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Triathlon in Australia

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History of Triathlon

The origins of the sport of triathlon as we know it today can be traced back to France in the 1920s. The French newspaper *L´Auto* reported in 1920 on a competition called "Les Trois Sports" (the three sports) with a 3 km run, 12 km bike leg, and a swim across the Channel Marne, completed in succession without any break (Tinley, 2012). There is also a 1934 report of Les Trois Sports in the city of La Rochelle, describing a race with a channel crossing (200 m), a bike competition (10 km) around the harbour of La Rochelle and the Parc Laleu, and a run (1200 m) in the stadium André-Barbeau. Similar documented accounts of tri-sport events featuring running, swimming and cycling (not necessarily in that order) continued throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (Tinley, 2012).

The first modern swim-bike-run event to be called a triathlon was held in 1974 at Mission Bay, California where a group of friends had begun training together. Amongst them were runners, swimmers and cyclists and before long training sessions turned into informal races. The first formal triathlon race was conceived and directed by Jack Johnstone and Don Shanahan, members of the San Diego Track Club, which sponsored the race. Held on September 25th 1974, the first Mission Bay Triathlon attracted 46 participants and consisted of a 500 m swim, an 8 km cycle ride, and a 10 km run (Ehritz, 2003).

The first modern long-distance triathlon event was the Hawaiian Ironman Triathlon, which includes a swim of 2.4 miles (3.9 km), a bike ride of 112 miles (180 km), and a marathon run of 26.2 miles (42.2 km). It was conceived during the awards ceremony for the 1977 Oahu Perimeter Relay (a running race for 5-person teams). Among the participants were numerous representatives of the Mid-Pacific Road Runners and the Waikiki Swim Club, whose members had long been debating which athletes were fitter, runners or swimmers. On this occasion, U.S. Navy Commander John Collins pointed out that a recent article in *Sports Illustrated* magazine had declared that legendary Belgian cyclist Eddy Merckx had the highest recorded maximum oxygen uptake of any athlete ever measured, and that perhaps cyclists were fitter than anyone.

view interview: John & Judy Collins - Ironman Triathlon Founders

brag for the rest of your life!

A number of the other military athletes in attendance were also familiar with the Mission Bay races, and understood the concept when Collins suggested that the debate should be settled through a race combining the three existing long-distance competitions already on the island: the 2.4 miles (3.9 km) Waikiki Roughwater Swim, the 115 miles (185 km) Around-Oahu Bike Race, and the 26.2 miles (42.2 km) Honolulu Marathon. Collins calculated that, by shaving 3 miles (4.8 km) off the course and riding counter-clockwise around the island, the bike leg could start at the finish of the Waikiki Rough Water and end at the Aloha Tower, the traditional start of the Honolulu Marathon (Schneider, 2008). Prior to racing, each athlete received three sheets of paper listing a few rules and a course description. Handwritten on the last page by Commander Collins was this statement: "*Swim 2.4 miles! Bike 112 miles! Run 26.2 miles! Brag for the rest of your life!*" It is also reported that prior to the race he was heard to say, "*Whoever finishes first; we'll call him the Ironman*" (Ruibal, 2003)

Of the 15 men to start off in the early morning on February 18, 1978, 12 completed the race and the world's first Ironman, Gordon Haller, finished in a time of 11:46:58.

By 1982, the Hawaii Ironman gained extensive media coverage and participation levels had increased to 580 competitors. In 2011, over 3,000 athletes completed the gruelling challenge, with the fastest man, Australian Craig Alexander finishing in a course record time of 8:03:56, and the fastest woman, Brit Chrissie Wellington, finishing in 8:55:08, just one minute shy of her own course record set in 2009.

The Origins of Triathlon in Australia

The first State Triathlon Associations in Australia came into being in late 1984 and early 1985. In May 1986 at Broadbeach, Queensland the Triathlon Federation of Australia was formed, which in 1991 changed its name to Triathlon Australia (TA). TA became a founding member of the International Triathlon Union (ITU) upon its formation in April 1989 in Avignon, France. At the 97th session of the International Olympic Committee, ITU was given the status of official world governing body for the sport. Since then 140 countries have become affiliated.

