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Stuff of Legends



An inside Look at one of triathlon's greatest coaches, Brett 'Doc' Sutton - the mentor, the motivator, and the manager.

Brett Sutton has a reputation for being hard on his athletes. In the world of triathlon, he has been

described as “the coach with the most formidable résumé in triathlon” and “widely considered to be the best and most unorthodox coach in the sport.”

The biggest news to us all is that 2012 will be the final year that Australian Head Coach Brett Sutton will be on deck with Team TBB's athletes as he looks into stepping off the gas after what is widely regarded as the most successful triathlon coach in history. He will however remain an integral part of the team but will reduce his time on deck and begin a new chapter of passing on his coaching legacy and getting back into development projects within the Asian community. This, obviously, is fantastic news for all involved with triathlon across the region.

While on deck with him last year at Team TBB training camp, I was surprised how relaxed his approach was to swim training. “Swim fitness is key”, he quickly pointed out. “ If they were not swimmers when they were young they never will be, you have to work with each athlete with what they got”. I was aware I was in the presence of a man that was a walking bible of the sport, he had seen it all in his 30 year career and had the track record to prove it.

Born in 1960 to parents who were both coaches, his father demanded much from his athletes, who swam endless lengths of the local pool. Despite being himself a poor swimmer, Sutton began coaching swimming at the age of ten. Five years later he was ejected from school for coaching during class time and so it was then that he set about organising his own swim squad. His swim squad performed well, but soon the parents of his chargers became concerned by their coach's tender age so he made the transition to training greyhounds and racehorses. Surprised at this turn of events, we quizzed him about the similarities of training man and

beast. "If you push a horse in training too hard it will break down in a race, the horse doesn't talk to you, so you have to look and see how he reacts to the sessions. I've found that from training horses I've learnt the most from how to train athletes," Sutton responded.

Sutton embarked on a short career in the boxing ring during his early 20's, but maintained his links to greyhounds and horses. After some time he made the return to swim coaching, where he was appointed as coach to the Australian national triathlon team. At the time this was viewed as a highly controversial move, as he had not been to college nor had he any formal training. This high profile position catapulted his status as a swim coach but soon brought with it unwanted, negative attention. Rumours spread that Sutton 'brutalised' his athletes. Some suggested these rumours were spread by rival coaches who were driven by envy at his new appointment.

What has never been in doubt is that Sutton is a hard-nosed trainer. People speak of his "infamous(ly) tough training sessions." Sutton counters with comments to the effect that he spends most of his time "slowing his athletes down," using the example of current World Champion Chrissie Wellington who trained under Sutton's watchful eye in 2007. "Brett changed my life," remarked Wellington, "and took me to the top of the world. He believed in me when I didn't even believe in myself. He trusted me, and himself, when everyone would have had doubts. He made me see triumph and disaster as one in the same. He taught me how to keep my head and shaped me into a champion. For that, and more, I will be eternally grateful."

His coaching resume is staggeringly good. So good, in fact, that it must speak volumes about him as mentor, motivator, and manager. His athletes have called him, "The best coach in the world." Others venture that, "Guys like Brett are the ones doing it right. He has a strong personality. All the great coaches do. They are like Napoleon. People will do anything he says."

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Sutton is unabashedly unorthodox in his training. His principles are out of the mold in the context of a twenty-first century, research based, science driven sport. He is not a fan of stopwatches, heart-rate monitors or power meters, for he believes people should learn to feel their bodies and gauge their effort during training and racing. He also believes that weight-training exercises, pilates and yoga are a waste of time for triathletes. He forbids physio's from seeing his athletes and allows them to only have Thai massages. He prohibits his athletes from taking liquids during training. "They have to adapt their bodies to becoming dehydrated in races," he says. Brett has been known to have his athletes race without helmets and with their training wheels to teach them to trust their body and mind above and beyond their equipment.

On running, Sutton espouses that good IM running is not about landing on the forefoot, but is about keeping things level, standing up, and maintaining a nice cadence (a mid-foot strike is "the safest, injury-preventative, economical running form"). He asserts that this same principle applies to swimming as well; to stop worrying about the perfect pretty stroke and instead focus on doing long, hard repetitions. He says, "Some of my athletes swim with straight arms, one sided, head up, but bloody fast, because they have done the work."

"Brett is an amazing person who understands the human mind and behaviour on a remarkable profound level. Based on this deep insight of people and their thinking, he is able to advise them about their training, athletic lives, but just as easy also about their lives in general," says Team TBB owner, Alex Bok.

Sutton has no time for people who get sucked into the "triathlon lifestyle." He claims that too many triathletes get hooked by "all the gadgets and data," and many read all the magazines and buy all the toys but don't make time to put in the required hard work needed to succeed in the sport. He insists that his athletes trust him completely and follow his instructions without question. It is here he draws the Napoleon comparisons. Sutton regards interval training as a very important part of his programmes, claiming unapologetically that "If it's not long, it's got to be hard." He is infamous for his "black days" when his subjects embark on a seemingly endless succession of hard intervals or other very hard sessions. The value of these sessions, he asserts, lies in "psychological toughening."

"There are...times in every race where you enter a dark place of doubt and must have that passion to overcome," Sutton is quoted as saying. The three most important components for Ironman, he insists, are "Consistency, strength and self-discipline."

“As a coach Brett has that unique eye for detail how each athlete needs to maintain their technique also when fatigue sets in. It is this ability that Brett has to step by step increase the technique of each athlete while also providing the athlete with the mental insight and strength, to bring the best out of every athlete that is committed to listen and learn,” adds Bok.

Sutton is the brainchild of teamTBB, an Asian based triathlon group that has helped propel many of the leading amateurs and professionals in the sport. Their website says, “teamTBB produces World Champions, Olympic medallists and Ironman winners on a regular basis,” and “teamTBB is a professional organization for triathlon and bike related sports that nurtures a unique culture to improve the lives of youth around the world, by providing hope and opportunity through sports.”

“Working with Brett has been one of my most pleasant and rewarding work experiences in my life. Other than the coaching, even the business aspects of teamTBB and TBB Holding are being kept amazingly simple. If there is something we disagree on, we simply agree to disagree and then move on to jointly stick to our teamTBB and business vision. It is just so simple and at the same time a matter of staying flexible between both that this and our amazing sponsors are the main reasons why teamTBB is now turn 6 years old and is still growing from strength to strength,” says Bok.

Not just a triathlon training organisation, it seems they have embraced philanthropic initiatives as well. TeamTBB aims to organise grassroots community events to introduce the bike lifestyle to people and communities across Asia, especially in poorer regions. They claim to provide funding and expertise to train local coaches and establish training schools in order to support the development of bike related sports and provide underprivileged youth a chance to expand their horizons and improve their physical and social well-being.

In terms of tri success, the team has so far snared 2x IM World Championship, 2x ITU long distance World Championship, 36 Ironman wins, and 20 Ironman 70.3 wins. And, as an ominous footnote, they claim they are still counting.