

COACH SUTTO

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by Simon Whitfield

It took me a while to sit down and write about the final leg of my European adventure, my tour of the continent, a journey in search of insight into performance decision making. I began my excursion in Yorkshire with the Brownlee brothers, the best of the best, two brothers performing at the pinnacle, not only by their own standard but that of our sports; they are the evolution of the triathlete built on the Simon Lessing model, swim at the front, bike off the front, run faster than anyone else.

To start with the Brownlees it was appropriate to finish with a man who has few peers coaching at his level (although I was coached by a couple of them), the grand master of coaching in our sport, an original, Brett Sutton. Brett is no stranger to controversy, some self inflicted, while other criticism simply comes with the territory, to be the best ruffles some feathers. I will chose to leave these be.

I first heard of Brett many many moons ago. I believe I made it onto his radar in the early days when he was the Australian National team coach and I was a try hard junior racer attending a talent ID camp at the Australian Institute of sport. It was 1994 or 95 and the camp was called CASIO 2000, or

something like that. We ran on treadmills with Vo2mX apparatus hanging from the ceiling, the selectors were determined to be ahead of the curve identifying the next generation of talent, observing from behind a desk in a lab coat they admired their fancy equipment while waxing on about their new special protocols. Apparently I barely registered as a blip, my capacity to dissect and orchestrate optimum performance lost in the dark of the data mine, blind as it looks only for what it thinks it wants to see. I don't know if Brett was there, I can't imagine he was, but it was the first I heard of him, like an underground murmur the athletes spoke of Suttos squad with reverence and aspiration, we all wanted to be the next Ben Bright, a clumsy red headed Phoenix risen from the ashes under the watchful eye of coach Sutto (and truly one of the best blokes I had the privilege of knowing during my racing career). Brett exists only out in the field, in the trenches. He isn't interested in engineering numbers, cutting edge protocols and lab coats. He wants to know the athletes, he understands what makes them tick, what buttons to push and how to enable them to discover their own capacity, take agency of their destiny.

Brett instilled in his athletes a fierce work ethic and relentless determination. No set was too big, no mountain too high, his athletes pounded the rock day and night, Brett understood the human capacity to work, and keep working. If I give the impression he was pounding their head on the rock I have done Brett, and his athletes, an injustice. He is methodical, pays attention to every detail and listens intently to his athletes, attuned to what they say, and what they don't say. He expects his squad to be resilient athletes and strong minded individuals.

The stories which proceeded the Sutto squad created a myth of sorts, we heard they trained in the harshest location possible, they lived up a mountain with no distractions, they ran marathons on the treadmill looking at the wall, they weren't allowed water, were forced to ride 100's of kms home from races, they ran four times a day. Their legend preceded them and Brett was the master of creating a

mystic without even trying, if it was premeditated it was backed up by the athletes quite head down focus and attitude rooted in the belief that no one prepared more thoroughly. I saw first hand an example of the shift athletes made when they passed through the gates of Sutto's fehdien after Greg Bennett came back from his first camp. Benno would be the first to tell you he went into camp with one set of expectations, of himself, and what he was entitled to, and he came out a different person. He had a sharper refined edge, like a blade forged in the furnace by a master craftsman, he radiated relentless and he approached racing as a boxer might, one who never stops preparing. As if every bout was just another moment in the day, the only break he took from punching the bag was walking to the ring and when he was done, no matter how he did, he simply walked out the way he came, and went back to punching the bag. Benno learned to love punching the bag. Sutto instilled this in his athletes, ingrained it in their DNA.

My first World Cup was in Ishigaki Jumi, a two day journey from Australia to the far atoll like islands sprinkled like stunning jewels surrounded by coral reefs dangling like a pendant off the main islands of Japan and inhabited by the most wonderful people. The food, the culture and the adventure have stayed with me as memories that exemplified what a privilege it was to be a triathlete on the circuit, but the defining moment of that trip happened sitting at breakfast on race morning watching an individual do lap after lap of the tiny hotel pool with giant paddles strapped to her hands. She was there when we arrived and continued long past the end of our leisurely race morning oatmeals and coffee. Joanna King swam 6k in a 18meter pool in the morning, and if I recall correctly, she won the race later that afternoon. If you went through the results you would see my 46th or 44th, something in the 40's, and in the top 10, Sutto athlete after Sutto athlete, everyone one of which was most likely assigned a workout to address their weakness before and after the race, on race day. They worked and they worked. And their coach showed up in a suit, a proper suit complete with tie. He did this out of respect for his

athletes, for the work they put in. I don't think he does it anymore but we used to see Sutto at the races sweating in his suit, running around the course, cheering on his boxers.

