

COACH OF CHAMPIONS

Enigmatic, hard-arsed and autocratic, a “nutter of a coach” as one prominent champion put it. Just mention Brett Sutton’s name in any elite triathlon arena and various stories and opinions are bound to arise. Jason Bailey caught up with the controversial coach for some insight into the bigger picture.

Ten kilometre swimming sessions and basement treadmill sessions are intertwined with Brett Sutton’s controversial personal history and forthright views on the sport. These yarns and topics are all true. But as with all things, there is a bigger picture. And it deserves to be told. “Brett’s image is quite far removed from the truth,” says former charge James Cunnam. “He takes great care in each individual’s success and gives every person only what he believes they need or can handle.”

An ex-professional boxer, Brett became a prodigious swimming coach from an early age. Animal training became a dual metier, racing dogs and horses his specialty.

“My father taught me to be an observer,” says Brett from his home in Switzerland. “He was a master swim coach, but one who never read a single manual on the subject. I moved on to animal coaching after that, which taught me more than anything else. You can’t talk to an animal; you just have to watch and learn. That experience helped so much, especially later on in dealing with the mental aspect of triathletes.”

SQUAD GOALS

And so the Trisutto squad came into being. Starting out on Australia’s Gold Coast, Brett’s fledgling training team made the move to France in 1992. Initially based in Macon, this adventurous group of Antipodeans pursued the well-worn path of weekly racing and criss-crossing France in order to make a living. And make a living they did, with Brett’s maiden European experience being the original model for the various international training squads of today.

“We had two small units with eight athletes,” he says. “At that stage it was



all Australian athletes with no European knowledge, language or experience. All that saved us then was the outstanding performances of the athletes. That first year was tough but the boys grew with it. We moved to Alpe d’Huez in the French Alps after that.”

It was during these first European forays that Brett’s unconventional methods became stuff of legends. Athletes running 400m repeats in wetsuits (“Heat adaptation for my temperate NZ roots,” says Ben Bright) or kicking water bottles off the pool deck (“You don’t hydrate during the swim leg mate,” reasons Brett himself) have all done the rounds, and have no doubt been embellished in some instances. While most of these tales turn out to be true, it is perhaps his protective,

caring and even paternal instinct that is less well known and sets Brett apart. He draws much from his boxing experience, a sport that has more in common with triathlon than many might think.

“Triathlon, especially IRONMAN, is a sport that needs a defence strategy. For example, we teach our athletes how to walk fast, how to manage themselves when things get tough halfway through the marathon leg. Boxing is all about defence and so is triathlon. It is a sport where measurements are unnecessary but where self-awareness and belief is.

“My role as a coach is that of protector,” Brett continues. “For instance, I train females far more intensely than the men; they have a far sharper human compass and are not as open to distraction as

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NICOLA'S CRAZY COACH

Nicola Spirig’s racing 70.3 Antwerp two weeks after the London Olympics may have raised more than a few eyebrows, but it was all part of a master plan laid out by coach Sutton. The longer event required a softer aerobic effort and enforced rest, the latter being a result of Nicola and husband Reto Hug being forced to drive to and from the event from Switzerland. “There is always a greater plan and a specific reason behind Brett’s seemingly crazy ideas,” says the twice Olympic medallist. “Brett’s idea behind the 70.3 so close to London was to get a great workout and force me to rest. And the car travel sure took care of that!”

Qualified lawyer, mother and athlete all form part of Nicola’s identity, her sheer intellect and independent nature evident in the way she lives her life. And while she and Brett initially clashed when they began working together, she thinks that their differing personalities have improved each other in many ways. “Brett acknowledges that he had to change if he wanted to coach me. While he thinks that a professional athlete needs to be singularly focused, he realised that completing my studies and starting a family was important to me. My personality is such that I have to understand exactly why I am doing something; every workout has to make sense to me and Brett understands that. We have come a long way but he will always be my crazy coach!”



the guys are. They can handle far more intensity and are less likely to sulk about it. That said, holding them back and protecting them from overtraining is always a priority. It is a constant work in progress.”

Then there is his desire to see his athletes as all-round human beings, and happy ones at that. His advice to Beijing Olympic Champion Emma Snowsill? Settle down and have kids. His reasoning behind making Nicola Spirig swim at 8am the morning after her London 2012 triumph? Show her the stroke adjustment needed if she decided to – and wanted to – defend her title four years later after starting a family.

