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Brett Sutton's Opinion



Potential, Performance and The Race of the Century

"Potential is a very condescending word. When I'm shown people with potential, I ask myself why they aren't using it already."

Brett Sutton certainly pulls no punches. As a coach to many a champion triathlete, the Australian is well known for his ability translate athletic potential into performance.

Be it at Olympic level or in the long-distance version of the sport, Sutton's coaching success is staggering. Olympic Champions, ITU World Champions, Ironman World Champions; you name the discipline and there is one name that invariably crops up as an influence behind the title-holder.

His views of the current state of the sport, however, are just as forthright and, with the Rio Olympic Games taking place in little over a year, wholly insightful.

Nature Gym: Where are you at the moment and what have you been up to the last month or two?

Brett Sutton: I've just arrived in St. Moritz to start a training camp for Nicola Spirig, who will now look to race at the European Championships in Geneva. I was back in Australia just before that to attend my daughter's wedding and show my younger kids where their Dad grew up.

NG: With the ITU World Series already into the fifth round this coming weekend in Japan, what performances stand out to you? Any surprises?

BS: I don't really watch the ITU stuff these days as I don't need to.

The fact that there is now no World Championship allows a narrow focus on the Olympics and a few regional championships to best judge the sport's direction.

I'd also add, I won't pay a fee to view something that should be free. Even if the coverage is much better than its WTC long distance counterpart, triathlon as a sport is so small. A further "money-grab" from its own constituents just serves to make it even smaller.

NG: It is just over a year to the Rio Olympics. Who do you see as the favourites for the gold medals at this early stage? Is it too early to tell?

BS: With regards to Rio 2016 I can't see anyone on the horizon running any faster than they did in 2012. The main players in the men's race look to be the same; the Brownlee's still dominate as expected. The new names are difficult to judge as some races now have shorter swims making it less of a triathlon test.

Out of the main women's running pack, nobody has moved forward in terms of performance. Gwen Jorgensen has done a marvellous job of building up her confidence over the past thirteen months but again: is she a faster runner than before?

I don't think so: Gwen is a better drafting athlete and whether this fact translates into Olympic gold depends upon the field and the course. But for me, she is the only mover.

The fact that Nicola can come off a break after an Ironman and run a marathon six days before a World Series race on three weeks of actual triathlon training and still podium does not bode well for the rest.

NG: The pre-Olympic year is an interesting one, the last minute scramble for qualifying points being the priority for many an athlete. This factor aside, what are your impressions of the pre-Olympic years of past? Any similarities or patterns you've noticed since 1999?

BS: Unfortunately, Olympic qualification is similar to most years – a farce and a sad blight on our sport.

It favours countries with vast budgets to send their athletes around the world. I think it is near criminal the Olympics are used as blackmail to force people to race events all over the globe that have no merit other than paying a fee to the ITU.

There is no athlete structure or consideration for their health; it's just a case of "how much do you give us (to host the race) and you're in. Be there if you want to go to the Olympics." At Cape Town recently the water was 11 degrees. You can't tell me this scheduling is putting the athlete first. To me, it is extremely unfair.

NG: The return of Courtney Atkinson to the ITU fold has been a talking point, particularly with a similar attempt by compatriot Chris McCormack no doubt fresh in the minds of many. What are your observations of Courtney's comeback and just how difficult is it to re-enter the Olympic buildup after a time away? Any differences to that of Macca's 2013 campaign?

BS: Australia does not have the same depth it once did and so Courtney, as one of the last guys from the golden generation may still feel he can beat the current group. At his age, I'm not sure if he has the weapons to be competitive for the podium.

However – and to my lasting regret – one of my former juniors from the past does. I have always thought that Brad Kahlefeldt could be faster but, like many of the other boys, he has been beaten mentally by Alistair Brownlee and is now racing long course.

NG: The French men are impressive in their depth and consistency. Why is this and what are they doing different compared to former strongholds such as Australia?

BS: The depth of the French men has always been impressive because they have the greatest club and coaching structure in the world.