1.5 km swim
40 km cycle
10 km run

The first ITU World Championships were also held in Avignon in August 1989. The distances chosen were to become the standard in short course triathlon racing - 1.5 km swim, 40 km cycle, and 10 km run. These distances were chosen on the basis that the swim was the equivalent of the longest Olympic pool event, the bike was the standard international time trial distance, and the run the longest Olympic track event. The term “Olympic distance” quickly became shorthand for the standard course (**www.triathlon.org.au/About/History.htm**).

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Australian Success

As a relative newcomer on the world stage, the sport of triathlon wasted no time in establishing a strong foothold in a dynamic Australian domestic sporting landscape. Nor did elite Australian athletes waste any time in asserting their dominance on the international stage, an enduring dominance that now spans almost 25 years of international competition. Since the foundation of the ITU in 1989 and the commencement of the ITU World Championships that same year, Australian athletes have achieved unparalleled international success. This success occurred almost from the outset, with Greg Welch picking up the Elite Male World Championship title in Florida 1990, and Miles Stewart following up with a home town victory in 1991 on the Gold Coast. In the female category, Michellie Jones won successive World Championships in Muskoka, Canada in 1992 and Manchester, England in 1993. From that year on, Australia's dominance of the sport at the elite level has been such that they have now held 19 senior World Championship titles, clearly ahead of Great Britain in second position.

Credit: jimmyharris/flickr/CC-BY-2.0

When combined with success at U-23 Elite and Junior Elite levels, another nine titles, Australia is undoubtedly the most successful triathlon nation in ITU World Championship racing to date. Australia's ITU World Championship success has been augmented by success at Olympic and Commonwealth Games. Australia has achieved podium finishes at all four Olympic Games since the sport's introduction at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, including Australian women Emma Snowsill and Emma Moffatt winning gold and bronze medals respectively at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Similar success has also been achieved at the two Commonwealth Games in which triathlon has appeared – Manchester, England (2002) and Melbourne, Australia (2006). These results, along with Australia's domination of the World Ironman Championships – Chris McCormack (1st 2007 & 2010), Craig Alexander (1st 2008, 2009 & 2011), and Miranda Carfrae (1st 2010; 2nd 2009 & 2011) - clearly substantiate Australia's standing as the world's leading nation in the sport of triathlon.

view video: Craig Alexander - his career

Foundations for Success

It is popularly held within Australian triathlon circles that the enduring success achieved over the past two and a half decades can be largely attributed to the origins of the sport in Australia and its evolution as it branched out from the United States. Triathlon, some argue, is the ultimate modern day sport and one that is ideally suited to Australians and the Australian environment. Australia was one of the first countries to embrace a sport that seemed ideally suited to its climate, lifestyle, and sense of sporting adventure. In addition to a relatively strong tradition in each of the three disciplines individually, the iconic Australian surf lifesaving movement also provided a readymade population of elite athletes indoctrinated in multi-sports events incorporating run and swim legs whose competitive nature and appetite for individual challenge saw many attracted to this new and exciting sport.

Due to triathlon's formative stage of development in Australia at the time, another factor that surreptitiously but significantly contributed to the development of what was to become a dominant performance environment, was the lack of high performance training centres. In the early days of Australian triathlon there were two dominant squads, under the guidance of Head Coaches Col Stewart (Gold Coast, Queensland) and Brett Sutton (Jindabyne, New South Wales). Between them, these two squads contained the majority of Australia's elite triathlon population and, in turn, the resultant depth and quality of talent within these squads created a competitive training environment that was ideal for the development of the physical and mental skills required to survive and thrive within the sport. Listening to the words of key individuals, who were immersed in these environments in varying roles, readily elucidates how this exceptional training environment provided the foundation for Australia's burgeoning performance success.

