

Meeting a coaching legend – Brett Sutton

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A few weeks ago I had the unique opportunity of spending time with one of the world's great coaches, this was a man I had always wanted to meet since I got into triathlon many years ago. His record in triathlon is unsurpassed and his athletes have won everything there is to win. His athletes have included Chrissie Wellington, Emma Snowshill, Loretta Harrop, Siri Lindley, Nicola Spirig, Jodie Swallow, Caroline Steffen, Dan Halskworth, James Cunnama, Mary Beth Ellis, Bella Bayliss & Stephen Bayliss to name but a few – this list just goes on and on. No other coach has come close to what he has achieved in triathlon over the past 20 years. The mans reputation proceeds him to say the least and he's as controversial as they come, that man is Brett Sutton.

I first contacted Brett many years ago when he first started using twitter, most never thought they would see the day when Brett started using social media like this. It was his athletes who held him in such high regard who first encouraged him to put his thoughts out there for people to learn from. To be honest I actually never ever thought he would reply to one of my tweets being the busy man he is so was surprised when he tweeted me straight back. In fact he just didn't just tweet me back he engaged in a coaching conversation that proved to be invaluable for me. He really couldn't have been anymore helpful, then over the years he continued to help me whenever I needed advice or a different point of view on something. This really surprised me because the name Brett Sutton can be quite intimidating to lot of coaches and athletes as he's known for being a very direct tough talking Australian coach. But what I found was a man that was more than happy to help in anyway he could, he gave me his time for nothing and as a coach you don't forget things like this. What I know about great coaches is they are happy to share and discuss their ideas with other coaches and athletes alike and Brett was no different. In fact he has been one of the most helpful coaches I've ever met.

You see Brett has many detractors out there, many successful people do, but what I've always been bowled over by is the people that really know him seemed to hold him in only the highest regard and will defend him fiercely. He's a man who seems to command the utmost respect from his peers and athletes alike. Sure he has disagreements with them but they are still unflinching in the amount of respect they have for the man. I know athletes who would go to extraordinary lengths to be coached by him because he is renowned world wide as a trainer of champions with proven track record many times over.

The controversy that currently surrounds Brett at the moment is his new "DOVE" project, this stands for – we say no to Drugs, Obesity, Violence through Education. He has resigned from his position as head coach of Team TBB in order to pursue this new vision. If you haven't been following what they are called "the biggest soap opera in triathlon " I would highly recommend looking at his new website www.trisutto.com or follow him on his Facebook page " Brett "the Doc" Sutton" where you will find all his latest updates. He is also on twitter at "Brett Sutton". I should warn you first and foremost if you decide follow him on twitter, please don't judge him by the grammar of his tweets, what a lot of people don't know is that Brett despite being one of the most intelligent and articulate men I've ever met is dyslexic. He has his way of writing things that sometimes can feel like things are written is some kind of "Sutton code" but there are good reasons for this, its just his way of writing. So if you judge someone by how they write something on twitter then you completely miss the point of the man, if you can be patient you will start to understand the messages he is trying to get across. One thing is for sure I spent nearly 3 hours talking to the man and he is articulate and as intelligent as they come.

My meeting with Brett took place on the beautiful little Island of Cozumel in Mexico. I was there supporting 3 of my clients who were racing, which was an amazing experience in itself. For those that don't know this is where Brett and his now former team (as of 2014) were based for part of the year, this was Team TBB. This has probably been the most successful elite level triathlon team over the past few years. We spoke on a whole range of subjects and boy can Brett talk! To be quite honest though I just wanted to listen to the man and he didn't disappoint, 3 hours might seem a lot but it just wasn't enough. He's one of the most fascinating characters I've ever met and has a wealth of knowledge on lots of subjects that kind of blew me away. He's as sharp as they come.

So on the day in question we arranged to meet at his squads training location, which is deep in the heart of Cozumel, it was a fascinating journey to say the least. I was lucky enough to be staying in a beautiful hotel on the Island, which was stunning, it had everything you could have wished for. I pretty much hadn't seen anything else on the Island so it was a real eye opening during my taxi trip to see the "other" side of Cozumel. This was in stark contrast to where I had been staying, it was as poor and as run down as you could have imagined. I always find it very upsetting when you see this level of poverty anywhere but what really stood out was this little gem of a sporting complex for children slap bang in the middle of it. There was an outdoor pool, football pitches, running track, basketball court all bathed in glorious sunshine. It was far from being a high tech facility as you could have imagined, it was just an area where kids could go and play and have fun. It was also the training facility that the worlds most successful triathlon team and coach would be using while they were there, was this choice of venue already telling me something of the man and his vision?

