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Exclusive: Brett Sutton interview

Posted by: Editor
Posted on: Friday 19th October 2007

TRAGS Brett Sutton | Chrissie Wellington

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Following on from Chrissie Wellington's outstanding victory in Hawaii, Tri247's Annie Emmerson caught up with Chrissie's coach, Brett Sutton, to find out what he thought about her surprise win.

AE You've had so many major successes in triathlon, but we know that Ironman is your real passion, what does this victory mean to you?

BS OK, I hope you don't mind me taking this opportunity to get on my soap box on this one! People outside our sport just don't realise that all through our team's success in the short course races, I have always maintained that even the drafting athletes must be real triathletes. That was up until two years ago when an athlete still had to be good at all three disciplines to win the short course races. That is no longer the case. So, as a team we sat down and said, "We are going after Kona". We set our time-frame at three years. I am happy to say we were wrong! Short course triathlon with drafting could have been so exiting, but the powers that be decided to make it a second rate sport of wet second class runners.

I take satisfaction in the fact that that while I am in triathlon, I have never succumbed to such mediocrity.

AE There is a lot of talk about the fact that Chrissie has been in the sport for such a short time, and winning Hawaii in only her first year as a pro has stunned the world of triathlon. What are the main factors that have helped her achieve this victory in such a short space of time?

BS Chrissie had done some swimming when she was a kid and so she had skill in this area, it just needed to be dusted off. She came to me after destroying the age group World Championship in Lausanne on the bike. She also had low level success in cross country in the B and C grade levels around London. What we did is shape, clean, polish and then direct an extraordinary talent. The speed of which was only dictated by the frightening discipline of Ms Wellington. Basically, we directed her energy, which had been going in 50 different directions, into one cohesive direction.

What did I do? I did not get in her road. She improved every day and did so every week. Then every month. And so I had to give her her chance.

AE We know that Chrissie spent a lot of time in Nepal living at 5000m. Do you think this has helped her in anyway in her training?

BS Absolutely, it has helped her metabolism. In the team she is known as 'Chrissie the Chrissinator'.

AE Chrissie is without a doubt a hugely talented athlete, but did you have any idea when she first came to you just now talented she was?

BS To be honest, after the second day I told her physically she could make a living at this sport within six months. However, psychologically she really needed to learn the ways and thoughts of a warrior. To explain to you just how she thinks; when she gave up her job and moved to camp we visited her in her apartment, sat on her table was the book The Art of War. Every day Chrissie has worked on her mental approach to life in general. That is what has impressed me. She took some very harsh criticism and being a head-strong lass, old Sutto and Chrissie had a rocky three months. But she won my respect by understanding it was for her benefit. I don't think she is unhappy about it now. Most of you call it brainwashing, Sutto-style - I totally agree! It is washing all the crap out of the brain that stops people from winning. She became a fierce competitor. Put that with her talent and something special was always going to happen.

AE In only her second ever Ironman, her time is only 13 minutes slower than that of Paula Newby-Fraser who holds the overall course record, do you think she can beat that time?

BS I don't look at the sport that way. If you want to talk sense, we must talk again in three years time. But do I think in two years if the men and the women's races are honestly separated. Could she compare to Paula Newby-Fraser? Without a doubt! But then we must also add in Erin Baker, and I suppose let's throw in Natasha and that would be something awesome to see. It is unfortunate we don't, because Hawaii is a mass start, which favours the slower swimmers and weaker bikers and so the women don't really get a true, honest women's race. It is about time the organisation sent the girls off 30 minutes before the men. Erin Baker was right 20 years ago and she is still right today.

AE You were obviously watching the race. At what point did you think she was going to win?

BS The answer to that, and I will quote an email that I sent to people before the race, is; "She is not a 100 to 1 shot, but even money." She handled the pressure of the newness, of all the Americans telling her how hard Kona is and then she goes and wins!

The best way to describe it is, when all her teammates were asked who would win the race, they all said we fear Chrissie; not Natasha, not Michelle. Belinda Granger has been racing Ironman for many years and when the Chrissinator went past on the bike, the girls in the group asked "Who is she?". Belinda answered, "this year's winner girls!".

We had seen it every day in training for three consecutive months. It was relentless. I am also so proud of my other girls who kept competitive and had great races.