Bill Davoren was heavily involved in triathlon in Australia from the mid 1990's, and went on to work directly with the majority of elite athletes of the day as the Head Coach of the Australian Triathlon Program (2002-2008). Davoren describes the impact of the early triathlon environment on athletes and performance in the following way, "*We cut out teeth in the early 90's, a period when there was phenomenal talent, depth, a great racing scene and the reality was that that talent bred more talent, and in turn created a world class training and racing scene.*" Athletes were training against world class contemporaries every session, and needed to find a way to back up and push themselves to perform day after day. Davoren added, "*The result was a population of physically and mentally resilient and resourceful athletes with a willingness to train and race with incredible intensity and toughness as they strived both for individual development and performance success, and to stay at the top of the Australian triathlon food chain.*"

Credit: Jason Mrachina/flickr/CC-BY-NC-ND-2.0

A product of this prolific environment was Chris McCormack, arguably Australia's most successful athlete over all race distances, having won multiple Olympic distance and Ironman World Championships, and having been voted International Triathlete of the year on five separate occasions. In discussing the factors contributing to Australia's success, McCormack has no doubt about the significance of the impact that the domestic training and competition environment had on both himself and his peers through the early to mid-1990s.

Reflecting on these influences McCormack highlights the quality of coaching, the depth of talent, and the competitive intensity of the training and racing. However, he also makes special reference to the impact of Australia's pioneering champions of the sport, "*To have the likes of Greg Welch, Miles Stewart, Brad Bevan, and Michellie Jones all experience international success and then come back and train in the domestic environment was invaluable……to have the opportunity to talk to, touch, train with, and race against these individuals demystified their success and allowed the next generation of aspiring champions to realise that if they can do it, then maybe I can too!*" Clearly, this opportunity to pit oneself against the best on a daily basis not only served as a powerful motivator, but also as a mechanism for fostering personal self-belief and general sporting confidence.

The Psychology of Triathlon

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Renowned for his appreciation and understanding of the mental side of elite performance, McCormack provides a number of wonderful insights into the world of triathlon and why Australia has produced so many champions, and has been so dominant throughout the years. The importance that he places on the mental side of performance is immediately apparent when he states (in relative terms) that, "*the physical side of triathlon is the easy side, it's the mental side that is so important, and being able to master what is in your head*" (McCormack, 2011, p. 67). The rationale behind a comment such as this becomes apparent when he explains a couple of key factors that underlie his philosophy regarding winning. The first, is that "*Races are won in key moments*", and the second, is that "*Success in triathlon is, above all else, about enduring suffering*" (McCormack, 2011, p. 65). He goes on to explain that racing is less about the race plan, or even your opponents for that matter, and emphasises that every race is more a war between the positive and negative in your head. Insights such as these have significant relevance to triathletes of all levels and speak directly to the skills required to be successful. They also highlight the importance of individual self-awareness and environment required to develop these skills at both a conscious and sub-conscious level.

every race is more a war between the positive and negative in your head

In his book, *I'm Here to Win* (2011), McCormack points out that ultimately triathlon is about pain, knowing when it will come, enduring it, and persisting through it, "*Every triathlete (pro or amateur) no matter how fit, reaches a point in every race where he/she has to decide whether they will endure more suffering…….It's all about your mindset, and being able to endure the suck!*" (McCormack, 2011, p. 78; p. 212). In more practical terms, this involves having good cognitive awareness, maintaining effective self-talk and associated strategies in the key moments in the lead up to and during the physical and mental adversity experienced during racing. It also requires commitment and determination in not giving in to your 'rationalisations' – the insidious thoughts and easy excuses often designed and offered up by the mind, to end the suffering (McCormack, 2011). These realisations embody the value of the interface between the quality of the training environment, and the quality of the people within it.

view video: Chris McCormack - mental toughness

Obviously, athletes need a training environment that will challenge and develop them both physically and mentally, but the true potential of such an environment can only be realised by an individual with the insight to maximise the opportunities of being exposed to such an environment on a daily basis. Hence, McCormack's comments regarding exposure to Australia's pioneering champions of the sport are especially pertinent. He explains that in order to be successful you must have good mentors, mentors that you respect and that are going to encourage you to reflect and to ask yourself the right questions – like, "*what is limiting me?*" In his view, the biggest limiting factor is fear, but very few triathletes are willing to work at this level of awareness, being willing to acknowledge their fears and develop the skills to manage them – both their own, and the fears of their opponents. However, for those with the courage to do so, and to make the most of all that such a robust environment has to offer, the reward is one of the true keys to success – confidence, and the willingness to back yourself, and dominate the key performance moments.