One thing is for sure, Brett is a man who has presence. I arrived early at the swimming pool for our meeting, there were a few swimmers in the pool warming up and slowly member of team TBB started arriving. They all looked relaxed, in good spirits and incredibly fit. I don't think I've ever seen so many P5's lined up against as wall in my life! The moment Brett arrived there was an instant buzz around the pool. They some people have an aura and Brett is definitely one of them. He then came over and introduced himself, I wont pretend I wasn't nervous but he instantly put me at ease. I really wasn't quite sure what I was going to think of him because if you buy into all the hype that surrounds him you would think he was a really intimidating character, this couldn't have been further from the truth. I really liked him, he's a man with a twinkle in his eye and there was a warmth and friendliness I really wasn't expecting.

What was clear through speaking to him was this was a man that cares very deeply about triathlon and the athletes he works with. He's as honest as they come and completely wears his heart on his sleeve. He surprised me in so many ways, he also made me laugh a lot. He's a very funny man with a sharp sense of humour, he says it how he sees it and certainly doesn't hold back. What I also really liked is that he was also a good listener too it wasn't just about him and his views, he really wanted to hear my thought on certain things. All in all he came across as a really likeable guy that has the ability to make you feel good about yourself, he was good company for sure.

What was hugely important to me during our meeting was I wanted to get an understanding of what made Brett tick as a coach. I wanted to know his motivations, beliefs and any else that would give me an insight into the worlds most successful triathlon coach. Again he surprised me in many ways here because again if you believe all the hype you read about Brett you start to build up a picture that couldn't be further from the truth. What is clear is that Brett isn't just about training the elite level pro triathletes, I think this is where Brett is really misunderstood. The pro's have always been what he describes as the vehicle for encouraging people of all ages and abilities to get into the sport, essentially they are the the inspiring role models. Particularly for children, this is what plays a big part in the Team TBB ethos and is the reason he created the team in the first place. The team wasn't just a team of elite athletes, it was a team that had many different levels of coaching for all abilities from juniors upward, this also includes recreational athletes. Wherever he has gone he has set up set up pathways in local communities (often very poor communities) to encourage local children from all backgrounds to get involved in sport. This includes local races and backing community projects. This essentially would help give these youngsters a way out and a direction for their lives, which would hopefully stop them becoming overweight, involved with crime, violence or drugs. His teams have served the purpose to connect people of all ages and abilities to an active lifestyle.

For me this was a fascinating insight because one thing that Brett has never done is shouted about his involvement with local communities and children etc. In a sense all we know is about Brett Sutton the tough talking coach who only coaches the very best in the world, but I think if most people truly understood the scope of Brett's coaching work they would be amazed. I had a basic understanding of his teams but was blown away when I fully realised the true breadth of his work. When you finally start to understand what Brett has done over the years you start to realise why the man is held in such high regard by many, he's a passionate man who cares deeply about the sport and the people he works with. The people that have been closest to him will know this and give their loyalty back in return.

It was funny because I also asked Brett what motivated him most as a coach, some might expect him to say training Olympic gold medalists or something along those lines. Sure he said that was great but it was also the little things that mattered just as much. This could be watching one of his kids trying hard in the pool or seeing one of his pro's offer advice to one of the juniors. The process seemed just as important to him as the end result. I think most coaches will connect to this so I think it was really nice to hear this from someone who is at the very highest level of the sport. I've always believed that being a coach is one of the best jobs you could possibly do because you get reward on a daily basis and Brett definitely hadn't lost touch with this. In fact it was obvious that his ability to get enjoyment out of many different situations was still clearly fuelling his motivation to move forwards.

The one thing that was clear during our meeting was how much thought Brett clearly gives to the development of the sport. His ideas for a brighter triathlon future were fascinating, he could talk on a range of topics that are connected to the sport and he doesn't hold back, he says it how he sees it and wears his heart firmly on his sleeve. This is where I truly gained an insight into how articulate and intelligent he is, I learned a lot about the sport just from this one conversation alone.

