

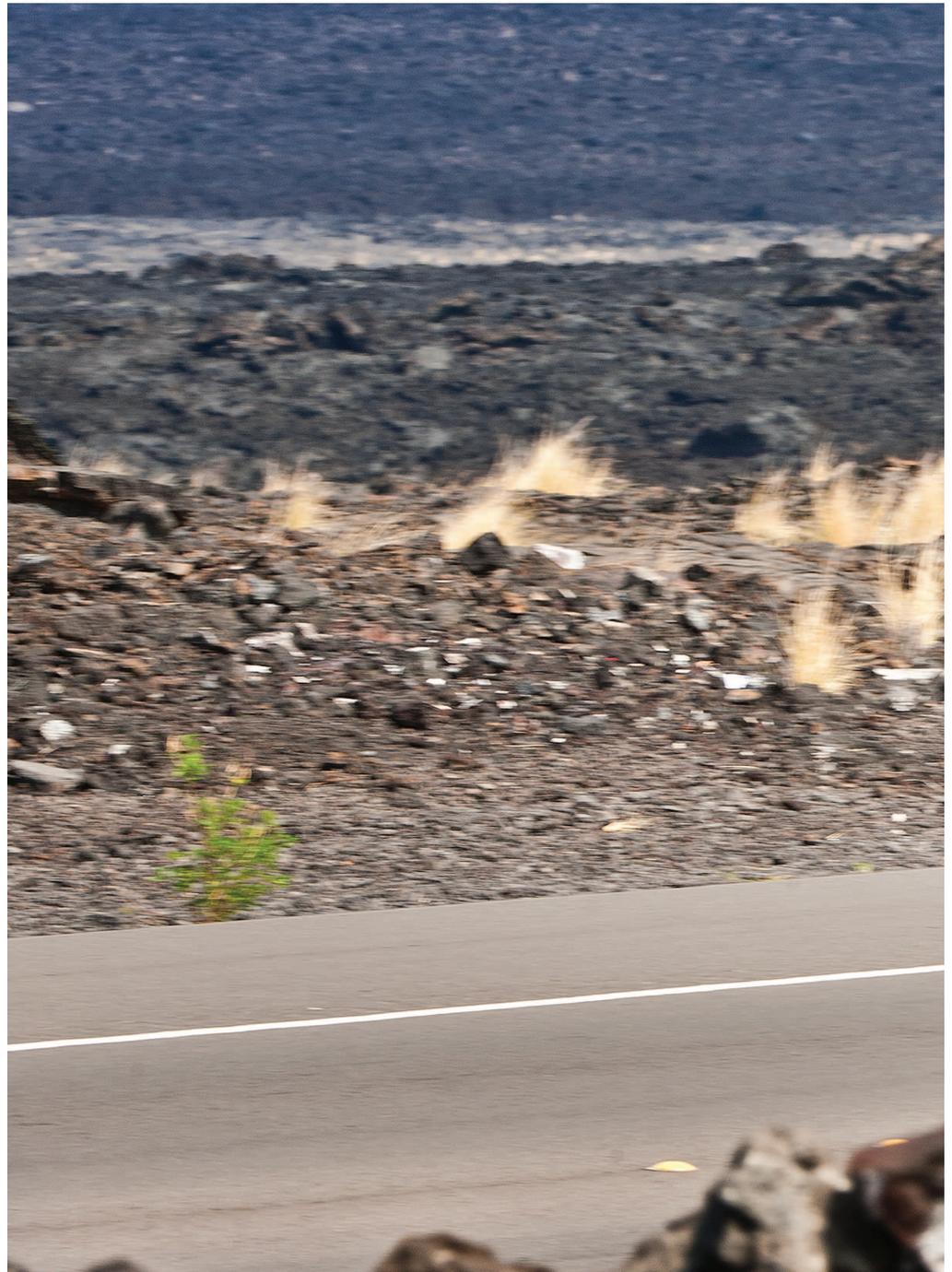


» MATT DIXON «

# ALL IN

Simply training more or going harder in every session alone will not help you race consistently faster. There are many more factors that contribute to a good training programme and are all an important part of the overall plan.

This month Triathlete Europe's resident coach, Matt Dixon, looks at how focusing on becoming using a focused *all in* approach can help. He explains how this approach helped professional athletes Chris Lieto and Meredith Kessler, and how you can learn from their lessons to race faster.



A few weeks ago I was invited to give a speech to a company on what it meant to be *all in*. The company itself was at an interesting point in its evolution having achieved solid progress in the last years, but was now aiming to take a big leap of growth and success over the coming years. The employees are highly motivated and eager for success, but the CEO let me know that they were worried that the ambitious goals laid out for them would only mean more work, a chance for burnout and looming fatigue.

