

The Long and Winding Road

Long, long, long post, no apologies

Back in 2002 my work colleagues Belle and Louise convinced me to have a try at the then called BRW Corporate Tri. 400m Swim, 10km Bike Ride and 4km Run. We were part of the BP team. I was overweight, unfit and had no idea what I was doing (some may say that's still the case). Of course, we did the corporate thing, dressed in the team uniform, this ungodly Lime Green two piece that just so happened to be tight and see through when wet.

I can't recall the exact time, it was either 1:15 or 1:17, what I do recall was doing the obligatory Triathlete ritual of trawling through the photos to see my self crossing the finish line. As I said two-piece lime green see through Lycra outfit, with this beetroot red, sweating profusely, exhausted overweight bloke collapsing over the finish line. One of my better looks.

There were some rookie errors in that first race, like consuming two 750ml bottles of Gatorade before the race start (someone told me you needed to hydrate and so, hydrate I did). 1.5 litres of Gatorade sitting in your stomach for a 400m swim is not ideal, particularly when you combine that with swallowing the beautiful Elwood water that roughly 3,000 triathletes before you have pissed in. Needless to say, the projectile vomit of bright orange Gatorade coming into the bike transition would have made Linda Blair proud.

Little did I know that this would be the start of the Long and Winding Road. My good friend Jeanette was part of Tri-Alliance and convinced me that I should be part of a training group. This is where I first met Ollie, Andy Sleeman and Jarrod Evans. Tri-Alliance was small back then, our Saturday rides no more than 12-14 athletes and the ride leaders were Mick Donovan and Georgie Mervin. We rode from Niddrie to Black Rock and back, I remember it was such a big deal when we rode our first 100km. Mick had just completed an Ironman and Georgie was a Superstar of the Gatorade Series.

I'm not sure how or when but some of my very good friends were part of that group. I met Rohan Belmore with the Iron Horse Cycle top, (You will not meet a more passionate, loyal bloke), Sue Scott who is responsible for me setting the goal to represent Australia in the Olympic Distance World Championships, Gary Blake who in his 60's had decided to do his first Ironman and someone I admire for getting out there and doing it., Col Brown (The Cougar), we had to convince him to stop pissing around in the Fun tri's and start racing Sprint. The Flounder, Dale Beehre, we have travelled together many times, Paul Venner and Jacqui Earl.

These are the Originals, everyone of them an Ironman and everyone of them with an inspiring story that has influenced my journey.

I spent two years doing the Fun Tri series, learning the ropes, 5 years racing the Sprint series including Olympic Distances. In 2007 I decided to try my hand at qualifying for the Australian Team racing in Hamburg. I didn't realise how competitive it was and you really had to work to qualify. Hamburg was such a wonderful race. Of course, qualifying once wasn't enough, I went to Canada and then in 2009 decided to try to qualify for the team in Australia. Now there was a very competitive Qualifying Season. One of the highlights was the infamous Glenelg Road Trip, in the Green Territory with Ollie Allen, Rohan Belmore and myself. The door lock failed, so we had to gaffer tape it shut, the auto window winder broke so we had to raise it by hand. Race start delayed with 2-3 metres waves, designated driver (unnamed) falling asleep at the wheel.

2009 was also the start of the Ironman Journey. Jeanette Linehan, Dale Beehre, Dale Harrison, Ollie Allen, Paul Venner and myself, I don't think I have missed anyone from that group, apologies if I

have. We had no idea what we were doing, we just worked it out on the run, read lots, worked as a team. It was the beginning of countless hours of training and preparation. None of us owned a TT bike, we raced on TT Bars. We experimented with nutrition, we learnt on the go. We worked our backsides off, we didn't know what to expect on race day but we had each other's back and we became Ironmen. We were hooked.

In 2010, we saddled up again, in the May of that year I had a bad bike accident, I broke my face off my skull, I've talked about it before but never really reconciled how close I came to disaster or really told anybody the true extent. My Faciomaxillary Surgeon was always amazed that I walked away, he would often tell me with the extent of my injuries I should have been a quadriplegic or brain dead, I am forever grateful that this wasn't the case and never take anything for granted.

I was determined to race Busselton that year, I had set myself the goal of doing five races there. I worked hard and made it to the start line and duly finished, number two over and done with and the journey was well under way.

The goal of five became ten at Busselton, three Melbourne and one New Zealand races to get me to Fourteen.

For twenty years I have been involved in Triathlon, I've busted my gut, busted my body, I've worked hard, had some laughs along the way, met some great people. It has influenced my life; I hope in some ways I have given something back.

As I have said every journey to the start line has its challenges and as usual the road to Kona has been no different. To say I have been challenged would be an understatement. First and foremost, Covid arrived and as every Victorian knows what a nightmare that was. Lockdowns, limited training opportunities, not knowing when we were going to race. Add to that my body continually not playing nice and the endless search for answers. Just reflecting on that comment, the last few posts of my pre-Ironman Races have all had similar themes and that saddens me to a degree.