Same can be said about the Americans; the flood gates are sure to open with the introduction of triathlon into the college athletic system.

Their (American) talent pool is extraordinary and the women's results are definitely not a flash in the pan. Once their male coaches get up to speed, the men are sure to be in a position to dominate.

NG: Nicola Spirig's impressive return to ITU racing in Cape Town had many people talking, especially given the myriad of other sporting activities she has undertaken. Do you think other elite athletes could benefit from applying a more varied and eclectic approach such as Nicola's?

BS: Mixing it up is hazardous and must be done with the greatest of care.

Nicola is pretty unique and, like Gwen, has multiple skills; both can run and do drafting triathlon. Nicola is a superb bike rider, so she can move around and also be devastating in long course events.

At present, she is negotiating with WTC to see if a "Race of the Century" is viable at Kona 2016.

However, the only short course triathlon on Nicola's agenda is the European Championships in Geneva and, depending on how the Ironman negotiations go, we will decide on her future direction.






NG: A recent blog post of yours mentioned the French athlete Ben Sanson as a great coach in the making. Given Ben's legendary status as a competitor and personality in decades past, talk a little about the interesting Frenchman and what makes him special.

BS: I do believe that Ben could be the coach to take the French to the next level. He has his personal demons that age will no doubt take care of but he has the skill, knowledge and personality to lift people above their own natural ability.

But potential is a very condescending word and when I'm shown people with potential, I wonder why they aren't using it already. Ben fits into this category and must judge what he needs to do to turn his potential into performance.

Remember: the only thing that the words "potential" and "performance" have in common is that they begin with the letter "P."

***Note: header image courtesy of trisutto.com**

Posted by **Jason Bailey** at 07:41     

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Contact

Jason Bailey
Holistic & Sports Massage
Cape Town
Southern Suburbs
Email: jbailey326@gmail.com
Twitter: [@athlete_natural](https://twitter.com/athlete_natural)
Instagram: [@athlete_natural](https://www.instagram.com/athlete_natural)

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A Happy Team



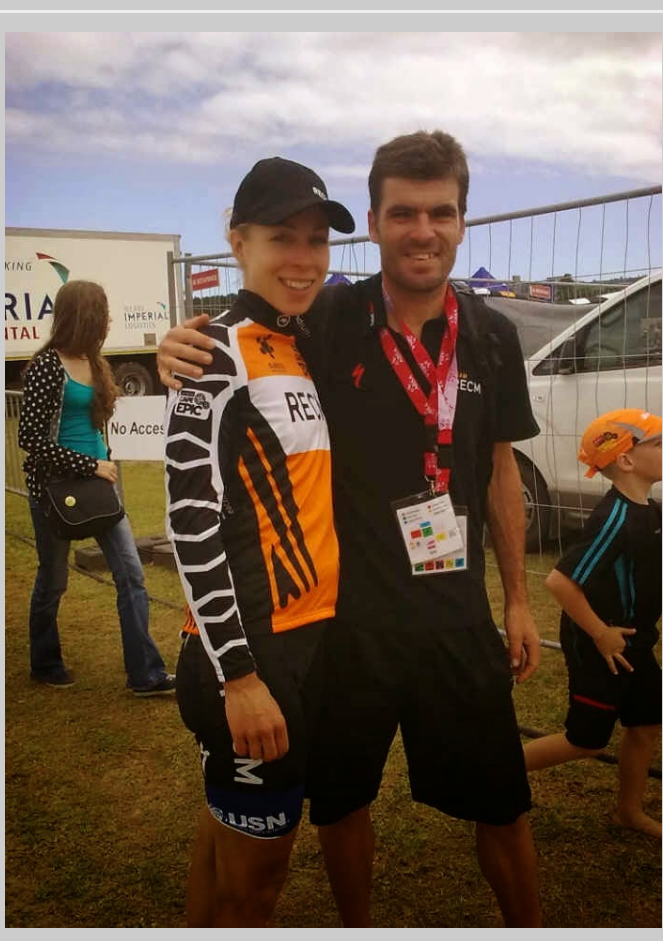
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