The staff had individually and collectively achieved success but were now asked to strive for something greater. My task was to discuss the concept of *all in*, and hopefully motivate them to take a leap toward excellence while providing some insight into what this might mean. A daunting task was laid out for me. The stories and lessons I laid out focused on my expertise and experience as a coach, with lessons drawn to their business goals. We can draw direct learning from some of the topics I highlighted. Let's investigate.





## PERFORMANCE

I often get asked what makes pro athletes special. Beyond the obvious genetic traits, I would identify 10 traits and characteristics that are typically present in the most successful athletes make up and approach. It would be easy to write a feature on these traits alone, but I will simply outline them as a backbone for this piece.

1. **RESILIENCE:** Almost every successful elite displays wonderful emotional and physical resilience, as well as a great capacity to manage adversity.
2. **GOAL ORIENTATED:** It is no surprise

that elite athletes have a strong sense of goals and purpose.

3. **VALUE ASSESSMENT:** Most elite athletes understand the value in ongoing assessment to ensure they remain on target with their goals, or enable a refinement of the plan and direction in order to meet the goals.
4. **EMBRACE SUPPORT:** While this is an individual sport, few would diminish the relevance of a support team, and the need to gain outside assistance to help set and guide their path.
5. **LOW PEAKS AND VALLEYS:** While we all have emotional fluctuations, the best

performers are able to keep these fluctuations minimal, never wildly diverging from the path of purpose.

6. **VALUE RECOVERY:** While hard work is the key to success, the consistent performers are able to weave needed recovery into the programme and approach.
7. **SPECIFIC PURPOSE:** The best are able to filter out noise and distractions, and place most of their focus on the specific areas that will help create success.
8. **PATIENCE:** Another obvious one, but of great importance to success. Elite athletes embrace the journey and



understand that most overnight success will have many years of work behind it.

- 9. PASSION:** We go nowhere without passion, and a true love for the craft, work and process is essential to stay the course.
- 10. CALCULATED RISKS:** Finally, greatness cannot be achieved without stepping out of the envelope of comfort. Smart and calculated risk taking is a critical element to making magic happen.

These traits and characteristics are omnipresent in almost all the most successful elite athletes I meet, but the truly special ones also understand what it means to be *all in*. It's an x-factor of process, mindset, wisdom and approach that enables them to go from good to great. As you will find out, being *all in* means much more than great commitment, and certainly includes more than hard work and lots of effort. Being *all in* requires a smart and tactical approach of your resources to facilitate optimal performance. Luckily, it doesn't require genetic gifts to be *all in*, it just takes a little gumption and a willingness to take the risk. You might just be surprised and like what you find.

## "IT'S AN X-FACTOR OF PROCESS, MINDSET, WISDOM AND APPROACH THAT ENABLES THEM TO GO FROM GOOD TO GREAT"

### MY STORY

I seldom worry about telling my story of athletic success. This is because it holds little value for most to read, and certainly carries little inspiration athletically. While I did compete as an elite swimmer and professional triathlete, I am wonderful example of completing a pro career poorly. While I had great grit, passion and determination, coupled with a strong work ethic, the results were never commensurate with my talent level.

The main reason for this was that I focused so much on hard work, with little real consideration to recovery or supporting the training with adequate fuelling and hydration, that I placed my body in a state of fatigue and disrepair. I believed *all in* simply meant working harder than anyone else. I drove myself into the ground, to the point that I left the sport with deep fatigue and frustration.

The reason that I relay this is that this experience was fundamental to me stepping back from the sport and really considering what it meant to shoot for elite performance. Despite my background in physiology, and my background in age group and collegiate swimming coaching, I pushed myself so hard as to create

failure. I also saw many doing the same thing around me, and this experience providing the key chance on reflection on how I had approached the sport, as well as how many of my swimming and triathlon coaches had guided the plan.

I realised that the obsession with work, and little else, made no sense and couldn't believe how so much lip service was given to concepts such as nutrition, hydration, recovery, functional strength and more from what I call 'the supporting cast', but no real value was given in daily practice. This was central to why I began coaching and educating through a framework that I call the 'pillars of performance'. By this I mean that equal emotional and physical value is given to an athlete's endurance training, functional strength, nutrition and recovery, to make up the complete programme.

More than a nice tag-phrase, these 'pillars of performance' have developed a way of thinking for purplepatch athletes, and an easy way to maintain a laser-like focus on the programme. We have had some great results from this way of thinking, and the examples below showcase how this is an important element of athletes being all-in.

