

# A Decent Obsession: The 1994 Triathlon World Championships

Report and pictures by  
ROB GREENAWAY

ACRUSH was forming in the finish chute. Dozens of top placed age-groupers were coming off the final run section of the Triathlon World Championships. They checked their stopwatches, losing themselves as the adrenalin that had carried them the last few hundred metres stopped pumping.

Several were carried away on stretchers. Volunteers, like well-meaning vultures, pulled bar-coded identification tags off their limp bodies and delivered them to the timekeepers.

In the 35 to 39 age group, Niels Madsen of Wellington, racing to pull one second—and therefore second place—off his New Zealand compatriot Ross Thompson, blasted across the finish line in 1:58:40. Before he hit the tarmac six hands lowered him onto a stretcher and carted him into the distance. Watching this spectacle I wondered what drove these athletes to compete to the point of collapse. The word “obsession” came to mind.

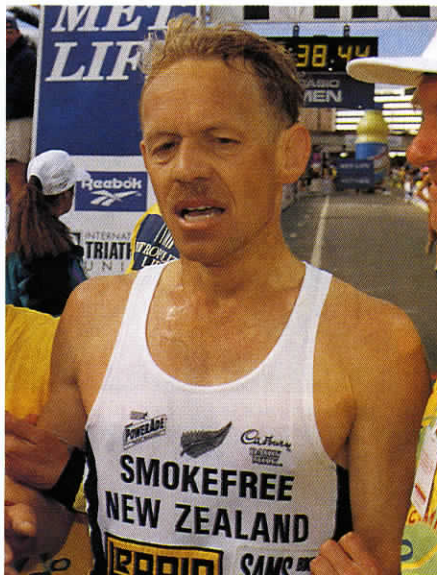
Newly-retired former world champion triathlete Erin Baker was watching the finish nearby. I asked: “How do you define the word obsession?” She looked at the ground for some seconds before replying, “The inability to see beyond it, or through it. You don’t have to be obsessed by the sport of triathlon to do it, but there are lots of obsessed people here.

“Obsessed competitors don’t do as well as those who are just dedicated. Those who win have reached a point of balance where they realise the importance of the sport and where it fits into the overall picture of their lives.”

Baker had a triathlon to watch and was distracted, so I left her to her dedication and searched out Alan Nelson, editor of *NZ Triathlete Magazine* and media director for the event, he sat in the press room looking very pleased. “Dedication is balanced outlook. Obsession is tunnel vision.” Nelson agreed with Baker.

“Look at John Hellemans,” he suggested. “He’s the best in his age group by far at 41 years. He is a world champ. He is New Zealand’s best coach and a full-time medical practitioner, with a family. He is balanced and he is good. He won the New Zealand open title when he was 38. He prioritises his life so that he has strength in everything he does.”

Nelson was on a roll with the subject. “Dedicated triathletes are not necessarily faster, but they are more satisfied in what they do. They seek to do as well as they can, at a personal level. Obsessed athletes



Niels Madsen—nothing left after crossing the finish line.



South African Jean Claude Koenig gets a helping hand from medical director Ruth Hight.

are never satisfied. There’s always something wrong with their performance, with their gear, with the weather, with their old injury.

“Obsessed people are inevitably very boring and burnt-out. The elite athletes are not usually obsessed, however. The age-groupers feature a lot of obsessed people and I feel sorry for them because they are not leading a balanced life.”

While Nelson was philosophising, Spencer Smith from England hurtled across the line, the fastest male triathlete in the

world. He looked powerful and relaxed. Later the television monitors showed the Australian Emma Carney carrying a hat in her hand and running the final stage of the event like a gazelle. She won the battle, but not the war. New Zealander Jenny Rose, seven places back, had the points to take the international title.

New Zealand triathlete Kevin Pyne was watching the monitor with me. “See how Carney leads off the toe of her shoe? She’s a sprinter at heart. Relaxed too. It’s great to see style like that,” he said.