My build this time has been severely interrupted, some family issues, some physical issues including losing 8 weeks due to an Achilles injury. But most of all the mental aspect has been the one that has thrown me the most. For the first time ever, I have felt totally devoid of motivation and I personally haven't dealt with that well, I have internalised the discomfort, there were days where I didn't want to train, I've experienced that before, normally I would just go out and do it, this time I didn't.

I have espoused to all and sundry that we train in any weather conditions, however, this time I allowed the weather to get to me. I allowed the combination of being injured, the weather and outside influences to push me into dark holes, I felt broken at times, I still feel broken and for the first time I am unsure of the outcome. It's a place I don't like being. There were days when I have felt so alone and it's uncomfortable, there were days when I got so emotional, I couldn't control my feelings. So, I retreated inside, I didn't want anyone to know. Whilst I might be loud and prepared to speak my mind, in essence, I am really a private person.

I feel there is a weight of expectation out there, everyone tells me I have done years of training and I have a great base; I think they are being kind; I feel so under done, I am almost embarrassed to be fronting up to the start line. I am not scared; however, I am full of self-doubt, I remember a quote about going to the well of self-doubt being a great poison and I have allowed that to affect me.

I will leave that here and follow with this: I am "The General" or "The Zoolander", I am bloody minded, stubborn, resilient and an annoying prick. I have been searching for my limits forever, On Thursday, when I do stand on the start line, I will most likely shed a tear. I have worked hard to get

here, so I will do my best not to waste the opportunity. When the gun goes and we start racing, there will be nothing left at the table, I will give my all, it may not be the fastest race or the ideal scenario but I will not be defeated. I will never ever give up.

Of course, all of this is not possible read "anything is possible" without the support of your loved ones. I have been married for almost 39 years and during that time there has not been one year where I have not been involved in sport of some sort, playing football, President of the Football Club, Trainer at North Melbourne, then 20 years of Triathlon, each and everyone of those has been time consuming, yet all through that Brenda has supported me, the early starts, the fucking around in the dark because I failed to prepare properly the night before, the famous spoon at the bottom of the bowl quote. The flush of the ensuite before training and as every triathlete knows it's not once, but two or three times. The road trips, the lost days.

I've have said this before and will say it again, it is a selfish sport anyone who says they are doing it to make their family proud may very well be, but for the most part that's bullshit, primarily it is all about you. I cannot thank Brenda enough for allowing me to indulge myself in my sport. Love you to bits.

My two daughters, Nicole and Jacinta, each shows their support in different ways. Jacinta quiet but would always be there to help if I asked and then there is Nicole, my number one fan, you could not aske for anyone more enthusiastic or genuine in their support. I love you both.

My Ironman stalwart friends (it's the best description I can think of), Jeanette and Paul, Rohan, Dale, Sue, Gary and Col, thank you for being a supporter, an inspiration, a friend, we all have our foibles but we are connected in a very special way.

Ollie as my Coach, we don't always agree on methodology, yet you have supported me throughout, thank you. I would not have achieved as much as I have without your support and friendship.

There are always people you meet along the journey, so I can add Gary (we have had some great conversations over the time), Mario, the vainest man I know who is batting way above his average, just doesn't know it, Michelle, whose dedication inspires me, Jimmy, Andy Livingstone (Simon the Likeable), Michael and Janine to that group of friends I have met along the journey.

I cannot thank Janine and Michael enough for their support over here. It has been fantastic and truly appreciated.

And of course, there are many others who have been a part of my journey, actually too many to mention, but know this, I thank you all for being a part of the journey.

To those racing here with me:

Dan, have a great race, you have worked hard, enjoy the day, I hope you have a great race

Jimmy, what a pleasure to be your Coach and to be racing with you, you have worked hard for this. All I can say is go out there follow your plan and do what you do best, I hope you have a great day and the race is everything you hope for.

At the end of the day, we are Ironmen

I have two quotes I want to reiterate - The first from Suzanne Weyn, who wrote Mister Magorium's Wonder Emporium espoused by Mister Magorium himself, it's about the value of Living Your Dreams:

“Your life is an occasion; rise to it.”

And the other, I mentioned earlier, I will attribute to James Cummings

“Do not drink the Poison from the Well of Self Doubt”

On Thursday, tomorrow the 6th October 2022, I will be doing my best to rise to the occasion and bypass the well of self-doubt. With a little luck, some grit and determination I will be a Kona finisher.

Dance like no one is watching,
Spend like you don't need the money,
Love like you'll never be hurt,
Sing like no one is listening
Live like it is heaven on earth
Race like the wind is always at your back, and
Never, ever, ever, give up
Train with Passion, Train with Purpose, No Compromise
quidvis est possible

Greg

Aka “The General” aka “Zoolander”