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Brett Sutton Interview: Part 2

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In Part 2, we talk with TeamTBB coach Brett Sutton about training on his team, general training philosophy, technology and managing egos in the strongest team in triathlon.

Slowtwitch: You're in a unique position, Brett, wrangling the finest

women's talent we've not seen in a long time. I've seen the most recent men's wave of elites in San Diego come and go. Some year ago, San Diego hosted an all-star squad; it was McCormack, Jürgen Zook, Spencer Smith, Chris Leggh, Norman Stadler, Cameron Brown, Bryan Rhodes, all smashing one another in preparation for the Hawaii Ironman—with many coming up flat come October. Now they're all training on their own. How have you managed to bring together a similarly-strong women's squad, and get them to keep from breaking one another to bits in training? Egos certainly have to come into play.

Sutton: I like to have a little self-satisfaction, so the first thing the team is built around are athletes that have got a lot of heart. We do think highly about the social factor within the team. They can be very aggressive people and not like each other, but the bottom line is, they go out of their way to help someone that's got a problem, not stomp on 'em. It's a wonderful group.

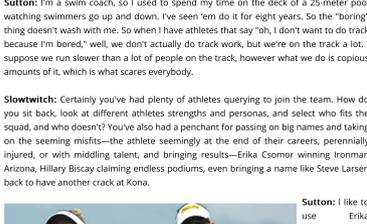
With the men here, it's easy. They tend to be able to control themselves. But the girls sneakily give it to one another. That's why I spend a lot of time on the track watching them go around. If I've got a hard run, I'll organize it such that I can watch it, and I can control the speeds. If I want six-minute miles, I get six-minute miles.

We control the competitiveness in the pool because I'm in front of them every day. We control the competitiveness on the run because I watch it all the time. And on the bike, it's a matter of sending whom out with whom.

Slowtwitch: Perhaps it's the case for short-course federation coaching and athletes, there's not many long-course triathlon coaches out there that are truly present for the team workouts every day.

Sutton: I'm a swim coach, so I used to spend my time on the deck of a 25-meter pool watching swimmers go up and down. I've seen 'em do it for eight years. So the "boring" thing doesn't wash with me. So when I have athletes that say "oh, I don't want to do track because I'm bored," well, we don't actually do track work, but we're on the track a lot. I suppose we run slower than a lot of people on the track, however what we do is copious amounts of it, which is what scares everybody.

Slowtwitch: Certainly you've had plenty of athletes querying to join the team. How do you sit back, look at different athletes' strengths and personas, and select who fits the squad, and who doesn't? You've also had a penchant for passing on big names and talking on the seeming misfits—the athlete seemingly at the end of their careers, perennially injured, or with middling talent, and bringing results—Erika Cosmor, winning Ironman Arizona, Hillary Biscay claiming endless podiums, even bringing a name like Steve Larsen back to have another crack at Kona.



Sutton: I like to use Erika (Cosmor) as an example. She, for me, was struggling with triathlon. I've watched her for years mop duathletes up. She'd like to finish her career on a high and see if she can be a champion in triathlon. That was why I brought her on, to work on her swim and see what she could do. Chrissie was one who had

ability, there's no doubt about that, but she was looking for direction.

I'm not anti the jocks, the big names. It's just my mentality. Watching Belinda Granger run now makes me so happy. I can look and see I've made a difference.

Slowtwitch: How do you determine the best workouts for an athlete while they're all doing Ironman? Clearly, the track sessions Chrissie or Erika are doing won't be suited to a Hillary Biscay or Donna Phelan, or even someone like Bella Comerford, Belinda Granger or Rebecca Preston. Which is what I noticed at the track workout—several smaller sessions in play, rather than everyone doing the day's one workout.

Sutton: (laughs) It's like being a ringmaster that way. I'll have four or five different sessions going on the track at once, guys going in every direction. I used to work with horses, and since they don't talk and tell you when they're tired, you have to be able to look at them to determine what you need to do with them. I do the same with each of my athletes. I look at the individual talent. Like with a Hillary, she has a football problem. While everyone is trying to fix it, they're making it nine times worse. The way she moves her legs isn't going to change—she's done a breaststroke kick for 15 years. I'm not gonna change that. If she was 14, of course, you can build a motor pattern into them. That's what we did with Reinaldo (Collucci), working with him from scratch, build in what you want. But when the motor pattern is settled, you gotta take what there is. So think you look at the individual and say "how do you build on what they've got?"

Take Steve Larsen. What's there is there; he's older, was retired, and is coming back. His first Half Ironman with us, he said "I could have run faster if I'd gone harder." That was good. Then, he just did a Half Ironman that he says was his best ever race as a triathlete. We didn't change Steve to have him get on his forefoot or something like that. We just develop what his strengths are.

There's a lot of lucky bitches out there that are glad (Larsen) didn't find me six years ago, because I think I could get him to run a 2:45. But that's life. I don't have to change anything in his technique. He was capable of running that, but nobody's seen how to take him forward. They were all trying to teach him to run, instead of saying "you have this wonderful bike engine, let's use that, and then let's walk fast." That's basically the difference between what I believe is a real coach, and someone who hands out information.

