

Q&A

With
Todd Skipworth



THIS OAR THAT

Olympic rower Todd Skipworth first turned his hand to triathlon several years ago, taking up the challenge set by countless rowers who had raced Ironman before him. Lately he has been tearing up the 70.3 scene, posting impressive results at Shepparton and Canberra.

We caught up with Todd to talk racing, results and how he juggles the two sports.

INTERVIEW BY CASSY POLIMENI | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRIZONE 

Todd Skipworth was 23 when he made his Olympic rowing debut in Beijing. He returned four years later to compete in London and in between Olympic appearances he decided to follow in the footsteps of countless rowers before him and try his hand at Ironman triathlon. He qualified for the 2009 Ironman World Championships with a 9:03:03 finish at Ironman WA and went onto to finish sixth in his age group at Kona in 9:41:31. Since then he's gone from strength to strength as a triathlete, most recently being crowned Age Group Champion at Shepparton 70.3, where he clocked the second-fastest swim, third-fastest bike and fastest run of the day. Three weeks later at Canberra 70.3 he was the fastest age grouper and tenth overall.

AT: First up, congratulations on your result at Canberra – tell us a bit about how your race unfolded.

TS: Thank you. I thought the organisation and the course itself was awesome. It's a really great race to get to do and a tough but fast course. I had an OK race, I felt like my swim was a big improvement on Shepparton, mainly due to a bit more time in the water.

I haven't really done any swimming since late 2009 because it's not part of our rowing training at all so I'm still building my swimming fitness back up and trying to get a feel for the water again. It helped having still conditions and a nice big course with big buoys to sight as well as getting to start in the front wave.

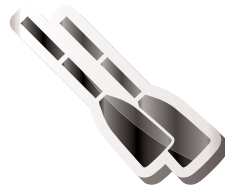
I didn't have a great day on the bike at all. I've been doing a lot more work since Shepparton trying to cross the rowing fitness and strength over to the bike because we haven't really been riding much while rowing the last few years. Apparently there is quite a big cross over effect from rowing to cycling but I think it's going to take a bit more time and work to get that bike specificity back. Another thing I'm struggling with at the moment is going from the swim to the bike and being able to push effectively straight away but I think that will come with more practice.

I'm reasonably happy with how I ran off the bike but I dropped off a fair bit toward the end of the run. I need to do a lot of work on transition – I'm pretty hopeless at them.

Photo: Trizone (www.trizone.com.au)



CROSSING OVER: Like many rowers before him, Todd Skipworth is enjoying great results after swapping his oars for running shoes.



been a fair few who have had a crack at the full distance, firstly to see if they can make it and then to try and go one better than those who have already done it. When I decided to give one a go in 2008 I met a really great bunch of people in Perth who were hugely generous with sharing their own experiences as well as their time and help training and I guess those kind of people make you interested in triathlon beyond the racing scene.

AT: How does the pinnacle of competing in rowing compare to the pinnacle in triathlon?

TS: It's really hard to compare the two. I rowed in the lightweight four so having three other guys supporting and racing with you adds a whole other element. And I think nothing can compare to the Olympics – it's quite surreal when you're competing at the Games and just as surreal looking back to believe that I was lucky enough to get to experience it. On the other hand the atmosphere at an Ironman or Half Ironman is unlike anything I've experienced. Everyone in the crowd is so supportive of all the athletes, not only those they know, and even the other athletes are always encouraging

that can really drain you both mentally and physically because of the concentration required for the technical aspect of rowing, whereas a lot of the triathlon training is at a slower pace and more of a natural movement pattern but a lot longer in duration.

AT: You're a double Olympian now – how did your experience in Beijing compare to London?

TS: Beijing was a real disappointment performance wise. We had one guy in the boat carrying a stress fracture in his ribs for five weeks leading into the Games, and then a bit of sickness that ripped through the crew at the Games, and I think we all came away with a feeling that we didn't perform to anywhere near our potential. At the same time, it was my first Olympics and an amazing experience. Just the scale of things and the way the Chinese ran the Games was incredible – masses of people organising everything to the smallest detail and probably the best and brightest time to see Beijing.

London was also really difficult to deal with from a performance perspective. We went in as reigning World Champions and in the last lead up regatta we took silver on a really bad day knowing we had a huge amount of improvement, and then everything went a bit pear shaped again in the lead up to the Games, with a crew member injuring his back a week out from London.

Unfortunately that's the way things go. Experiencing the Olympics and venues and the village was just incredible though, and the Poms really did create a great atmosphere and ran an incredibly efficient and exciting Olympics.

AT: Do you see both rowing and triathlon in your future, or will you focus more on one? Any plans to turn pro after achieving such great results?

TS: I haven't made a decision yet about going back to rowing. I'm really enjoying a different stimulus and the triathlon training and racing at the moment. Given the time you need to dedicate to rowing or triathlon in terms of training it will have to be one or the other, so for now I'm focussing on triathlon and pretty keen to turn pro and at least test myself racing in the pro field and see how I stack up.

Photo: Trizone (www.trizone.com.au)



one another, and there's a lot more build up and excitement with the music and commentary. A rowing race is pretty much decided by the time you reach the crowds so its 30 seconds of crowds at the end and then nothing.