One thing that clearly bothers him is the fact that a lot of people seem to be making a lot of money from the sport with very little being given back. He also thinks things could be done bigger and better for all. Like his coaching he has a vision for all level of the sport from grass roots right up to elite level. At grass root level he believes that more needs to be done to help children gain access to the sport whilst investing in local communities and local races. This really is the bedrock that our sport is built on and he recognises this more than most. This is the very reason Team TBB was created, he wanted this to be the blueprint for what could be created all around the world to help people of all abilities gain access to our sport.

He also strongly believes that at pro level things could be done a lot better with the vast majority of them struggling to make a living. For all the training and hard work they put in they get paid absolute pittance unless they are at the very highest echelons of the sport. Most continue to do it for the love of the sport and the lifestyle so are happy to go along with this. But when you really sit down and think about it the money they earn for what they put in it really is a drop in the ocean considering how much money is coming into the sport. Most will never earn enough money to support their racing or their lives after racing so something needs to be done to address this.

Brett has been really clear in his blogs in showing just how simple it could be if more money was directed back to the athletes, local communities & age groupers, but this would need a new change of race formats/structure and people buying into his idea of the 30/30/30/10 split. 30 % to pro's, 30% age groupers (as part of a prize draw), 30% race organisers and 10% to local community projects. At the moment the splits don't come close to this and it's the athletes that are losing out. He also believes that bigger sponsors would be attracted to a sport that offers higher financial prizes. I think he also feels that if all pro's came together as one team or organisation this could put them in an extremely powerful position to make a change the sport, this would then give the bargaining power back to the athletes. This would take someone with great strength of character to achieve but could be done, but at the moment no one seems to be prepared to take this on which frustrates Brett hugely. He cares deeply about the pro's having trained so many of them and finds it's extremely distressing to see them getting virtually nothing back for all their hard work.

"I'm disgusted with the way the sport is run. These people should be getting paid superstar money, and they aren't because people are under the false pretense that the sport is boring. There are a lot of boring sports where people earn lots of money."

All in all, Brett's vision is a huge one for the sport. I could also see how he had to move on from Team TBB to pursue this vision. The DOVE project is the very start of this vision. The DOVE project aims to create a worldwide club for triathlon that caters for all. This message of sport for all and money being re invested back into the sport is the DOVE message that needs to be spread around the world. Then once the message grows and more people come on board each country can start to build triathlon teams, which support this ethos at both pro, and age group level. Then finally people can start to create races based around swim, bike and run that are equitable for all parties with the 30/30/30/10 split.

www.trisutto.com/#thedocspeaks/c1hn4

For me sat there listening to him you could clearly see that if any-man was capable of making this work it was Brett. If any person was capable of making a change, or offering a new alternative it was him. He's trying his best to show people that there are other ways to do things based on his experience you don't always have to follow the masses. He just needs a little bit of help from all those that care about triathlon along the way.

After our initial meeting one of Brett's colleagues invited me back to the local running track later that evening to watch one of the squad sessions they run for local children. I jumped at the chance. As I've mentioned before this was no high tech facility just a simple track for anyone to use. I arrived early and sat high up on one of the track stands so I could take everything in. It was truly heart warming to go back there later in the evening and see so many kids out doing some form of sport. Three kids really caught my eye, they were around 5-8 years old and were running a series of 100m races on the track before the session had even started. Much as you would expect all three of them were going as hard and as fast as they could with each effort. One of the girls in particular caught my eye, she was tall, leggy and blond. She was winning most of the races but what struck me was how fiercely determined she was, you could see it etched on her face. Little did I know this was Brett's eldest daughter.

Slowly but surely more and more kids started to arrive until the numbers grew to about 70, pretty impressive for an evening track running session! They were being put through their paces doing all sorts of stretches, running drills and paced efforts. What struck me was how happy all of these kids were to be out there, lots of smiling, chatting and friendly banter. The other most important thing was there were all ages, shapes and sizes working out together with no one left out. I wasn't expecting Brett to be there to be honest, but there he was. In fact most of his team were there. I watched how his younger daughter ran rings around him, she clearly adored him. It was a definitely family affair as his wife was also present, they were both there to support the squad and watch their daughters run. Brett wasn't coaching that evening he was merely offering his support to the squad and being a good Dad at the same time.