Not surprisingly a number of these views were also shared by 1996 World Champion and inaugural Head Coach of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) Triathlon Program, Jackie Fairweather (née Gallagher). When asked to reflect on her own career and also why she thought that Australia's elite women had dominated the world over the past 20–25 years, Gallagher's candid reply was, "*We were all hard-arsed bitches!*" Elaborating on her response, she went on to explain that, by its very nature, "*Triathlon is a hard person's sport and you need to be physically and mentally tough just to do the work.*" Furthermore, she discussed that sporting success is often about self-belief and confidence, and that female athletes often aren't naturally confident, so the difference between the good and the great was largely related to their confidence. The 'bitchiness' could probably be more accurately described as a singled-minded, ruthless, tenacity driving you to train and race to win!

you need to be physically and mentally tough

In a similar scenario to the men, Gallagher paid tribute to the pioneering influence of Michellie Jones, who paved the way for her successors by going overseas and displaying this tenacious, single-minded determination in winning back-to-back World Championships. The legacy of her ground-breaking feats was a generation of female athletes with a 'can do' attitude, a deep sense of self-belief, and an impeccable work ethic destined to ensure their competitiveness amongst any company. These sentiments were again shared by former National Head Coach, Bill Davoren, who stated that, "*Their mindsets were phenomenal; they were hard, tough, and always looking to take themselves to a new level of performance.*" He reflected that this resilient and determined attitude meant that the women garnered incredible benefits from the competitive training environments with the men, and sharing in the battle to stay ahead of national peers also ensured that they were super competitive on the international stage.

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Taking on the World

Not surprisingly, the international racing scene became the next frontier of challenge in the evolution of a steady procession of Australian athletes with a hunger and willingness to chase competitive opportunities. Traditionally, these athletes would train and race a tough domestic summer in Australia and then, around April each year, many would head to Europe and partake in the French club racing scene. This lifestyle of living lean and pursuing opportunities to race for money in various corners of the world, not only appealed to the adventurous and competitive Aussie spirit, but also further contributed to the mentally tough and resilient triathlon prototype rolling off the Australian production line.

However, as the sport and the success of Australian athletes on the international stage grew, so too did the domestic racing scene. In addition to the traditional national racing series, the early 1990s saw the introduction of Grand Prix racing involving an elite field of the top 30 Australian and invited international athletes. The Australian Grand Prix racing series soon gained a reputation as the world's premier domestic racing scene and began to attract increasing numbers of the world's leading male and female triathletes keen to pit their talent against the best from Down Under. Australia soon became a major international hub for the sport of triathlon, forcing all involved to grow and evolve with its ever increasing profile and success.

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With the sport's continued development, the general public were now able to regularly consume high quality racing and Australian success on free-to-air television with multiple flow-on effects, including increases in the sport's appeal and popularity, a surge in participation numbers, and additional coaches and training centres to cope with the demand. At the grass roots level, triathlon was developing a critical mass and depth of participation characteristic of all successful sports, and the quality of the training and competition environment ensured that those athletes who progressed through the pathway to the top of the Australian triathlon tree were world class; a fact emphasised by the continual production line of male and female world champions that emerged throughout this period.

The ultimate motivator also arrived for all those involved in the sport on the 24th September, 1993, in the form of Juan Antonio Samaranch's announcement that Sydney had won the right to host the 2000 Olympic Games. Not only did this announcement bring with it added funding, but the prospect of being able to race the biggest race of your life in your own backyard, served to strengthen the will and resolve of all elite and aspiring triathletes within this incredibly successful high performance system throughout the 1990's and into the new millennium, the legacy of which is still evident in today's athletes and high performance programs.