A few people have asked which is harder – an Ironman or a 2k rowing race – and we laugh because its so difficult to compare but the best way to describe it is if you take all the pain and emotion of an Ironman and compress it into a six minute rowing race – that's kind of how it feels.

AT: How did you find the transition from rowing to triathlon?

TS: I think I'm still transitioning really. The bike and run have a fair amount of cross over but the swim not so much, and getting used to the sensations in different muscle groups from swim to bike and then bike to run is going to take some time. The training for both is quite different as well – rowing tends to be shorter, more intense sessions

AT: You beat your time at Shepparton, was that due to differences in the course or did having these races close together work well for you in terms of building up your speed?

TS: I think the course had a lot to do with the difference in time, but I feel like there was a bit of improvement just having three weeks more triathlon training in me. Having just done a race leading into Canberra probably gave me a couple of key areas I knew I could improve on and a better understanding of how much harder I could push in certain areas, as well as where not to push.

AT: How did you get into triathlon?

TS: A few of the rowers did an Ironman in 2005 and I guess they sort of put the challenge out there for the rest of us and since then there's

“If you take all the pain and emotion of an Ironman and compress it into a six minute rowing race – that’s kind of how it feels...”

– Todd Skipworth



AT: What are your strengths in triathlon?

TS: I'm not sure I have strengths necessarily, but probably my mentality dealing with tough times in training and racing and also my knowledge of myself as an athlete and being able to listen to my body – when I need fuel or if I'm pushing too hard or not hard enough, I think that's probably one of the more critical elements of the long races.

AT: What's next on your triathlon calendar?

TS: I'm not too sure at the moment. I'd like to get a nice block of training in now, and then perhaps do the Geelong 70.3 in February and after that probably a full Ironman – not sure which one yet.

AT: How much training do you rack up each week when competing in rowing and triathlon?

TS: Rowing training is probably between 20–30 hours a week with our time split between water and land-based rowing, as well as weights, core work and some running – all of which tends to be pretty high intensity.

Triathlon is more like 30+ hours a week but the majority – at the moment at least – is done at a reasonably low intensity.

AT: How was your first Kona experience?

TS: Painful, but awesome! I was studying full time and training was secondary so I was probably a little under done but I really wanted to go and experience it in case I didn't get an opportunity to go again. It's definitely an experience to tick off the bucket list. I hope I get to go back and swim in Kailua Kona Bay again one day, and complete a race that I feel I got the most out of myself.

AT: Finally, a little birdy told us you might have plans to work with super coach Brett Sutton – is there any truth to this?

TS: Andrew Johns has been helping me out and put me in contact with Brett. I went to Switzerland in September and did a couple of weeks with Brett and Team TBB. I would really like to work with him, I really like his philosophy and no nonsense approach and can tell that he has an innate ability to read an athlete and get the most out of them. I've remained in contact with him since then but am waiting to hear what opportunities may come up. **AT**

Photos: Delly Carr



LEFT TO RIGHT: Clint Kimmins ran his way to a sub-ten hour finish at Ironman WA 2012; a triumphant Mat Rogers at Ironman WA 2012

MAKING THE TRANSITION

Todd Skipworth is not the only athlete to be lured away from his chosen sport by the siren call of triathlon. Meet other athletes who've made the jump:

CLINT KIMMINS

"I turned to triathlon because I wanted to become a real athlete (surfers aren't real athletes!) To me triathletes are the fittest people on the planet and Ironman triathlons are the ultimate, not only in fitness but physical and mental strength. I idolise anyone who races long course tris and I wanted to become one of those people.

"Triathlon exposes how tough you are. It's like the classic Prefontaine quote, 'Most people run a race to see who is the fastest, I run a race to see who has the most guts! Love it!'"

MAT ROGERS

"Doing a triathlon had never crossed my mind other than when my cousin mentioned Ironman to me seven years ago and I said, 'I'll do Hawaii with you,' not knowing squat! In April this year a friend I was training with for GC Marathon suggested I do the Luke Harrop Enticer Tri. A few days later I bumped into Clint Kimmins and mentioned I was going to do it not knowing he was even into tris at the time. He said, 'Sick, I'm doing it too. Don't do the enticer, it will be over in a heartbeat – do the full!' So I did.

"It took me 1:15 and there were so many people in front of me that probably shouldn't have been, according to age and body shape, and I was spewing. From that point I was hooked. Next I did an Olympic distance in Byron, and from there I did Cairns 70.3 totally underprepared and had a pretty dud race in Yeppoon. Busselton was the next option so off I went. I love the feeling of going until you're totally done and then thinking, 'There's still the marathon to go!' I'm now completely hooked on Ironman and I'm already planning next year."

CAINE ECKSTEIN

Twenty-five year old Caine Eckstein used to be a different kind of Ironman. In the early years of his career he wracked up five Coolangatta Gold wins and is the reigning champion of the Kellogg's Nutri-Grain Surf Ironman series. In August he announced he would be focussing his training on the Ironman World Championships in Hawaii. While he didn't finish (he pulled out 16km into the run due to an injured foot), Eckstein had a faster swim split than the pros and his bike time was the second-fastest in his age group.

"I think that triathlon is such a great sport, [it's] the one I like to watch," he says. **AT**