Slowtwitch: Is working with Larsen a different challenge, since he comes from an advanced level in a different sport?

Sutton: No, because he's embraced the sport on the whole. Not all of them do. Some who specialized in their sport come into triathlon thinking they're going to be good at it, and they're not. Remember "you're good at that because you're bad at any of the individual disciplines?" That went out 10 years ago.

It's a different thing. But while Steve has his strength, he has respect for all the disciplines.

Slowtwitch: You've been instrumental in the athletes' gear selection as well. One of those things is regarding aero helmets, and technological testing.

Sutton: Yeah, let's look at the gear conundrum, and I have a very clear vision on it. I would try anything 15 years ago as a swim coach. I was desperate to be a great swim coach and went out of my way to try everything. However, I found it destroys what you already had, because you're always tinkering. I still tinker today, but tinker with an athlete who can't run fast. Particularly if the athlete says "I'm willing to give it a go, because I'm crap anyway."

But when it comes to gear, Chrissie is riding the gear. I believe she rides fastest on. I think she'd be closer on a P2. I've told (Conejo's) Gerard Vroomen she's on the right bike when they wanted to change her out. I've sent the aerobars back when everybody's sending me aerobars to make her go faster. The only place you use aerobars is Hawaii. Hawaii suit someone who's got no great bike skill. Chrissie doesn't get downhill really well, and we're re-aligned her with drop bars for Germany so she can go down a hill, around a corner, and do it with confidence. But in Hawaii, she'll be on time trial bars.

I don't care what they want to tell me about what happens in a wind tunnel. I think there are maybe three girls that are faster with aerobars, full stop, in the pro ranks. And the rest are wasting three or four seconds every turn, every gear change.

And I see all these aero helmets, wonderful-looking pieces of equipment—and there's no air in 'em! The athletes cook their brain and run a marathon. They've saved a minute-thirty, then run 15 minutes slower. That, to me, is a problem. People like that stuff, and that's fine.

Same with discs. There are a handful of girls that can ride a disc properly. And of that handful are only a couple that are strong enough to get off it and run. There's not enough give in the graphite going up through the back. A disc just jars you up. A few companies have experimented. I think that's why Sofride was good for Ironman if there were no hills, because it gave you a bit of ability to run off the bike better because it took up that jarring.

If I thought Chrissie could go one second faster using a product, we'd use it. But at the present, she comes from a mountain bike background. The first year on a tri bike, we dropped her front end about eight centimeters from when she first a P3 but I didn't think there was a need for it, it was too extreme.

Really, I don't even look at the bike in a triathlon. To me, it's an apparatus to get you from the swim to the run. We want to run well. We just set up on the bike by the eye to what is comfortable. If they need to look like a bus at the front, that's how they're set up. We actually set up Chrissie to be a bit wider in the front than low, and give her as much room in the chest cavity for breathing.

The helmet, as far as I'm concerned, is for protecting the head and managing heat. When someone comes up with an aero helmet that's as open as a regular helmet, then we'll stick one of them on the athletes.

I find the same with shoes. For me, Chrissie is comfortable in the shoes she wears, so that's what she wears. She gets paid by winning races. If someone comes up with a shoe that suits, then we'll go with it.

And blood lactate testing, that's valuable, but only if applied the right way. I don't take lactate from Chrissie in the pool—she doesn't swim fast enough to create proper lactates that we could get a good read from. Loretta Harrop couldn't run fast enough for us in those tests to get a proper base. So I did I did lactate on Loretta, it was in the pool, because she had to skill level there. If I had Jackie Gallagher, I'd never give it to her in the pool, or you'd get false readings. Craig Walton, you could possibly get readings from in the pool. But any one less? They're kidding themselves.

That's just my opinion. I'm happy that other people have their opinions, but that's the way we play the game here. I know what the market is driving, but on the bike, you need to use what's best for you, not what you think is best for the fastest guys on the circuit.

Slowtwitch: What is the team's mission statement? What's it beyond a collection of pros simply training together under you?

Sutton: The biggest goal is to provide hardworking pros with an honest living. If that means some of our top ones want to go on their own in the future, that's the way it'll have to be. They're training their guts out six and seven hours a day, and if they're not in the top four or five in the world, they're really struggling. That's our main goal. It's not winning races, but that's just what's happening at the present moment. It's hard for us, because the team is so much more powerful than where, financially, the team should be.

It is our goal to provide coaching in triathlon like is available in cycling and swimming. And we wanted to foster the successes and use the athletes as mentor for children in underdeveloped situations so they can see hope. We did that with Reinaldo, our poster child. We've worked with him for six years through our social program in Brazil, and now he's going to the Olympics. We have a program there with 450 kids that are learning that if you put your head down, work hard, don't do drugs, don't drink underage—which is a problem there—there's a chance you can do great things. And if you're really good, you can get paid for it.

That's rewarding for me, to see the team running with the little Thai girls on the track in Thailand last year. To have 12 Filipino athletes, with no direction, and give them some structure to the point that they were doing some track sets with our guys. It's been wonderful.