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Servicing Secrets

My involvement with the National Triathlon Program commenced in 2009 through my role as a service provider with the AIS. The AIS Triathlon Program works in partnership with Triathlon Australia and is focused on providing world class support to Australia's best elite triathletes. My introduction to the program in March 2009 coincided with the majority of athletes preparing to head to the northern hemisphere in April for racing in the United States and across Europe, with the major focus for the year being a home ITU World Championship Grand Final on the Gold Coast in September.

During the northern hemisphere summer my involvement with the national program was limited to some basic telephone and Skype contact with athletes and coaches to help troubleshoot various personal and performance-related issues. In Australia my time was spent consulting with various developmental athletes and those rehabilitating from injury, which provided a good opportunity to gain a better general understanding of the sport, along with the pertinent performance, personal, and social issues relating to triathlon.

It also provided timely opportunity to review some profiling conducted by my AIS predecessor. The rationale for the profiling was based on Sternberg's (1999) theory of successful intelligence, which differentiates intelligence as a set of multidimensional human competencies including analytical skills, creative skills, and practical skills, that are context specific. The theory defines successful intelligence as the ability to achieve success in life according to one's personal standards, and within one's sociocultural context. The associated assessments included measures of analytical skills (Raven Standard Progressive Matrices; Raven, Court, & Raven, 2004), emotional intelligence (Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory; Bar-On, 1997), and mental toughness (Mental Toughness Inventory; Middleton et al., 2004). This profiling information not only gave me an enhanced insight into a number of athletes that I would be dealing with within the squad, but also a useful point of reference in our initial consultations.

My first few months with the sport were a very steep learning curve, and although I was able to watch a number of the major northern hemisphere races online, I really craved an opportunity to consolidate some of this learning in a more practical sense. I was very fortunate that my first significant involvement with the squad was at an event the magnitude of the ITU World Championship Grand Final. Given that I didn't have a working relationship with a number of the elite athletes competing, my entry was a rather soft one with my primary objectives being to observe, learn, and help out where I could without saying or doing anything that might upset anyone. I'm happy to say that I was relatively successful in achieving these objectives, and was reassured by the operating systems in place to assist in the management and support of our athletes at such an event. However, it must also be said that although increasing my familiarity with the logistics of race day and the athletes involved within the national squad was beneficial, the most significant development from a servicing perspective, was a far greater understanding and appreciation of the physical and emotional demands endured by the athletes in competition. Grounded in this new found perspective, I largely saw my role as working within a multidisciplinary framework to assist athletes and coaches to prepare for and manage these demands in an effective and functional manner in order to enhance performance and well-being.

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

As a relative newcomer to a sport, particularly a sport with such a strong history of success, I understood the importance of spending concerted time learning from those established in the system, and seeking to heed the lessons from the past. I believe that this approach is imperative for a number of reasons. Firstly, in my experience, it assists in the development of rapport and the efficient integration into a new program. Secondly, it assists in understanding and conceptualising the success that individuals and the sport in general has experienced in the past. Finally, it increases one's ability to leverage off the previous success and effective systems within the sport and utilise a more strengths-based approach (Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener, 2010) in order to effectively complement and enhance these existing systems and all those working within them.

However, it must also be said that while the fundamental physical and mental skills required for success in the sport remain ostensibly the same today as they were 25 years ago, the reflective approach undertaken also revealed that a number of the key factors that had contributed to Australia's success in the past are no longer as influential in the current environment. For example, the national program is now predominantly decentralised, with athletes training in their various home environments with their respective coaches. Although such a system may create greater convenience and the opportunity for more individualised programs, at the same time it also dilutes the many powerful inherent influences brought to bear by regular exposure to a competitive training environment containing a critical mass of high calibre athletes.

The silver lining to this cloud, however, is that triathlon's success over the years has it positioned as a priority sport (potential multiple Olympic medal) within the AIS framework, and therefore the coaching and resourcing is first class, and the support staff are happy to embrace the challenge of working creatively within this altered context in order to continue the sport's evolution and success.