### CHRIS LIETO

Chris has had a quite wonderful triathlon career, and many people have contributed to his various Ironman and half iron distance victories and successes. I am proud to have helped in his journey, and his story of his success draws many lessons. As I outline his path, I think it is important to understand that Chris achieved much of his success following a major injury following a collision with a car that left him with a severely damaged foot. While it plagued the final year or two of his career, he did a great job managing that limiter in addition to what I discuss below.

When Chris came to me, in 2008, he was already a household name within the sport, known as a great cyclist, as well as multiple Ironman champion. He came to me as a frustrated athlete, following disappointment in his last couple of Ironman races, and was at the stage of his career that his only remaining goal was to aim to win the Ironman World Championships in Hawaii.

Our mission was to aim to win the Ironman World Championships, and this meant that I needed to review his previous approach before looking forward and mapping the plan. What I found was a

highly committed athlete, who sustained a great training load and weekly training hours, but wasn't gaining a return on his efforts. I felt that Chris needed more specificity in his training, for the Ironman World Championships and how he would plan to race it, but also needed to heighten his focus on recovery, nutrition and supporting strength training.

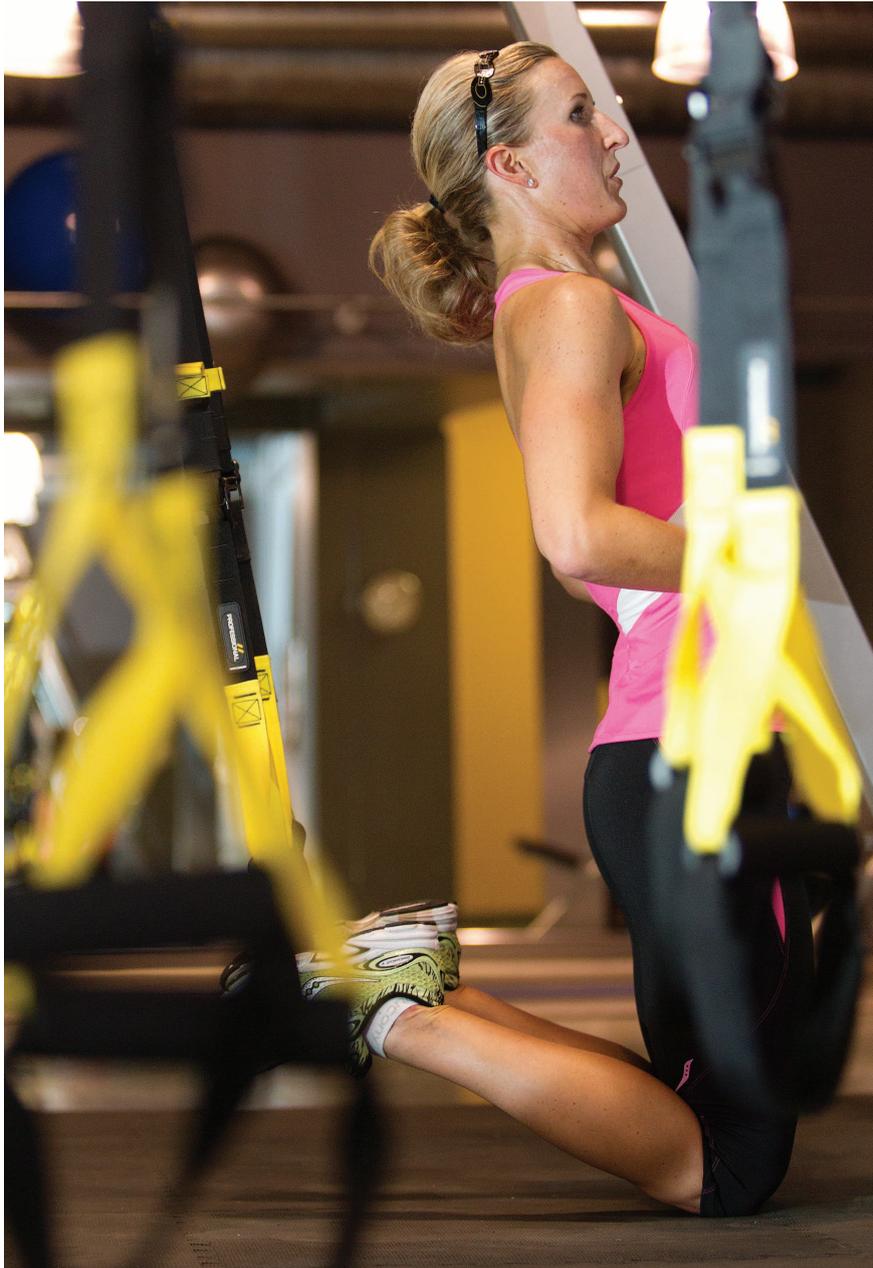
The 'supporting cast' of proper fuelling, nutrition, strength and a heightened focus on recuperation and rest would help him create a platform of health, and maintain a more consistent training regime. In addition, I asked Chris to take a risk and radically decrease his overall weekly training load with the hope of leveraging his existing platform of fitness. At the same time we increased the intensity and specificity of his key sessions. I asked for laser-like focus on the big sessions, but reduced his overall load. The final evolution was to truly plan and define a specific strategy for race day that would play to his strengths and allow his strongest performance.

