

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHAD RILEY

MAKING MEREDITH

**MATT DIXON OF
PURPLEPATCH FITNESS
EXPLAINS HOW HE TOOK
MEREDITH KESSLER, ONCE
A MID-PACK AGE-GROUPER,
AND HELPED TRANSFORM
HER INTO A MULTIPLE
IRONMAN CHAMPION.**

It was late 2007, and I had just completed another grueling 90-minute power-based trainer session with my team of 20 athletes. Standing outside the studio was a smiling, unassuming Meredith Kessler waiting to capture a few words with me. Meredith's simple request was that I "make her good." Under her gentle exterior was a world-class athlete wanting to be born. This is my interpretation of her journey, and some of the lessons that any triathlete can draw from her experience.

While Meredith's early race results didn't initially highlight the promise of a world-class athlete, her mind-set and mental toughness during training quickly revealed her potential. Her immense work ethic, accompanied by her physical resilience, would either lead her to a great evolution or early burnout.

Our first step was to look 3–4 years down the road and ask what Meredith needed to do to become a true professional triathlete. This vision allowed us to build out the initial year with patience yet with an eye to the future. With this in mind, we held back on turning her pro. There were two main reasons for this: She was still working 60-hour weeks in the finance industry, so her ability to absorb a high-volume training load, while maintaining a focus on recovery, was not optimal. Also, while she had completed multiple Ironman events, her training (she was self-coached at the time) was highly unstructured. She simply swam a lot, rode a little and ran frequently, and there was no progression, very little variance in intensity and, despite spending lots of time training, the approach didn't lend itself to getting faster.

She also had no insight into the tactical component of racing, or actually racing *against* competitors. She simply went from A to B. I needed to teach her how to race to win. Meredith has always been a fierce competitor, but we had to foster and encourage that fierceness to come out in races!

As she started her assault toward elite performance, she enhanced her focus on supporting (and critical) elements such as recovery, nutrition and functional strength. At first she maintained a very low training volume relative to what she had been doing. Instead of trying to find a way to squeeze in more training hours, we decided to maximize the training hours we did have, which was 14–16 hours each week. To compensate for the lower volume, we increased the focus on high-intensity training, and added volume during targeted weekends or mini-camps. My goal was to take this very fit but slow athlete and inject speed into the equation. The response was rapid and startling. She quickly

BUILDING SPEED AND STRENGTH

Prior to training with Purplepatch Fitness, Meredith would log long miles at a steady pace. Early on, I injected high-intensity workouts like these ones into her training. The results were rapid and startling.

Treadmill Workout

- Warm up 15 min
- 2x8 min, building effort (2 min at 6:30/mile pace, 6:20, 6:20, 6:00)
- 10-20 x (1 min at 5:45 pace on a 3-5% incline with 1 min easy recovery)
- 5 min rest
- 16 min at race pace, no incline (7-7:15 pace at the time)

Indoor Trainer Workout

- Warm up: 30 min with a mixture of builds
- 12 min build by 3 min: (175w, 195w, 215w, 225w)
- 2 min easy
- 4 rounds total:
 - 4x(2 min at high watts or Zone 4/5 with 1 min at 150w between).
 - 10 min at or above 70.3 or IM effort (dependent on time of year)
 - 4 min easy

The building efforts on the bike were in stark contrast to the hours Meredith would accumulate riding around at 150-180 watts with no intervals at all.

evolved into a sub-10-hour Ironman racer, and by the end of 2009 she was both physically and emotionally ready to move to the professional ranks.

THE ROOKIE PRO

Meredith's patience with embarking on her pro career paid off. In her first pro race, Ironman Arizona (2009), she finished a credible seventh place, but more importantly, she was beginning to understand what it takes to evolve

and win races. She went on to have a standout rookie season, with multiple Ironman podiums and an overall win at Ironman Canada. All of this was achieved without changing the approach of 14-16 hours of weekly training, while juggling a full-time job and other commitments. Inspirational, yes, but Meredith and I realized she would need to leave her job if she was really serious about her development as an elite triathlete. The next step in her evolution required three major steps: making triathlon her new full-time job so she could increase recovery time; experimenting with nutrition; and developing her run off the bike.