Credit: Chris Hunkeler/flickr/CC-BY-SA-2.0

In providing servicing to a decentralised program, a substantial amount to time is spent working directly with coaches. Maximising coach effectiveness is a key priority for me and covers a number of fundamental areas, such as coach well-being and self-management, effective engagement and management of healthy relationships with athletes, effective communication with relevant stakeholders, fostering competitive and supportive training environments, encouraging engagement in some form of mentoring relationship(s), and critical analysis of program and coaching practices. Given the amount of contact that coaches have with athletes and the inherent credibility and influence that they bring to the relationship, I believe that it is essential to spend time investing in the coach-service provider relationship to ensure consistency of message and the reinforcement of key concepts within the training and competition environment.

A specific activity conducted with coaches to achieve some of the objectives outlined above is Behaviour Analysis Modeling. Through this process coaches are encouraged to identify cognitive, emotional, and behavioural indicators (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and actions) associated with when they believe they are coaching at their best, and alternate markers associated with perceived sub-optimal coaching performance. We then work together to identify early warning signs (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that occur more/less frequently that contribute to sub-optimal performance) and devise strategies for early detection and effective self-management.

Another activity is to have coaches identify and articulate their personal coaching values and philosophies. We then discuss potential mechanisms for monitoring their congruence to these values and philosophies in their daily coaching practice, including identifying a relationship with a respected peer from whom they can proactively seek feedback on their effectiveness. Finally, with the expressed permission of athletes, I will sometimes conduct sessions with both the coach and athlete to discuss performance-related formulations and management protocols, and have both parties discuss how potential interventions can be reinforced in the daily training environment.

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The Nitty Gritty

My servicing of athletes within the national program has predominantly been individual work (as opposed to group workshops) and has followed a relatively straightforward performance framework. Observing the lessons of the past, the work primarily focuses on assisting individuals to identify and manage their key performance moments and more effectively endure the physical and cognitive challenges associated with their performance. This process invariably starts with assisting athletes to maximise the benefits of exposure to a high quality training environment. Prior to focusing on the physical aspect of training, athletes are encouraged to review their cognitive and emotional approach to the training environment, and anything that is restricting them, from a psychological perspective. A fundamental aspect of this process is that athletes are willing to acknowledge their relationship with themselves in the training environment, and embrace the role of being their own greatest competitor and ally as they strive in each session to be a better athlete (physically and mentally) than they were in the previous session.

Credit: woowoowoo/flickr/CC-BY-NC-ND-2.0

The training environment can then be observed as a mechanism for increasing awareness regarding this personal performance relationship and how the individual copes and reacts to various physical and environmental demands. The effectiveness of this process has been greatly enhanced by the coaches involved within the national program and their willingness to expose their athletes to a variety of personal and environmental training demands through activities such as training camps, boot camps, mixed squad training sessions, etc. Irrespective of the context, and consistent with the principles of deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993), athletes are encouraged to embrace the challenges and opportunities presented by these environments, to identify clear performance objectives for each session, and employ various processes in order to maximise the quality and consistency of their application and execution.

view video: Chris McCormack - motivation

A simple example is for an athlete to deconstruct the basic elements of a session and identify pertinent physical and mental performance cues that can be incorporated into a tailored performance routine. Athletes can then use this routine as an aide for facilitating two important processes. Firstly, it can be used proactively to enhance the efficient allocation of attentional and physical resources in the execution of a particular skill or series of skills. Secondly, it can serve as an important point of reference to identify and gain critical insights into how and when an athlete's performance may breakdown (i.e., key performance moments) under varying forms of distress. The job of the practitioner is then to work with the individual athlete (and coach/support staff where applicable) to develop the mental skills to manage these demands and develop the resilient, effective mindsets that have been the signature strengths of Australia's champions of the past.

A specific example of this involved an athlete returning to racing after two seasons plagued by a number of injuries and experiencing a number of significant performance-related issues. The predominant issue was that the initial (and most severe) injury had occurred on the bike and the athlete was experiencing distressing levels of anxiety associated with riding in a pack.

