

'TRI' LIKE AN AUSSIE

by Marty Gaal

Over the past few years, I've worked with a number of runners and triathletes. In December, I retired from the corporate world and embarked on a full-time coaching career. To celebrate the change and have a little fun, my wife also quit her corporate gig and together we headed Down Under to Australia to train and race with the Aussies. Basically, I wanted to find out why the Aussies are so good at triathlon. Here's what I found.

Water Works

My most obvious observation: The primary difference between sporting culture in the United States and Australian sporting culture is that swimming is a mainstream sport. In Australia, major swim meets are broadcast on prime-time television. Sports commentators mull the minutiae of the various events — did she nail the flip-turn on the 100 freestyle? Was Ian Thorpe slow off the blocks? And they aren't just reading the teleprompter — they know the sport!

In Australia, swimmers are on talk shows, commercials and making special appearances — when they're not competing and shown on prime-time, that is. Ian Thorpe and Grant Hackett are considered two of the most powerful figures in Australian sport — on par with Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan in his heyday. By comparison, U.S. swimmers are regarded as stars for a few brief weeks every four years and then disappear back into the pools from where they came.

In the 1940s, the Australian government built a large number of public pools, enabling the Aussies to make fitness part of their lifestyle. Now there are swim teams everywhere you look in the country — junior squads, senior squads, masters squads and weekend clubs. Everyone seems to either be a swimmer or was once a swimmer.

In contrast, in Florida — a state that is surrounded by water and full of lakes (and has roughly the same population as all of Australia) — you could throw a frisbee out your front door and most likely hit someone who couldn't swim.

During the summer in Australia (winter in the United States), there is an open-water swim almost every weekend in the state of New South Wales (where Sydney, the country's largest city, is). It's also not uncommon to have more than 2,000 entrants into a two-mile ocean swim. In Florida (or even in California), 500 entrants is a large number. (California, by the way, has more than twice the population of Australia.)

The Aussies also have huge lifesaving competitions, which make the front page of the papers and are covered on prime-time news. These lifesaving competitions involve many different sports — swimming, rowing, surf-skiing, running and paddleboarding, to name a few (some of which involve multiple disciplines in the same event) — and have been going on since well before triathlon was invented by those intrepid souls in Hawaii. While we also have similar competitions and lifeguarding services in the States, the lack of mainstream coverage unfortunately keeps the sport on the fringe.

It's also interesting to note that all the lifeguards in Australia are unpaid volunteers. They work and compete because they enjoy the sport. And simply put: When a sport is popular, it has more participants, which means more talent.

Culturally, Australians embrace challenges. Given the populari-


ty of swimming and lifesaving competitions, it's only natural that they also embrace triathlon competition.

Awesome Aussie Clubs & Coaches

Since moving Down Under, we've been residing outside of Sydney in an area called the Northern Beaches. Within a few days of setting up shop, we found a triathlon club that had swimming, running and cycling workouts listed on its Web site. While there are good clubs in Florida — the St. Pete Mad Dogs comes immediately to mind — there isn't near the number of triathlon clubs that we found just in the Sydney area alone.

Also, the coaches at these workouts are full-time multi-sport coaches. Having a full-time coach to lead the group and offer information and encouragement is a big help. In Florida, many of the group coaches I've known (with the exception of full-time age-group swim coaches) are volunteers or are only lightly compensated by their club. Lee and Erinne Zohlman of BodyZen in South Florida are also exceptions — full-time coaches who run excellent and affordable group training programs.

So basically it comes down to this: Aussies are good at the sport of triathlon because: 1) Almost everyone swims as a kid, 2) Swimming is on par with basketball and baseball for popularity, 3) Lifesaving and junior triathlon competitions expose young swimmers to multi-sport events, and 4) There are awesome triathlon clubs and full-time coaches dedicated to the sport.

So Mate, if you want to 'tri' like an Aussie you better stock up on roo burgers and head to the pool. No worries! 

Australian triathletes like Craig Walton excel in the sport much due to their swimming skills. And it's no wonder. Swimming is a top sport in Australia with competitive events nearly every weekend that attract thousands.

Photo by Rick Cruse