“Are you obsessed?” I asked. Pyne places himself fifth in his age group in New Zealand. He raced against John Hellemans and didn’t place in the top ten internationally.

“I’d say I’m dedicated. I put in as much training time as I can allow. I’ve got a full time job, and a family. But it can become an obsession. It’s getting the fine balance. My family is very supportive and I make sure that my training doesn’t cut into family time. That’s where obsession starts.”

I risked The Question. “So why do it?” “I’m a very competitive person deep down,” replied Pyne. “I used to represent New Zealand in boxing in my hey-day. I just happen to be into tri’s at the moment.”

Matt Brick was standing by the window, checking out the riders coming into the transition areas. He recovered from a well-publicised addiction to morphine to become the World Duathlon Champion in 1992. Brick was wearing all the right gear, but since injuring his archilles tendon all he could do was watch. Writing a few articles for Japanese magazines had him in the media room.

He said the words I was expecting to hear, eventually.

“Dedication and obsession? I would find it difficult to draw a distinction. The sport is obsessive when it affects other parts of your life negatively. The difference is when you choose to make that sacrifice. Putting off university for example. Having no other interests but sport. Seeing less of your family. But you do need to be obsessed to be a world class athlete.”

Brick recalls a recent study recently completed in San Diego. “There is a high incidence of alcoholism and other addictions in the families of top professional athletes. It’s as high as 70 percent. Far higher than the rest of the population. It’s more than a coincidence.

“Obsession doesn’t really create prob-

lems when you're doing well. Injury, retirement—it gets hard then. Dedication becomes obsession too easily. Your sense of self-worth is built around the sport, and you risk losing that if you lose the sport, so we push too hard.”

Brick looked at his foot. “That’s why I’m here. I had an archilles tendon injury last year but wanted another year of competition. I took the risk of injecting cortisone near the injury. That risk wasn’t worth it and the cortisone was absorbed by the tendon and weakened it. So I’m out now. Call it the effect of obsession.”

“Remember when mountain biker David Weins was questioned as to whether he would ever be a world champ?” asked Brick. “He replied, ‘No, my childhood was too happy.’ That same concept applies to triathlons. The obsession has to come from somewhere. We all have a universal need to prove our self-worth, but insecurity is a strong drive to do better than that. Hard upbringings, family dysfunction—you’ll see a fair bit of that in the sport.”

Brick raised his head, looked out the window and smiled a very fit and warm smile. “But this day is excellent. I love watching these things.”

After Brick’s lecture I lost the courage

to ask any other competitors about their motivation.

I’d watched a Korean competitor walk from the water earlier in the morning and had heard over the PA system that he was 76, a late entry and the oldest competitor. Duk Gyu Lee finished the cycle section after the elite men had started coming out of the harbour. A volunteer offered to carry his bike over a barrier separating the transition areas. He ran quite smoothly onto Oriental Parade when the crowds were at their largest and loudest. Forgetting the elite runners, a wave of cheers followed the old man around the course. As he approached the finish line, the day was given over to this one Korean. Lee stopped and bowed to New Zealand and 500 million television viewers around the world. The tears were flowing like applause. He wasn’t competing. He was just there.

At a press conference the day before the race, Peter Gilmour, Marketing Manager of the International Triathlon Union, had asked the media to look into the eyes of the competitors and see the dedication and commitment that had brought these people to New Zealand. “And maybe,” he suggested in his American drawl, “some child in the crowd will say,

‘I want to be like Spencer Smith, or Michelle Jones. I wanna be like them.’”

Duk Gyu Lee was shorter than Smith or Jones, so I hope the kids had a good chance of seeing into his eyes too.

Best times:

Men—1 Spencer Smith, Great Britain, 1:51:04; 2 Brad Bevan, Australia, 1:51:49; 3 Ralf Eggert, Germany, 1:52:40. Women—1 Emma Carney, Australia, 2:03:19; 2 Anette B Pedersen, Denmark, 2:05:31; 3 Sarah Harrow, New Zealand, 2:06:52.



Megan Dalton—sixth NZ elite woman.