

DON'T DIE

WONDERING

Ironman Australia Champion Laura Siddall

TEXT BY JORDAN BLANCO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KORUPT VISION

When Laura Siddall told her father she was quitting her job at multinational conglomerate Shell in order to stay in Australia, he expressed concern about her decision, including pointing out the pension scheme she would be giving up! Several years later, Siddall was understandably nervous when she told her parents she would be abandoning fulltime employment altogether to pursue a career as a professional triathlete. Thankfully, by that time, Siddall's parents had come to terms with the fact that triathlon was an important part of their daughter's

life. In the intervening years, Siddall had accumulated four amateur World Championship titles across sprint to half-iron distances. "My parents are incredibly supportive," Siddall acknowledges, "they just want to see me doing things that make me happy."

Sport has always played a significant role in Siddall family life. Siddall's father, Robert, narrowly missed out on Olympic selection in 1968 for rowing. Her mother Gill, who turns 71 this year, plays tennis competitively at her local club to this day: "I reckon she plays and trains more than I do," jokes Siddall. As the youngest of four daughters, Siddall had plenty of

inspiration, and perhaps a touch of sibling rivalry, with her 'sporty' older sisters. She dabbled in almost every sport from swimming to hockey as a youth but achieved the most in athletics and netball, representing England and winning the Schools International in 1996, in the 300 metre hurdles.

Siddall narrowed her focus to netball during her time studying engineering at Nottingham University, and achieved a very high level in the sport, captaining the England and Great Britain University teams. While she would have liked to follow in her sister's footsteps – elder sister, Naomi, played netball for England





BURNING AMBITION: Laura's relative late start into the world of tri has seen her self-belief turn into success.

at both the World Championships and Commonwealth Games - Siddall realised that she was unlikely to make it to the next level in the sport. "While I was probably the fittest athlete in the England set-up, my game skills weren't quite up to standard," she recalls. It was the era of the '6ft player' as England tried to compete with the taller teams of Australia and New Zealand, and Siddall, who stands just 5 feet 7 inches tall, was considered too short. "My sister, Naomi, is 6 feet tall and I swear she stole my height genes," laughs Siddall, "I'm the smallest in my family and they all love reminding me of this!"

It's a testament to Siddall's mental fortitude as well as her sheer athletic talent that she handled the rejection by England Netball so well, choosing to throw herself back into athletics, picking up the 400 metres and 800 metres on the track, rather than bemoan the near miss in netball. After a gap year in the British Army post-graduation from University, she moved to Chester to work as an engineer for Shell, and continued to

run: "I found a really great group of girls to train with and a great coach in Paula Dunn who is now the head coach for British Paralympic Athletics."

Interestingly, it was the group training dynamic that drew Siddall to triathlon when Shell transferred her to Sydney a couple of years into her corporate career: "I tried to continue with athletics but just didn't find a group I gelled with in Sydney,"

recounts Siddall. "Friends from work were doing a 90km charity cycle ride, so I bought a bike the week prior and joined them in my shorts, t-shirt and trainers." Siddall enjoyed it so much she took the bait when one of the same friends suggested she try her hand at triathlon. In late 2008, Siddall signed up for an eight-week triathlon beginner's course with Bondi Fit, led by Spot Anderson, which culminated in a sprint triathlon race. Riding a hybrid bike with trainers and baggy shorts, Siddall did not make the podium that day but the positive experience was enough to suck her deeper into the sport of triathlon.

Four years, several bike upgrades and plenty of Lycra later, Siddall had a fairytale week in triathlon. In September 2013, she won the overall amateur title at the IRONMAN 70.3 World Championships in Las Vegas, then the following weekend she defended her amateur Olympic

“ As a latecomer to triathlon and now aged 33, Siddall realised it was “now or never” since she “didn’t want to look back in 20 years and say ‘what if?’ ”

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LAURA SIDDALL

distance World Championship title in London. "That's when I started to think about turning professional," says Siddall. "More and more of my head space was taken up by a training session or race and I reached a crossroads. The corporate career would always be there but sport wouldn't." As a latecomer to triathlon and now aged 33, Siddall realised it was "now or never" since she "didn't want to look back in 20 years and say 'what if?'" In her words: "I didn't want to die wondering."