AE Where to next for Chrissie?

BS After this, we have to re-evaluate. We were going to try to make a late run for the Olympic team; yes, I believe she can go short, but the restrictions that will be placed on her would mean that she would have to give away what she obviously is fantastic at. We have to discuss it, but maybe we will go to 2012 and have a Hawaii winner come back and do the impossible by smashing the wet runners!

AE We know that your Team TBB, currently based in Thailand, is doing some amazing work helping young children in Asia, What impact do you think Chrissie's victory in Hawaii will have on this this?

BS This part of the story is what is not known about Chrissie by the triathlon public. She has kicked around for years through South East Asia, working for underprivileged people. That's why she was in Nepal. Already this year she has done clinics in Thailand and the Philippines and now sponsors a young Philippino athlete to attend our group for the coach to work some magic. I think her win could be the catalyst for the sport in South East Asia.

To give you an insight into Chrissie Wellington's mind, her first talk to me about the media and the frenzy around her, was "Boss, I don't want us to lose sight of what we discussed about my goal. I want to be able to use my triathlon result to help develop social programs for underprivileged kids in South East Asia. Any sponsor who does not believe this is a priority, we can do without. If it costs me a little money, I am at ease with that. I also want you to speak to all the people that have helped me with gear and product, while I was struggling, to see if they would like to do something before we discuss sponsorship deals with rival companies. I want to help those that helped me.". This is the real Chrissie, the one people don't see behind the flashy smile.

Conclusion? Wellington by name, Wellington by nature!

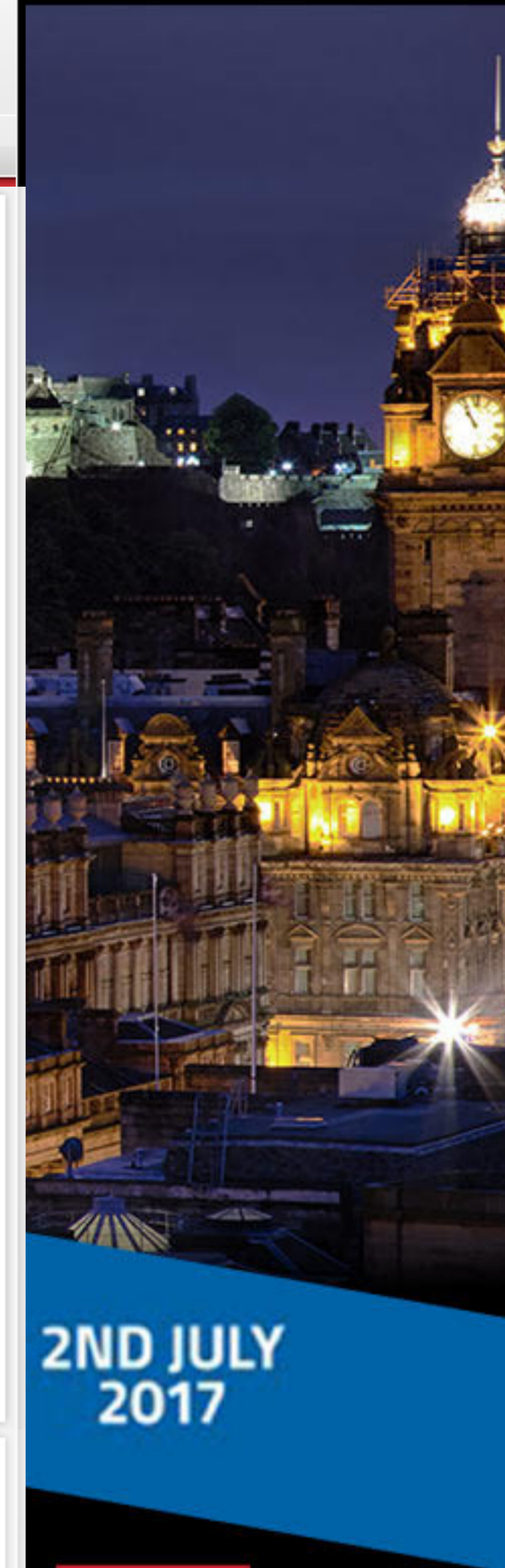
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