This is the side to Brett that I hadn't expected to see to be honest, he's a big family man and those that really know Brett will attest to this. His sense of community and sport for all was now clear to me. It was also clear where the DOVE vision came from, in its very essence it is who and what Brett Sutton is all about.

I should stress that my views and opinions written here are not solely based on one meeting alone. Over the years I've been fortunate enough to meet and get to know some of the athletes he has trained. I've also spoken to some of the coaches who have worked closely with Brett and in some cases worked with him back in his early days as the Australian National swim coach. Its always been very clear to me that the people who have been closest to him know him best and hold him in only the highest regard. The loyalty they give to him is unwavering, sure he has been criticised by many but no one is perfect and Brett would never claim to be. What is clear to me through these discussions I've had is here is a man who cares very deeply about his athletes, sure he works them hard and is very famous for setting some monster sessions, but what you don't hear so much is about the way he has to hold some of them back because they are classic over trainers and under-performers. If you want to read about the impact Brett had on Bella Bayliss' career then I would highly recommend reading this extremely moving interview Brett did with her when she announced her retirement. When you read this you get a great window into his world and his relationship with his athletes:

www.teamtbb.com/looking-for-clues/item/544-doc-reflects-on-the-amazing-career-of-bella-bayliss

I once had a conversation with Chrissie Wellington about Brett. I wanted to know what made Brett the great coach he was for her. Her response was fascinating, she told me that Brett might not be the most detailed or technically minded coach out there but where he is able to make the biggest difference is that he can work a person out really quickly. He has an amazing ability to get inside someone's head and work them out, once he does this he can start to unravel their weaknesses and fears and then put a plan in place to turn them into strengths. He "see's" things other people don't see and she was quite literally amazed at how quickly he worked her out. When a coach has the skill to do this the path forward for any athlete is always a lot more clearer and direct. I asked Brett about this during our meeting and was interested to hear that he actually comes from a long family line of coaches. He also used to train horses and greyhounds before he ever became a swim coach or triathlon coach. Obviously here the animals couldn't talk back so he had to become a master of reading them to get the best out of them. A skill he clearly feels was invaluable when switching to coaching swimmers and triathletes.

This reminded me of one of the first paragraphs I read recently in Sir Alex Ferguson's new book since he announced his retirement called " My Autobiography". The success Sir Alex achieved at Manchester United was unprecedented, we will probably never see another reign like it in football ever again. Here is a man that could truly work his footballers out and give them the direction they needed, most considering him the greatest manager they ever worked with. In reading the passage below I couldn't help but think about what Brett's athletes had said about him, its also serves as a clue for all coaches out there looking to succeed.

"In a lifetimes journey in football, you will have dips, lows, defeats and disappointments. In my early years at Aberdeen and Manchester United, I decided right away that in order to build trust and loyalty with the players, I had to give it to them first. That is the starting point for the bond on which great institutions thrive. I was helped by my ability to observe. Some people walk into a room and don't notice anything. Use your eyes: its all out there. I used this skill in my assessment of players' training habits, moods and behavior patterns".

To spend time with a coaching legend like Brett Sutton was undoubtedly one of the highlights of my coaching career. I am hugely grateful to Brett for taking the time to meet with me. All this starting from a simple tweet a few years ago. As with all great people they make you sit back and reflect. I pretty much spent the next week or so reflecting on our meeting. Here was a man who had gone full circle in his coaching life and reached a point where a new challenge had beckoned for him, ultimately though he knew what direction this challenge was about to take and he wasn't afraid to pursue it. You cant help but admire a guy who is at the top of his game but chooses to follow what felt right to him and move in a new direction. This takes a person with tremendous strength of character and self-belief to do this. I just hope people can offer their support to him as he pursues this goal.

I think the world will be seeing and hearing a lot more from Brett Sutton over the coming years as he pursues his new goals and vision for the sport. I was also extremely excited to hear that he has also written 3 books on triathlon, which will hopefully be published in the near future. No doubt they will be warts and all just like the man himself, he certainly wont hold back in telling his side of the story.

For those of you that want to know more about Brett's DOVE project then please go to his website above and start to learn a bit more, only good can come out of this if we can get enough people behind it. He will also be very happy to answer any questions you have. It's worth taking a chance to say we at least tried.

I for one have paid my \$100 to support this vision and will be running my kids triathlon on May 11th as one of the very first DOVE supported races.

Very best wishes for 2014.

Julian