

BASIC TRAINING WITH BRETT SUTTON

Interview by T.J. Murphy

LAVA: In your online coaching service, you offer recreational plans to help people get into the sport. The WTC/Ironman says their data shows that a lot of newbies make their first triathlon an Ironman. What's your advice to someone who might watch Daniela Ryf race and get inspired to be a part of the sport? What guidelines do you generally offer?

Brett Sutton: There is also data that a lot of newbie participants then stop doing triathlon altogether within two seasons, and this I believe is one of the reasons. We have always advocated that one should get into this sport to enhance fitness and overall lifestyle. Starting small and building some initial fitness in shorter distance races I believe is the best advice.

By all means, have a goal to one day participate and complete an Ironman. That, however, should not be a once-in-a-lifetime bucket list event. One could argue that staying in the sport and gaining lifelong benefits for yourself but also setting a good example for your kids with moderate, consistent exercise is the way forward from a Trisutto point of view.

L: What's one of the most common errors you see serious age-group triathletes make in their training?

Brett Sutton: The classic age-group mistakes are many—the one that causes them the most problems is they tend to cram as they get closer to their race day!

Many view it like an exam and remember their college days when they used to pull all-nighters. They skip consistent study only to bury themselves in the books close to the deadline. You can't do that with physical exercise; you must be consistent over the period of time—that's one of the great disciplines of endurance sports.

I see so many train inconsistently and then hammer the last two weeks and go to the race completely cooked. I'd say, remember this: 10 percent underdone beats 1 percent overdone every time.

L: I recall you talked once about the vast difference between the reality that a full-time professional triathlete is dealing with compared to the age-grouper who has a job and family—that when you are coaching an age group triathlete who shows up for a workout after an especially stressful day of work, you might just turn them around and send them home. What should age-groupers know about life stress in regards to triathlon training?

Brett Sutton: Good question. Life stress impacts you physically. If you have been stressed by outside influences, we advocate low-heart-rate, easier work that day. Change the session, make it a relaxing recovery—a sanctuary away from the stress. Don't pile more physical stress on top of it. This will only lead to super tiredness and hurt your motivation in the future. Sometimes in our squad we say, "Just chop the wood."

L: Another recollection I have is that a pillar of your coaching philosophy is to guide a triathlete toward living in a situation that is enjoyable—one where they are basically happy and like their lives. How important is this?

Brett Sutton: Just an extension of the last answer. We tend to think we can overcome because we have a thinking mind. I believe the total opposite. It nags at you over time if you're not happy within your environment.

You have to enjoy what you do and where you're doing it, but maybe more important is why you're doing it! If you tick all those boxes, improved performance is not far behind.

L: Your early years of coaching were with swimmers. What general advice do you have for the runner/marathoner trying to learn how to swim well enough to perform well in a triathlon? Would you recommend one of your stimulus-style programs?

Brett Sutton: If we are talking about professionals, this has changed quite dramatically over the last few years.

For age groupers it's easy. Understand that you are not a swimmer and don't put pressure on yourself to perform in that discipline. However, put in the time to train it. Understanding that being fit in the water makes a huge difference in the bike and run, even if the swim time itself doesn't improve. I just said today to one of our athletes whose anxiety about being a poor swimmer affects her performance performance in the discipline she does best: "View the swim as the warm-up; your race starts when you run up the bank."

For pros, if you're a non-swimmer and need to start from scratch and are already over 25, then I would suggest taking up duathlon if you're looking to be at the highest level. If you can't swim, it's extremely difficult!

L: What sort of technology do you advise age groupers to use in their training with Trisutto programs. Heart rate? Power meters?

Brett Sutton: Heart rate monitors and bike cadence.

L: You are affiliated with the Toughman race series, a global grassroots series of half- Ironman-distance races. You are known for coaching champions in every branch of the sport, from the Olympics to Xterra to Ironman. What do you like about the half-Ironman/ Toughman distance for age groupers?

Brett Sutton: You said it in your question: Toughman is a very well-organized racing organization that caters to the grassroots level of our sport. It doesn't ignore smaller races; it supports and celebrates well-run races that have up to 300 participants.

It's my hope our little support in some way helps those participants realize they are cherished in the sport. We can't all be Daniela Ryfs or Jan Frodenos, but the experience should be challenging and life enhancing. Toughman provides that!

Brett Sutton is inarguably the most successful triathlon coach in the history of the sport. In addition to mentoring some of the sport's icons, including Olympic gold and silver medalist Nicola Spirig, current Ironman World Champion and record holder Daniela Ryf, and four-time Kona winner Chrissie Wellington, Sutton has coached three individual Olympic medal winners, 16 ITU world champions and his athletes have amassed 150 plus 70.3 and Ironman championships. For more info on his camps and online coaching, visit TriSutto.com.

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