When I arrived in St. Moritz it was none other than the man himself there to pick me up. It was as if no days had passed since we last connected, Sutto was in full form telling stories, dissecting races, talking life in Switzerland, the difference between French Swiss and German Swiss, the rivalry. He spoke of his daughters tennis aspirations, and her fearless skiing exploits. We sat as two dads talking about our kids, their quirks and quarks, we talked about watching coaches with our kids, how interesting it was to be on the other side, how at times it was difficult to sit back and at others, when our children were just in the moment playing sports they loved, how it was such a pleasure to simply be observers with nothing more to contribute than awe and joy.

I met Sutto for dinner that night with his son. Tom has vision, he's audacious like his dad and while he might still be in his twenties he speaks with the authority and poise of a man much older, he is direct and confident.

Coach Sutto wears his frustrations, like an old fighter with scars, he'll tell you the stories, his lip quivers and his brow furrows, he has some issues with how the sport is run, to him it's so bloody obvious. He pays tribute to the origins of the sport, and the true essence of what it means to be a triathlete. He feels the races should reflect this, "no more of this shampoo, blow dry and a run bullshit". He wants Ironman corporation out, he loves the distance, and the challenge of preparing his athletes for the Hawaiian Ironman but the organization is "bullocks". And the coaching, what a treat it was to hear Sutto analysis the state of coaching, he respects certain coaches, he pays attention, he knows whats going on but he would never bow to another coach, it's just not part of his code. He prepares his

athletes, they prepare theirs, he respects their efforts, he wants them to respect his, and then he arrives at the race in a suit, determined to show them he simply cares more.

It was fascinating talking to Tom Sutton who is burrowing down into the triathlon and corporate wellness industry with the same grit and determination his dad shows. He is building his vision of how it can be done, they are coaching coaches, establishing curriculum, and educational systems aimed at providing every athlete and coach with the tools needed to see their full potential. Tom understands his dad's coaching philosophy, if Brett is the knowledge and experience Tom has taken on the role of the librarian, systematically organizing and sharing his dad's enormous catalogue of reference material and Suttonisms. Tom's vision goes well beyond the foundation Brett has built, TriSutton is only one pillar of the enterprise, Tom's ability to grasp the nuances of triathlon and understand the broader applications gives me confidence that whatever they do will be successful, with a unique Sutton signature.

I was able to spend a morning with Sutton on deck, he had a dozen coaches with him going through the various stages set out in their coach education program. This was combined with an age group training camp running in conjunction with the elite squad lead by Nicola Spirig and Daniel Ryf. Sutton was in full form, his analogies, his passion and Triathlon specific philosophy were front and centre. Today he was explaining he wanted his athletes to have purposeful kick, none of this six beat nonsense, and he lamented the use of world class swimmers as models, they are the anti protocol for swimming, "you are not a world class swimmer, you look nothing like them, you are not flexible, stop trying to swim like them, you can't, so learn to work with what you have, **WORK WITH WHAT YOU HAVE!!!**" He applied this across the board, triathlon is unique, you are not a swimmer, biker, runner: you are a triathlete. I agree, it's not swimming and biking, and running, it's swimbikerun, it's one word. Say it quickly. Swimbikerun. Sutton agrees. "Who can spin like that on the bike, this high cadence silliness, preserve your hamstrings, think ahead, you're a triathlete not a cyclist" "in Ironman it's not running, it's barely

even jogging, it's shuffling, they shuffle, Crowie shuffled quickly. Learn to shuffle quickly, wanna get faster, run up hill, a lot, run hills, a lot. And get out there and shuffle, and get to the track, do 40x400 at pace, 100x200 at pace, easy jog, do it, over and over. Learn your body, increase your capacity, build your resiliency and be consistent”.

It was truly a unique experience spending an evening sitting with the Suttons, and a morning at the TriSutto workout. I look forward to continuing our conversations. Their approach to performance decision making is built on conviction in the same manner Alistars is, do the work, believe in what you do, have the courage to commit and think for yourself, untamed by convention and the mediocrity imbedded in the status quo who's hidden agenda is centred around taking no risks, never stepping beyond their comfort zone because they believe zero is better then minus one.

Sutto punches zero in the mouth.

That would make a great t-shirt.