Meredith's second season included some highlights, but also plenty of adversity, especially in the early season. As Meredith is a very resilient athlete, I started to wonder if I had planned poorly, or taken one too many risks, when race after race ended in the medical tent or with a lot of suffering. As a coach, I was at a loss, and wondered if I had pushed the



race schedule too much. I started calling for rest, fearful of destroying a career before it had truly begun. Meredith was sure it wasn't fatigue, and felt something else lingered. After much research, we solved the mystery: She was having an adverse reaction to the key nutritional elements we added in her race pre-hydration and fueling (sodium citrate). In small amounts she did not respond negatively, but in Ironman races, the amount of hydration before and during the race was causing massive systemic stress. We changed the approach to nutrition, and it changed her ability to perform.

With her run training, she was originally running a lot, and doing weekly long (slow) runs. We took most of them out and replaced them with high-frequency running—shorter bouts (up to eight times weekly) but nothing that was extended and slow endurance (although plenty of very easy runs!). We then shifted the focus on building strength with a lot of hill running, improving her leg speed and foot strike without losing stride length (from hip line back) with plenty of faster treadmill running, and having her do key extended runs at or just above goal race pace.

The great training we were accumulating finally showed itself in races, and Meredith recorded her fastest ever Ironman at the end of the 2011 season, just missing breaking the nine-hour barrier at Ironman Arizona. She was back.

ARRIVAL OF A WORLD-CLASS TRIATHLETE

Meredith was finally ready to increase training volume. This has been a balancing act, as we have increased load on two fronts: volume and intensity. I've also had her maintain a demanding racing schedule, but still in the knowledge that it comes with a price of fatigue accumulation. So she takes post-race recovery as seriously as pre-race preparations. Against tradition, we evolved her preparation for racing, resting very early following a block of great intensity, then building into an event while

maintaining overall volume. With her increased capacity for work, and enhanced wisdom of race situations, I began urging Meredith to both take more risks and employ serious strategy against her main competition. It is worth noting that everything that I outline above would have been impossible in the years prior. She simply wasn't ready, either physically or emotionally, to employ these changes or approaches.

Meredith has won three Ironman titles this year, as well as a couple of hotly contested Ironman 70.3 races, but it is the way she has won them that displays the quality. Her victories are the result of careful planning, specific training, and the development of physical and emotional capacity to compete at the highest level. We still have a way to go, and we have not arrived at the end of the long-term plan, but we are making significant progress. **1**

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

Take a cue from Meredith Kessler and turn her experience into your competitive edge.

Create a long-term vision: A long-term plan opens the door of progression, which leads to constant evolution and improvement.

Be patient: It is easy to build a long-term vision, but much tougher to execute it daily and always maintain the vision throughout multiple seasons. Stick with it, and you'll be rewarded.

Build a plan custom-tailored to you: It is Meredith's willingness and ability to think outside the box and develop an approach that suits her that has delivered results. Do all the stated truths in triathlon training really apply to you? Are they truths, or simply unchallenged norms?

Think beyond endurance: Swimming, biking and running is the most specific training you can do. But to truly evolve your performance, you also need to focus on the supporting elements of nutrition, recovery, functional strength, psychology, skills and equipment.

Be consistent: Performance evolution is a result of many days, weeks, months and years of consistent training load. In fact, the reason we focus so much on specificity in training, as well as recovery, is to achieve training consistency.

Stay balanced: Without a tremendous amount of resilience and emotional balance, Meredith could not have succeeded. The triathlon lifestyle doesn't promote life balance, but if you make it a priority and dedicated focus, you can achieve it.

Work hard: This sport isn't easy. Meredith could not have evolved to her level without massive amounts of grit, determination, sacrifice and hard work. There is no easy way, but there sure is a smart way.

MEREDITH'S RACING TRAJECTORY

