



The Health of Triathlon?

By Brad Beven

I'm sure though that if you asked Macca, Greg Bennett or Craig Alexander if the sport was anywhere near where it was or has a future they would have to say it is going great guns. Bias for them is unavoidable with their recent track records even though they are of the old school of the Grand Prix days. On the whole though is the sport of Triathlon still moving ahead or have we regressed?

I can still recall the first Grand Prix in Sanctuary Cove back in 1994. While I was warming up there was a helicopter flying overhead and I initially thought there must be something going on and then realised it was for us. We were going to be live on national TV. The people of Miriwinni were finally going to see that I wasn't just a bum that rode around in fluoro clothing chasing my dad's truck up and down the back streets. They would see why I would be out in the pouring rain and turn down a lift because I was actually doing a track session on the open road. There was method in my madness. This was the time when in my mind triathlon went professional in Australia.

Before this time we had various different series, the Ampol series, Dihatsu series and then Triathlon Australia started organising the sport under their umbrella. In a way triathlon developed back to front. It grew a body and then a head later. These days it seems one is always trying to control the other, most times justifiably so but sometimes it is unwarranted or unwanted. I don't want to get into trying to demerit the contribution that the governing body does, as they are essential to organising, developing and nurturing the sport. Sometimes though, we have all questioned the direction or vision that the sports administrators have had.

I think in some ways the professionalism has indirectly suffered with the introduction of the Olympics. Don't get me wrong though, I aspired and fought for putting triathlon on the greatest playing field going round. I just think that with the first few Olympics, a lot of guys were chasing points in different races to be eligible to make the team. The Australian Sprint Champs one year had no prize money at all yet the field was one of the strongest going. Hard to call yourself pro when you aren't racing for anything. You can't put points on the dinner table. Only three could go to the Olympics at the end of the day but everyone was towing the line to be part of it. Everyone, including myself, would have given his or her eye-teeth to get on that team. The point being, that some of the professional racing such as the Grand Prix were hurt by different factors and this was just one of them.

The responsibility of the ITU and TA is a huge one in shaping the future of the sport and it is easy to criticise them when I wouldn't like to be in their shoes. However I think

there should be more input from those involved, such as the athletes, from the ground up so that wherever the road leads it is in the direction that is always for the greater good of those involved. Decisions should be flexible rather than “my way or the highway”. I must say I was confused when the name Aquathon was changed to Aquathlon. Not sure why but it sounds more like a ducks version of Australian Idol.

The future of the sport is still being shaped. If you look back at its brief history, triathlon is the fastest growing sport in the world, it made the Olympics at just over 20 years since inception and its appeal doesn't seem to be waning. We do seem to be on a winner no mater where administrators try to take it. The product is without question fantastic.

Triathlon does seem to be cyclical though with many turning to longer distance events. European countries such as Germany have always coveted Ironman more than short distance and now that trend seems to be spreading. An example is the Canadian Ironman. If, after you have slogged it out from sun up to sun down, you decide to give it a go again next year then you have to line up the very next morning at 9am to pay your entry fee, which they hold for 12 months. It sells out that day.

The cost is another deterrent to the mass appeal and viability of triathlon. With all the bits and pieces of bikes, travel, accommodation, licences, and the most contentious one - entry fees, it seems the cost of participating is becoming elitist to a degree. I'm sure that was never the intention of race organisers however with the expensive and litigious society that we live in it is hard to avoid. For a weeks rent these days you get a start in one of the bigger races, a bag full of “crap”(I can't put it any more elegantly than that) and the distant lines at the limited porta loos. Where's Kenny when you need him?

In all triathlon has had its ups and downs but you can't deny its credentials. We all get a little chuffed when even the word is used in mainstream vernacular or when a celebrity like David Duchovny, Robin Williams or one of the Bay Watch babes takes the start line. Anything with a bright future needs an evolution, let's be grateful that we are part of it.