This issue was addressed on a number of levels. Firstly, the athlete was assisted to identify unhelpful thought processes that were increasing anxiety levels and creating changes in his skill execution and effectiveness on the bike (e.g., increased muscle tension, impaired focus, poor positioning, etc.). Various techniques including psycho-education, mindfulness training, and cognitive restructuring were then used to help normalise and address these troubling cognitions, before then identifying a more effective mindset and associated performance cues. With the assistance of the Head Coach this work was then coupled with regular graded exposure in training in order to desensitise the athlete to the triggering event and also give them the opportunity to use these newly-acquired mental skills in a demanding, race-simulated environment.

The specifics of each individual intervention, of course, vary from athlete to athlete, although there is no hiding from the fact that triathlon is a tough sport and a significant percentage of performance issues are directly related to inconsistent application and execution of skills due to an inability to effectively manage the prolonged physical and psychological demands. It is a natural human tendency, and part of our evolutionary make-up to avoid pain and discomfort wherever possible, but unfortunately such an approach does not fit the elite sports model, and if not managed effectively the associated cognitive distractions have been found to lead to various degrees of performance decrement (see Moran, 1996).

In a number of cases the situation is further exacerbated by the comorbid existence of anxiety related directly to performance outcomes and/or the physical and cognitive demands.

The predominant interventions utilised in addressing these issues is a combination of basic Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy and Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC: Gardner & Moore, 2007) techniques.

For example, if an athlete is struggling with intrusive thoughts and increased anxiety prior to a performance, they are encouraged to attend to and acknowledge the thoughts in an open, non-judgemental manner (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) allowing them to disengage from the thought and providing the opportunity to redirect their attention to something more effective and functional (i.e., consistent with their performance objectives).

An effective technique to engage in this process is having the athlete use any physical manifestations of the anxiety (e.g., butterflies in the stomach, lump in the throat, increased heart rate, etc.) as an attentional anchor or focal point to which to shift their attention. With the athlete now engaging a more present focus and greater experiential awareness, they are then encouraged to utilise a brief centering exercise (e.g., regulating their breathing and/or monitoring any subsequent changes in their physical state). When the athlete is ready, they are then encouraged to re-engage with their pre-determined pre-performance routine, and the associated physical and cognitive processes, repeating the intervention as required.

attentional focal point

A similar process is encouraged if an athlete identifies recurrent lapses in concentration and a subsequent inability to adhere to their race plan and performance routines, due to their level of physical distress and associated negative cognitions. The athlete is encouraged to identify a specific aspect of the physical distress (e.g., burning sensation in the legs) and focus their attention on the physiological sensation as an attentional focal point, allowing the release of the fixation on negative interpretation/appraisal that is creating a distraction from relevant performance cues.

Once again, from this more present-centred focus, the athlete can then engage a more functional mindset of either reframing the interpretation of the distress as simply a physical sensation or important physical performance feedback, and/or re-engage their race plan and predetermined associative and dissociative strategies (Masters & Ogles, 1998) to strategically manage their attention and effort more effectively.

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view video: Chris McCormack - pre-race preparation

Final Note

A clear benefit of the intervention frameworks outlined above and my broader servicing philosophy is their utility within both training and competition contexts. Ever mindful of the lessons of the past and their contribution to Australia's success in triathlon, I utilise these philosophies and frameworks to guide my concerted endeavours to contribute to the achievement of a number of fundamental objectives.

These objectives include maximising coach effectiveness, creating optimal training environments, and assisting athletes to have a better understanding of themselves in both the training and racing contexts, and to develop the skills to create greater resilience, self-determination, and consistency in performance as they evolve from session to session and race to race.

It is a pleasure to be involved in a program steeped in a history of such success, and I hope that in some small way my involvement can both respect the achievements of the past, and contribute to Australia's continuing success into the future.

view video: Charlotte McShane - 2013 U-23 World Championships

Credit: Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games/flickr/CC-BY-NC-2.0

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