Having decided to make the leap to the professional ranks, Siddall also dove head first into a dramatic lifestyle shift. "Sadly, I just didn't feel it was right for me to commit fully to the sport professionally in Sydney... I knew I had to make bigger changes." On the recommendation of well-known Australian triathlon coach Darren Smith, whom she had met a year earlier, she connected with Matt Dixon, founder of purplepatch Fitness. Dixon coached a squad of professional and amateur triathletes virtually, as well as from his home base in San Francisco, California. While Dixon's professional

squad was full at the time, Dixon was intrigued enough by Siddall's story and results to invite her to join the squad in California for a week of training. "I absolutely loved it," exclaims Siddall. "Being in San Francisco, training with a new group of people and having my eyes opened up to a whole new world of training sessions and methods."

The time in San Francisco was effectively a weeklong interview with Dixon sizing up Siddall as he immersed her in the squad environment, while providing little to no feedback. Siddall sensed the pressure: "I completely balls'ed up an FTP test," she remembers, "as I had no idea what I was doing or what cadence to be riding in so I was just spinning away in a panic!" She was also self-conscious about her swimming, as an athlete that had not grown up in a squad-swimming environment and did not consider herself a candidate to be a front pack swimmer.

From Dixon's perspective, he recalls that he remained silent since he didn't want to "over-coach" Siddall: "by being quiet and observing, you can learn a lot

about an athlete instead of trying to fix things straight away." He also wanted to see how she would handle herself under duress and recounts one session in particular where he asked her to complete a series of high effort intervals. "When she finished her last interval," says Dixon, "I told her to keep going!" While some athletes may have objected or dropped their shoulders, Dixon observed Siddall rise to the challenge, intensifying her effort in a display of grit and demonstrating an ability to retain her composure when challenged. Besides her clear physical attributes, Dixon was also assessing her fit with the purplepatch squad: "it was obvious that Laura was selfless in attitude and highly collaborative, with a personality that fitted into the culture of purplepatch."

Towards the end of the week, Dixon invited Siddall on a run with him and proceeded to pepper her with questions such as "why should I coach you?" She assumed he was building her up to let her down gently but at the end of the run Dixon agreed to coach her on the condition that she relocated from Sydney to San