As times have changed and the sport has progressed, it is perhaps easy for some to assume that “old-school” coaches in the mold of Brett are stuck in the past and are rigid in their ways. So while the basic principles of training have stood the test of time, how does Brett view his evolution over the years? Is he a better coach nowadays? »

An advertisement for Zone3 Aspire wetsuits. It features a male model in a black and red wetsuit standing in shallow blue water. The Zone3 logo is prominent in the top right. Below the logo, contact information is provided: www.zone3.co.za, zone3sa@gmail.com, @raceszone3sa, and @zone3sa. A circular badge in the bottom right corner says "CHECK OUR FULL RANGE AT THE RACE EXPO". The product name "Zone3 Aspire R7 000" is written in the bottom left of the ad area.



“The Saffas I’ve trained have all been courageous. They’ve got excellent self-discipline. I’ve got nothing but good memories of them all.”

“Yes and no,” he says. “Am I a better coach now? Definitely for some yes, but not for others. I suppose it depends upon the era. For instance, I was far harder on first squads back in the 90s, which were predominantly male in composition. Those guys responded well to a Spartan lifestyle and strict discipline. But that wouldn’t have worked with someone like Nicola Spirig. I’ll put my arm around one athlete to console them while blasting another for a familiar situation. It’s a very fine line but one worth investing in.”

HAPPINESS = SUCCESS

It had been three long months in France. Racing every weekend, sometimes twice, was sure taking a physical toll on Brett Sutton’s young squad, most barely out of their teens. While results were good, morale was on the slide, homesickness was setting in and a shaky grasp of the French language was making day-to-day life difficult.

Then Ben Bright, now head coach of British Triathlon, read about some races in England that offered prize money. “We should go over there coach, maybe we can even find a KFC,” enthused the then-17-year-old racing prodigy. So off to Dover they went, crossing the Channel by ferry and arriving in Bath for a half-IRONMAN distance race fuelled on the Colonel’s Best and a little McDonald’s. Their British hosts were aghast, accosting Brett and debating exactly how he could allow his athletes to race on cheeseburgers. “You don’t understand, mate,” he replied. “They’ve been fantasising about junk food for three months, they’ll fly today. You’ll see.”

Bright came out of the water in the lead, mounted his bike with a smile and waved goodbye to his competitors up the first climb. The next time they saw him was at the finish, still smiling while eating another cheeseburger and drinking a Coke. He won by four minutes.

Is a happy athlete a successful athlete? Damn right, mate. 🍌



SUTTON’S SOUTH AFRICANS

The Republic of Brett Sutton knows no bounds as far as nationality is concerned. While initially almost exclusively Antipodean; Europeans, Americans, Asians and even South Africans have all found a home in Brett’s training stable over the years. So what does the “Doc” make of his Sub-Saharan athletes over the years?

“The Saffas I’ve trained have all been courageous,” he says. “They have excellent self-discipline and their efficiency of thought has allowed each and every one to improve at a fast rate. I’ve got nothing but good memories of them all.”

With Matt Trautmann, James Cunnama, Lucie Zelenkova, Caroline Koll and Conrad Stoltz having all been part of his group over the years, Brett points to the personality-fit and sheer adaptability as being qualities that his “Japies” all have in common. And it is Stoltz in particular that he has a soft spot for. “Conrad is someone I have great respect for,” he says. “He was a super non-drafting triathlete and my brief was to improve his run. The ‘Caveman’ was one of many guys negatively affected by the ITU move to drafting and, to his great credit, squeezed every bit of his talent into a mountain bike. He made himself a career he should be so proud of. When I think of athletes who I advised that made the most of what they had, Conrad is one of the first I think of.”

Twenty-one years ago, Conrad Stoltz arrived in Jindabyne. Situated in the foothills of Australia’s Snowy Mountain, “Jindy” is the destination of choice for ski-goers and holidaymakers alike, particularly during the winter down under. But Conrad hadn’t ventured to the New South Wales town for a holiday. Far from it, in fact, as he had secured a rare invitation from the enigmatic Brett Sutton to join his much vaunted training squad. “It was a hell of an experience,” says Conrad, then barely out of his teens. “Brett would bring a scale to the pool every second day and told me that I couldn’t run with such a fat arse. These weigh-ins determined whether regular meals were to be substituted with a salad. After a few weeks, Brett complimented me on my progress saying that I was starting to look like an athlete. He was an incredible motivator but he sure didn’t sugarcoat anything.”