The result was that Chris went through the next year with a reduced training load in terms of weekly hours, but remained healthy, motivated and energetic throughout the season. He also experienced significant improvements in sustainable power on the bike and pace in the run. He improved. You may know the results of the year with a great second place finish at the Ironman World Championships, which represented a true breakthrough for him. This result came from the transition from simple hard work to training with a specific purpose for what he was aiming to accomplish.

To be successful he truly had to understand what he was aiming for, and direct his effort directly toward that single goal. He also had to be willing to risk change and deviate from an already seemingly successful approach. This took plenty of courage, but to alter the approach and plan can be the catalyst to elicit improvements.

In addition, just because Chris was truly working hard, he had failed to place adequate focus on the smaller elements of performance that truly help in producing results like fuelling, nutrition, recovery and strength. These are all critical elements to place high focus and importance on. For Chris, being *all in*, didn't mean working harder, or doing more, it was shifting emphasis on where his energy was placed, and ensure that he embraced the specific work that could help him improve.

Chris has always been a hard worker but became a truly smart and tactical worker,



who channelled his commitment into specific focus to yield great results. Of course, this example relates to an already established professional aiming to fine-tune his results, but great success can sometimes be hidden in surprising places.

#### MEREDITH KESSLER

It was about seven years ago that an innocent looking Meredith Kessler approached me about coaching. With 20 Ironman races under her belt, with the best taking about 11.5 hours, there was little to suggest that she had any type of elite potential. Her goal was to 'see what she could do, and get good', but with a demanding position in the finance world and a limited training knowledge, I had little inkling of the champion inside.

Meredith still holds the record for the worst training plan I have ever seen. Her swims comprised of 6-10K straight a few times a week, seldom rode her bike and she ran 10 to 15K each morning on a short 200-metre indoor track. There was no specificity, no variance and no progression. The one thing she did have was a great attitude and plenty of gumption.

I knew that her journey would not be a quick ride, and asked Meredith to be patient as we heightened specificity, increase intensity, focused on sleep and recovery, and began to transition from 'working out' to truly training. Her results began to improve and she progressed to finishing an Ironman in under 10 hours in year one, which allowed her to hit her first cross-roads in the journey.

As Meredith evolved through the levels of performance we had to assess and evolve her approach. This meant increased focus, decreasing emphasis on work and the addition of more training specificity and intensity. By the time she had won most of what an amateur could, she began competing in the pro ranks. Meredith won Ironman Canada while still maintaining her work schedule.

Already a big success, it was time to evolve and adapt the approach again, and she realised that to become world-class, she needed to make a decision about her life. Quitting her job, she now had capacity to truly train like a professional athlete. As a result was able to increase both workload and intensity with her focus on recovery protocols and rest. The end of the story has not reached its conclusion because she still has major goals to accomplish, but she has become a five-time Ironman Champion, and US Pro Champion in the Ironman 70.3 distance.

For Meredith, the lessons from this are wide reaching, but the primary one is that hard work doesn't necessarily equate to progress, it is just hard work. You can commit to working hard but true success can only come from being *all in* on completing smart work. This doesn't make that training easy. The work is demanding but is balanced with enough recovery to maintain health and gain adaptations from the stimulus of training.

In addition, as the journey progressed, it was critical to continually evaluate the approach and plan, and evolve it to suit her needs and goals. Meredith's commitment can never be questioned, but it is her ability to truly embrace the fact that performance wouldn't arrive overnight and is, instead, a journey that requires huge patience, persistence and gumption.

The nicest part of the story is the message of hope and surprise, as you might never know how good you could be until you truly commit to something and follow the journey to find performance. No one would have thought of Meredith as a champion in waiting, more a simple and lovely woman who loved to exercise. She committed to the path and has overcome plenty of obstacles on her journey, but she has embraced it with commitment, passion and plenty of gumption.

So what does *all in* mean to you? How are you approaching your sport and your training? Are there things that you can do to truly evolve your performance and make a breakthrough? It might not be about simply doing more, and you might just need to shift your lens and have the courage to alter your approach if you are going to make your own breakthroughs. ■