

Interview with Lesley Paterson, winner of the 2011 World Xterra Championships

Lesley Paterson, an accomplished Scottish triathlete, talks to Claire-Marie Roberts about her unfulfilled Olympic dreams, falling out of love with the sport and her impressive resurgence that led to her winning the Xterra World Championship in 2011.

You made the decision to retire from triathlon in 2002 after spending eight years in the sport. What would you say was your main justification behind this decision?

I had been in the sport from the age of 13 until I was 21, so eight years. The sport of triathlon changed while I was growing up. With its addition into the Olympics, the format of international racing was altered to allow drafting [riding closely behind the competitor in front to reduce wind resistance] on the bike, and this changed where the emphasis lay. As a result, if you are not quick enough in the swim, then you miss the first big pack on the bike, if you miss this pack, then it can become very challenging to fight against the wind by yourself or in smaller packs, and therefore your ability to catch the leading group can be reduced. The knock on effect would be running the final leg more tired and thus if running was your strength (which it was for me), you really couldn't realise your potential.

I tried to be a competitive swimmer and spent years working on it but ultimately I just wasn't good enough. Added to this was the fact that all funding in the UK goes toward Olympic sports and my knowledge of other forms of triathlon was not there, I figured if I couldn't make it to the Olympics then I didn't want to do it all! I became emotionally unfulfilled. As an endurance athlete, you're constantly numbing your emotions, I felt stale, bored and ready for more of a mental challenge or rather stimulating challenge.

Would you describe your exit from triathlon as dropout or early retirement?

Both. At the time I thought retirement but now I see it as dropout. It resulted in me having a six year break from the sport.

During your break, how did you fill the time that you had previously dedicated to training?

I have always had a more creative side to my personality, I studied Drama at Loughborough University when I was younger, so when my husband Simon and I moved out to San Diego, I decided to return to University and study for a Masters degree in Theatre. From there, I then moved up to Los Angeles and pursued an acting career, starring in student and independent films before forming my own production company with a partner. My partner and I now write screenplays, produce films and TV programmes. When you're as driven as I was in triathlon, you need to find something else to stoke that fire! I renewed my passion for life through film.

“The biggest difference for me has been an increase in my self-awareness, knowing who I am as a person and what suits my body and mind.”

Having found a worthy distraction in the film industry, what was the catalyst behind your return to triathlon?

After the time-out, I eventually started to run again and compete in a few races, I felt I knew myself better as an athlete after my break from the sport. I realised that I was now competing for enjoyment rather than for the expectation of making a career out of it! Once I'd mastered a few running races, I turned my attentions to local triathlons. Nobody knew me in San Diego, nobody had any expectations of me, I didn't care anymore, I just did it for the sheer love of the sport and I was no longer scared of falling. Around this time, I happened to see an advert for Xterra off road triathlon racing [an extreme triathlon of 1.5km ocean swim, 30k mountain biking and an 11km trail run]. I had grown up as an off road athlete and thought it catered to my strengths and love of being outside in the environment.

Having regained your intrinsic love for triathlon, what made competing different the second time around?

Being more mature, I understood myself more, especially how I work mentally and physically. Having the confidence to do what works for me instead of trying to fit in to a mold of what works for others! I started to work with a close friend of mine who is a top bike coach (Vince Fichery). He taught me a lot about the physiology of training, I bought in to his philosophy and not only did it fit me from a physiological perspective, but it also suited me from a psychological perspective too. The basis of his training philosophy was long, slow mileage as the foundation of your training. Through adopting this approach I realised that I'd been training too hard in the past, and was too fatigued to gain any benefit. I had also been unable to gain any physiological benefits from working in lower heart rate zones. It came as a huge relief to train long distances at easy paces, and ultimately rekindled my enjoyment of the sport whilst reducing the mental and physical drain of the regime.

Along with the changes in training regimes, how else had the sport of triathlon changed during your break?

It's gotten much more media exposure, which is great. I'd say the biggest difference for me is living in the UK versus the US. In the UK, sports revolve around the Olympics and thus long distance triathlon and other forms of triathlon have previously not been as popular. Over here, Ironman is huge so other forms of triathlon exist.

Lesley Paterson

Lesley is Scottish and lives in San Diego, California. She jumped onto the triathlon scene with obsession of Olympic medals and world titles. She climbed her way up into the national Scottish team. British teams though never really fulfilled her potential in the early years. After a break she's now back to the sport and has reimagined her love of triathlon. www.lesleypaterson.com



Also, people and companies seem to think more 'out of the box' over here, so sponsorship is easier to come by and therefore, so is making a career for yourself.

How would you describe any noticeable advancement in the employment of sports science or technology in triathlon?

There was much more support in both sports science and technology to support triathletes, and it's within your reach if you want it. However, I'd say that there's a tendency for some folks to get obsessed with that side of things and ignore the basics. We measure training intensity (in watts) on the bikes for example. I've found that some athletes become frustrated and psychologically affected if their 'numbers' are not where they should be, becoming preoccupied and distracted from their performances.

Having performed successfully over the last 3 years, your efforts culminated in your victory at the Xterra World Championships last year. What would you say has made the difference? How have you developed into a more successful athlete?

Consistent training that suits who I am mentally and physically. Having the confidence to know what that is and to run with it. I'd say a large part of developing that confidence has been both moving to California and having a great husband that that supports me and helps me grow as a person.

In your opinion, what is the most useful element of the sport science support you receive that makes the biggest difference to your performance?

Biomechanical assessments. Form and efficiency is everything in this sport. I've developed a keen sense of bodily awareness from working closely with physiotherapists and biomechanists. I have used basic video analysis to assist my running and swimming. My bike fit was a 'Real' system, which tracks your hip and knee angles in conjunction with the 'feet' of the equipment.

Your husband, Simon is an Associate Professor in Exercise and Sport Psychology. How does having a husband with this specialism help (or hinder) your performance?

For the most part he has been great, but to be honest, we don't talk about sports psychology much. Not as far as I'm concerned. We do discuss it in the context of the athletes I coach or just because I want to learn more about it, but it's never personal.

Finally, what's next for you?

I'm not sure. More racing and I'm currently developing a reality TV series. I'll be taking six teenage girls from across America, and training them to compete in their first triathlon. The idea being

empowering females and developing their self-esteem through the medium of triathlon. I have some pretty lofty goals to be the next 'Janie Oliver' for fitness. We'll see! ■

Interview by: Claire-Piera Roberts

Claire-Piera works at the University of Cambridge and for British Handcuff Show as a BJJ's probationary sport and exercise scientist.

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