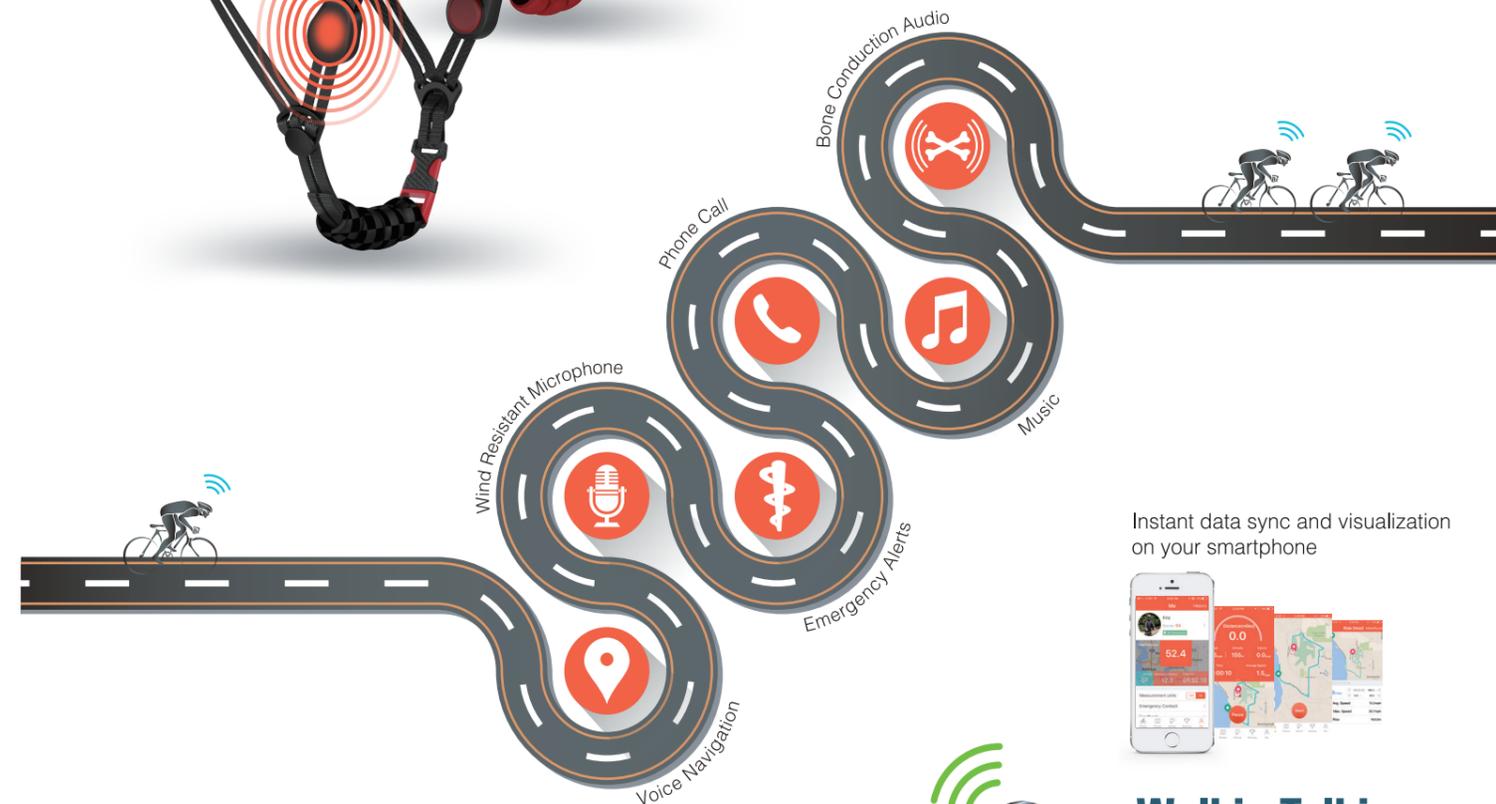


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Francisco. Without hesitation, Siddall flew back to Sydney, resigned from her corporate job, sold almost everything she owned and just over a month later found herself living in San Francisco as a member of the purplepatch professional squad.

Fast-forward three years and the recently crowned Ironman Australia Champion has only just become comfortable with that decision to quit her job and focus on triathlon fulltime. "There is no job description for what it means to be a professional triathlete," she explains, admitting freely that she initially struggled with balance as she transitioned from the corporate world and her social networks in Sydney, to life as a professional athlete on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. "I loved it but now [sport] was all of my life and my new social circle too. There was no balance."

Siddall also couldn't escape the financial challenges of her new profession. Going from a regular paycheck in her bank account to not knowing when she might earn her next dollar created enormous stress for Siddall. "It's a bigger strain than it may look, as there is a constant niggler in your head about trying to make ends meet... I felt that I should be spending every other minute of the day trying to work out how I was going to make money." Even now, she works hard to separate the business side of triathlon from the training and racing so that the stress of the former doesn't impact her focus on the day to day

training and getting the best out of herself.

Looking back, many of the life stresses she faced during her first year in the pro ranks arose from her decision to go "all-in" as a professional triathlete. However, Siddall would argue that there wasn't another option: "I was already in my early 30's so I didn't have time to waste!" That 'all-in commitment' didn't prevent her from having serious remorse during the first couple of years, wondering if it had in fact been the right decision. "All these doubts go through your head, including what other people are thinking," confesses Siddall. "She's gone pro but she isn't winning!"

Dixon agrees that it's been hard for Siddall and probably much tougher than she could have envisioned. "In her first few

results as a professional, she struggled to even sneak in the top 10 of a race and would seldom create consistent performances, relative to her trained potential," says Dixon. "She faced struggles and disappointments. There would be flashes of promise that were then followed up by a tough event... and that's just in the sporting part of her life." Dixon witnessed firsthand to Siddall's path to becoming a professional triathlete from a business perspective, trying to attract sponsors and build her brand. She was balancing the pursuit of excellence in her sport with putting food on the table: "it makes the journey a tough one." However, Dixon also credits Siddall with 100% commitment to the process, noting that she didn't seek immediate rewards despite fighting to make ends meet, and the setbacks merely pushed her to double down on her evolution as an athlete.

Both Siddall and Dixon are acutely aware that the trajectory from amateur champion to professional champion for Siddall has been far from seamless, encountering plenty of challenges in order to discover her personal recipe for training and racing success. "In 2015, Laura had a

series of races where we both felt she underperformed," explains Dixon, "but to her credit, she stayed the course, never wavered in the path or journey, and emerged to new levels." When Dixon talks about Siddall's journey as an athlete, he credits her with taking 'ownership' of the process with a commitment to self-improvement. If that sounds jargon-y, Dixon is quick to expand: "not many can take the ownership needed to truly work on improving oneself, most simply train hard, but without true commitment to improving themselves."

