

MATT DIXON: SARAH PIAMPIANO

THE JOURNEY FROM AMATEUR TO PROFESSIONAL

Following the article I wrote a couple of months ago outlining the journey and progression of Rasmus Henning, this month we shift to a very different story; the journey of Sarah Piampiano. Unlike Rasmus, who has a long and established resume and is a seasoned professional athlete, Sarah's professional journey is short (so far), but it is

still worthy of reflection as the lessons are strong. Over the last two and a half years Sarah has progressed from a non-active busy executive, to newbie amateur, to serious amateur triathlete to full-time professional triathlete. She is right in the middle of one of the hardest parts of building a successful career, and within her story are lessons for other serious athletes looking to progress their careers, as well as anyone looking for progressive performance development at their own level of competition.

INITIAL PROFILE

When Sarah approached me in 2010 she was working 95-plus hours a week and travelling two weeks out of every month for HSBC Securities in New York City, while squeezing in training around her hectic work schedule and life. She had a moderate résumé of results that showed promise, but I wouldn't say sparkled of pro-material. As age grouper her highlights included a fifth place at Ironman Providence 70.3, second at Steelhead 70.3 and (remember this one!) fifth place at Ironman 70.3 New Orleans. Her New Orleans performance included a 2:39 bike split (22.9 mph) and a 1:48 minute run split. As I say, not professional level.

Within her results it was obvious that her weak link was the swim portion of the race, with a stronger bike leg and running ability that was not yet displaying itself in the races. She was certainly doing well as a busy amateur but Sarah wanted more than amateur results. Upon approaching me for assistance, my initial reaction was that I didn't have capacity to take her on, and didn't feel her results showed the path to being a successful professional.

Sarah wasn't satisfied with that, so flew to meet me in San Francisco to have a coffee. As soon as we sat down I was aware immediately that Sarah had that 'special ingredient' that so many great athletes have. It is something beyond the results. It's a special way they carry themselves, talk and think. It is impossible to put a finger on it but many successful coaches have told me the same thing, sometimes you can 'sense quality' in an athlete. I left that coffee knowing I wanted to coach her, to see how she would progress, and while I knew it might be a long journey, it was sure to be a fun challenge.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the conversation, in fact, I would call it the crossroads of it, was the question as to whether Sarah should turn professional immediately. My initial reaction was that she should absolutely not make the move to take her pro card in 2011, and that if she was truly serious about making it as a professional athlete, she should stay amateur and learn how to train, how to race and how to win races. What I didn't realise at the time was that every other coach she was interviewing had pushed her to take the pro card immediately. This is, in my opinion, a classic mistake of so many athletes with potential to evolve into a top-flight competitor.

The ego boost and excitement of racing in the pro ranks clouds the need for true athletic and emotional development, and so often the stalls a career before it has even begun. It certainly happened to me in my pro career! I was strong enough in expressing my opinion that I refused to coach Sarah if she decided to turn pro. Sarah chose to work with me, in part, due to the fact that I told her not to turn pro. While she was tempted by the desire to turn pro immediately, Sarah also wanted to correctly progress as an athlete and truly give herself the best chance for long term success in the pro ranks. She already showed wisdom beyond what her racing resume would suggest. Now came the tough part, planning the career progression and development.

THE 2011 SEASON: AMATEUR

Before I launch into a review of her season it is worth noting what the goals and needs of this season, and beyond, were. As mentioned previously, I felt strongly that Sarah needed at least one season of racing as an amateur before taking the step up. This season would

act as a foundation to gain training experience (both emotionally and physically), develop emotional resilience, create a vision for proper career development and to begin learning how to truly race and win races.

With this backbone the simple mission of 2011 was to increase the focus and specificity of her training, while needing to balance her work commitments, and choose a progression of races that were some of the larger races available in the amateur ranks. In addition, Sarah is aiming to develop into a long course athlete, yet had not completed an Ironman, so we certainly knew at least one Ironman race needed to be included on the calendar.

From a pure training and performance standpoint I felt the needs were pretty simple. We needed to begin a two to three year progression of swimming, which would take a massive amount of commitment and sacrifice, while also truly developing abilities in the cycling and running portions. The swim, as is the norm for 'non-swimmers', represented the greatest challenge, and it is usual for complete development to take at least a couple of years, if not more. For the riding Sarah needed to develop her muscular strength, sustainable power, pacing and position in the time-trial position.