We want to be there on the ground and execute these programs, we just need the funds to pour into the projects. However, we'll get the team sorted first while we train with them.

Really, I'm just an advisor to TeamTBB management. But I think it's the hope of the management that next year, we'll have a team, all wearing the same kit, riding the same bikes. If the budget means the team won't be as powerful as it is now, then so be it. We will be seen as something that's not going away. We'll be seen by the, shall we say, "second tier" of the tri community, that if you're good enough to push yourself into a situation where you can be a part of the team, it's gonna lift you to the next level. That's what we're looking for.

Slowtwitch: While your work with Chrissie and the team has put you in the limelight in the last year, you've been in the wings for years having coached world champions, in Australian Loretta Harrop, American Siri Lindley, and have worked with Greg Bennett, Craig Walton, Chris McCormack. How rewarding has your career been from a coaching standpoint?

Sutton: We've had a bit of influence on a fair bit of athletes. I'm pleased with that. I don't see myself coaching for an eternity. If TeamTBB becomes a success, then that will be my legacy. I could say "I had all these guys and they all struggled for money before the team." You have a skill capacity and these athletes work day-in and day out. For me, TeamTBB can work as safety net for athletes who aspire to be good. It may be, in the end, a development team. But I've always been a development guy. I've never seen myself as anything but a development guy. We take people who were struggling in their own situation, and try to maximize their potential.

When we talk about Siri and those guys, they did fantastic jobs, but they had talent. I've had more personal success with guys that are not household names. When I can see that I made a difference in their career, helped them enjoy their sport. I think I'm more proud of Stephen Bayless, (who won his first Ironman this year at Ironman South Africa – ed) than I am of Chrissie. He's battled away for years, gotten on the podium, and now got a win. I don't think maybe that would've happened if he hadn't run into me.

And Bella. She ran into me early, then fell for the "we know better, he doesn't know anything" mentality people were whispering in her ear, and went away. She's come back and straight away, we've had several great years. She's back into the method. She is absolutely getting the dividends for the 18 months that she's put in.

Slowtwitch: Probably one of the biggest questions is how your training has yielded such a collection of results. How is the training different?

Sutton: The thing we work on most is time, patience, and pick. We pick and stick, as in, stick with it. As soon as someone has done a certain kind of training, and it's not the results they want, their eyes wander, and they go off. Even my athletes do that. They leave me. Everybody's looking for the easier way. People are always saying there's an easier way. Let me tell you—there's no easier way. We're a clean team. We work out for our aerobic conditioning. We train hard. To be successful at the top level, we work twice as hard. But it's not without thought.

Chrissie will train 12 hrs a day if you let her, because she loves it. I've got huge forearms from pulling the reins to hold her back. Belinda Granger will go up and down these hills all day if she thinks it's gonna make her better.

I read the training logs, this and that. It's just that you pick, and you stick. You do it, and you do it, and you do it. And when it's not working and lose a bit of confidence, you go back and say "no, this is where I am going." You'll always be so much further ahead than if you are bopping from "I've tried this for three months, now I'm gonna try this." I got into triathlon because it's an aerobic sport, and people who work hard will be rewarded in the long run. You see many different running techniques, many different riding techniques, many different swimming techniques, from the top guys. There's no magic stroke, no magic training sessions.

Everyone's pinching my training sessions. There's no magic session. It's about how you put it together, for that athlete. We just try to create the environment where success is inevitable. Everybody's wondering about the sessions. I never worry about that. They ask, "where's your logbook?" I'm not interested in the sessions. That's the easy stuff. Any idiot can buy a logbook with 55 sessions. It's the way you put them within the training cycle. I can't write a book about where to put them in the training cycle, because I've got eight different training cycles depending on what athlete you've got. If you've a 48 kilo girl, you're gonna have a different training session than a 95 kilo bloke. We might have a routine, but within that, everyone has their own thing going.

Slowtwitch: You are, however, going to be instrumental in helping put together, with Ironguides coach Marc Becker, a series of training sessions that age groupers can purchase. How can you differentiate there?

Sutton: We want to keep it simple. There won't be one thing that won't come from out of our program. I can tell the age grouper, "what you're reading (in magazines) is what you think people are doing. This, this is what we are doing."

The thing that nobody gets, is that all my training is based around age groupers. There's no difference. Just put in the work. People are at the "top end," thinking about the incremental things, and hardly anybody in the sport has the skill level to be worrying about it.

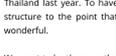
We don't work on what they say is scientifically right or wrong. We work on find out what works for you. That's what we're after. What we're doing with Ironguides is a great window of opportunity for people who say "I don't have enough time to fit this in." Some have a six-hour training window, and spent an hour of that on the computer writing everything up. So they're wasting an hour they could have been out training. We've seen it with athletes in our program, it's just as applicable to the age grouper.

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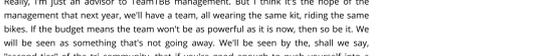
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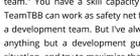
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