Under Dixon's tutelage, Siddall has gone through an immersive development of all of the critical, artistic elements of swimming, biking and running, learning her craft from the ground up. For example, on

the bike, Siddall has worked very closely with Dixon's coaching partner, Paul Buick, referred to in the purplepatch circle as the "bike whisperer", in order to improve all aspects of her cycling. According to Dixon, this investment in her bike skills, rather than simply training hard to increase her power output, is what separates Siddall: "Laura has become a master of terrain management, utilising conditions and developed styles of riding to maximise speed for output, and she has learned to apply those tools to racing."

Besides crediting Siddall herself, Dixon extends equal praise for her growth to his coaching partner, Buick: "I don't think Paul's contribution and influence can be over-stated relative to Laura's development." Dixon attributes Siddall's

technical and emotional development in large part to Buick's guidance. "At purplepatch, we believe in the team and bringing to bear the best resources possible for each athlete," he says. As head coach, Dixon is proud that "purplepatch's athlete-first mindset allowed Paul to bring his unique set of skills to help the athlete."

Dixon also acknowledges that the training load and process for Siddall is quite distinct from many other purplepatch professional athletes, noting "what we have found works for Laura would not work for most others but the fact that she has had the courage to define her own path is massively





BIKE COACH: Paul Buick, otherwise referred to as the “bike whisperer”, has worked with Laura on all aspects of her cycling.

important.” The result has been a tremendous growth in confidence and wisdom with respect to what works for her. Rather than merely being coached, Siddall has forged a partnership with Dixon and Buick to maximise her own athletic potential.

The shift in confidence compared to her first two years as a professional becomes clear when you ask Siddall about her current training and racing approach: “I focus on the doing and try not to worry about the end result... if I just absorb myself in the process and being present every day, then the outcome will take care of itself.” This self-confidence was put to the test when she lined up in Port Macquarie in early May as the clear favourite in the women’s race to take the Ironman Australia title. “I stuck with my own race plan and stayed pretty internal,” she says, “given the distractions and chatter leading into the race.”

Siddall has checked the box on two of her season goals so far this year – winning an iron- distance race and qualifying to the Ironman World Championships in Hawaii – but she’s not resting easy. “After that feeling of winning at Ironman

Australia, I definitely want to experience that again.” She’s giving herself plenty of chances with a stacked racing schedule all across Europe this summer as part of her ambassador role for the Challenge Family European series. Her schedule includes a return to Challenge Roth, where she placed fourth in 2016, recording a sub 9-hour finish time.

More than just seeking that winning feeling, when asked about her future goals, Siddall sticks to the ‘process’ script that’s been the secret to her success to date: “I just want to see how far I can push my body and how good I can be as an athlete.” She still feels that she’s learning and developing as an athlete: “there are still huge gaps between my racing and training performance that I want to close... and I believe I can!” After a bumpy path as a professional triathlete, Siddall’s confidence is finally blooming. She can say aloud that she’s seeking to be world-class: “I want to be competing against the best in the world and be competitive. I want to be one of the best in the world!” **AT**

FUN FACTS

| LAURA SIDDALL | |
|------------------------|---|
| Current abode | Siddall chases summer. Moving between the northern and southern hemispheres depending on the time of year... and the weather! |
| ‘Sid Talks’ | Frequent contributor to the Fitter Radio podcast, sharing her views on the current state of triathlon and generally ‘chewing the fat’ with host Bevan McKinnon |
| More Than Sport | Passionate ambassador for More Than Sport, a charity founded by former professional triathlete Chris Lieto. Siddall volunteers in the local community at as many of her races as possible |
| Swimming | Siddall had her school swim team disqualified on two separate occasions for an illegal butterfly stroke – she still doesn’t know what she did wrong! |
| Gap Year | Prior to university, Siddall spent a gap year in the British Army in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, based in Germany |
| Four Girls | Siddall is the youngest of four girls, with sisters Anna, Naomi and Charlotte |
| Meditation | Siddall regularly uses a meditation app, Headspace, to work on mental focus as well as clearing her mind at the end of each day. |



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