Sarah's running biomechanics were already good. She is one of the rare true natural runners, but she still needed to develop into being a strong triathlon runner who could run well off the bike. Underlying all this was a need for improvements in mobility, functional strength and sports-specific strength, including a significant focus on glute and hamstring firing that would enable her to make the biomechanical improvements. Obviously this was a large



project to undertake. I say this as it is always a large project, and a classic mistake is to try and fix everything at once with a shotgun approach to training that often leads to quick burnout and fatigue. A systematic approach is needed to develop an athlete.

When applying these thoughts into a plan, Sarah did what she possibly could on her end. With the support of HSBC Sarah was able to reduce her work schedule to 30 hours per week and eliminated extraneous travel. This allowed her to channel more energy and focus into the triathlon performance side of life. Her reduced work schedule allowed for a significant increase in recovery time and sleep, and focus on other key aspects such as nutrition.

With the swimming portion being the area of greatest need the early months included almost 50 per cent of training hours applied to swimming. Living in Manhattan plenty of time was accumulated on the bike trainer, so we focused on specific interval work and strength-endurance instead of simple low intensity volume. The goal was to lay a foundation of strong swim fitness, and make great gains in muscular strength and endurance in both riding and running. We also set aside three complete sessions each week for functional strength, but always supported these with running sessions immediately before or after to maximise efficiency and maintain specificity. The recruitment and firing in the functional strength workouts certainly transferred to improved running biomechanics and form.

The results over the season were exactly as hoped, which doesn't always happen of





course, with overall amateur wins at Ironman 70.3 Texas, New Orleans, Calgary and Ironman Coeur d'Alene - Sarah's Ironman debut. She went on to become the fifth amateur at the Ironman World Championships. These experiences, along with her overall development, led her to a place to be physically and emotionally suitable for racing professionally.

THE 2012 SEASON: FIRST YEAR PRO

No matter how well you have performed as an amateur, the step up to racing professionally is great. There are increased internal

expectations, the higher level of performance and the emergence of external expectations. The game changes. It is not an easy journey and for all the successful professionals out there, the scrap heap of those who have tried but failed to make a real impact, is much greater. As this is our second season in a four-year plan we knew that Sarah couldn't simply stick to what was successful the year before. It was time to evolve.

Sarah took major life decisions to facilitate the next step in the journey. At the end of 2011 Sarah quit the financial safety net of her Wall Street employment,

gave up her New York apartment and moved to a location and setting that would be optimal for her development. She made Santa Monica her base with Gerry Rodrigues of Tower 26 (Tower26.com). Gerry is, in my opinion, the best open water swimming coach in the world with a unique understanding of triathlon training and open water skills. We also share a common vision of general training and coaching philosophy, and his programme would allow daily on-deck swimming coaching for the many thousands of metres Sarah would have to accumulate, with all those metres being specific to the development as an open water swimmer versus simply a swimmer.

Luckily, the swim programme is surrounded with a fantastic training environment for biking and running, hence a great place for development. With the swim being the area of development, it had to be the focus of location and setting. Six months of dedication to swim development and improvement began as we started the second step on the ladder toward 'front-group'. None of us have expectations to achieve front group performance in 2012, but the foundational and journey has to begin now.

Swimming, more than any other sport, requires a massive training load and consistency to truly evolve into a solid performer. There is no easy way. Most athletes do not have the capacity, courage or vision to be willing to dilute the focus on their strengths to truly focus on a weakness. It is why so many weak swimmers simply stay weak swimmers. Sarah showed us once again the ability to see the long-term view and looked at her training with that magical wide-angle lens I so often call for. In a frustrating and challenging journey we have succeeded in greatly improving her pool swimming and now Gerry is tasked with evolving her into a true open water swimmer.

With the added training and recovery time we were given from taking away the life-stress of work and a Manhattan environment,

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Sarah also had the ability to accumulate greater riding and running kilometres. It is worth noting these added kilometres were not randomly applied. Continued muscular strength, endurance and power were sought, and a higher than normal focus on intensity and power was given to the riding sessions. I wanted to turn 'Lil Poo' into a powerful rider relative to weight.

