeling for their own bodies and know exactly the limits of their performance.

Have you ever watched an Ironman on TV? Or a marathon? Most of these professionals overestimate themselves and eventually collapse. They crawl to the finish line, completely exhausted. So no, they usually don't feel better about their bodies. They make exactly the same mistakes as the amateurs, have the same fears and doubts. Just because they finish faster doesn't mean they're flawless machines. But I'm happy to tell you who amateur athletes should learn from.

Please.

From the runners in East Africa. I love their mentality, especially that of the Kenyans. If you want them to train loosely, then jog around comfortably in the area. And when they have to push themselves to the limit during interval training or in a competition, they transform into warriors who forget everything else. And what do you do when you're injured? Then it is God's will and they take a break until they are well again. This is the intuition that Europeans and Americans never allow because they feel like they know better.

"Political correctness is something for the gurus at the universities, it doesn't exist in my group."

On the one hand you demand intuition and often slow down your athletes during training, on the other hand you are considered a tough trainer. How does it work?

Before an athlete joins my group, I explain my basic rules to them. First: I'm always honest with them. And second: Political correctness is something for the gurus at the universities, it doesn't exist with me. Once that's settled, we can get started.

Sounds pretty extreme.

Yes, but my athletes always know what to expect from me. And they know when I say something, it's just the truth. I don't want to lie to the athletes like many other coaches in the world do just to make their lives easier. The athletes don't deserve that.

What is your goal as a coach for amateur athletes?

I want my athletes to understand that enjoying sport is essential. Of course, goals are good and important, but they can also destroy you. Then the sport becomes an illness.

People are goal oriented.

Absolutely nothing against that. But the whole thing has limits. At some point, a hobby athlete simply can no longer run the marathon faster or perform even crazier performances. And what happens then? Then they think they're not good enough, quit, put on 40 pounds and lose meaning in life. But look: if you exercise regularly, you live a healthier life and are fitter. So you've already won, and you don't need some silly race to prove it to you. If you don't understand that in my group, I'll throw you out immediately.