Our expectations for the year are to gain experience at this level, improve swim performances steadily throughout the season and begin to ride and run close to the top competitors in the sport. We have zero focus on winning races, or even gaining podiums, but instead building the season around personal performance and development. The races then become fun and valuable experiences, as well as a chance to truly race without pressure of outcomes. That will surely come in the following seasons!

We are just a few races into the 2012 season and it has already been quite eventful. A debut sixth place at the stacked Texas 70.3 was followed up by a somewhat surprising and breakthrough overall victory at New Orleans 70.3. On an adjusted course, due to a cancelled swim, Sarah ran, rode and ran her way to victory over a field of multiple top-10 Kona finishers including the great Mirinda Carfrae. A truly outstanding performance that left many, including me, with jaws dropped.

It was certainly a result that was worth celebrating, but also worth putting in perspective. Sarah is quick to note there was no swim in the event, and while she showed that she has the ability to ride and run with the best, one performance doesn't make a season. In fact, the exact reason that provides Sarah with the best opportunity to succeed long-term included the reaction to this race. She celebrated, embraced it and then moved back onto the journey of development. Ironically, a massive win can often be as debilitating as a performance failure, often promoting a sense of satisfaction and a tendency to relax. Sarah did not fall into this trap, instead came

straight back to the all-important roadmap of progression and isolated this as a very enjoyable outlier.

Just a few weeks later Sarah recorded a sixth place at Ironman Texas, a solid result, but certainly a lower than expected level of performance relative to her progression. It was an outlier at the other end of the scale. No harm. Just like New Orleans, we learned what we could from the race (as there are plenty of lessons to gain from every Ironman), and moved on to ready ourselves for the next part of the journey and the rest of this very busy season.

THE FUTURE

It is yet to be seen how the rest of the season goes for Sarah, but we will be busy judging it on her own performance variables, as well as a growth in racing experience and performance. From there she will be ready to build towards 2013 and this will certainly include another massive swim focus over the winter and spring months. I expect her capacity for positively absorbing training to be evolved, which means she may be able to accumulate more overall training hours and we will make a large push on the run performance (off the bike).

Setting up the second season of a professional's career is different than the first taste. We will become more tactical with a greater focus on specific events, as well as a shift to truly chasing the challenge of racing against the top competitors as frequently as possible. The goal is performance, not just podiums, so it is essential that Sarah races the largest races, with the largest fields and evolves to truly compete within these fields. This is the challenge. She still has a long way to go with a lot of barriers and challenges in the way, but she only has the opportunity to face these challenges because of the smart decisions, appropriate focus and massive amount of hard work completed so far. She has developed to have the opportunity to become top class, but this is not a given, otherwise everyone would be doing it.

LESSONS TO TAKEAWAY

This is not a review or story that has an ending, but rather an outline of a progression and evolution from amateur to professional. The end of this story is still to be written, and still to be determined. Sarah's success so far, and opportunity to now go further, can be summed up with:

- **The development in a long-term vision and roadmap of career development:** Not only building the vision, by continually revisiting the plan, adapting parts of it and basing training and performance success against it.
- **Patience in the plan:** Sarah didn't jump into a level she was unprepared for, and was willing to take a chance on her self in the short term, for the opportunity for long-term success. Choosing to take the pro card a year earlier surely would have produced a less favourable evolution.
- **Utilising resources:** Sarah surrounds herself with positive and strong influencers, and keeps that circle of trust small and tight. My strongest role has likely been the continuing reminder to have patience in the process, and despite her inclination to want results 'now', Sarah has evolved to accept and embrace the process and journey to performance.
- **Setting up an environment:** Not all of us can do this, but to truly excel you need to be in an optimal situation. I see many keen amateurs talk about racing at the highest level but unable to move beyond the comfort of their safe and easy environment.
- **Blood, sweat and tears:** Applied in a smart, specific and progressive manner, but the backbone of this journey has been consistent hard work in all aspects of performance; training, nutrition, recovery, functional strength and emotional learning.

I hope we can report back in a year or two and discuss the success and process of part two. It is all there in front of her now. May the hard work and commitment continue. 🏆