

## TRAIN LIKE AN ELITE

## LESLEY PATERSON

If Xterra is the jewel in the crown of off-road triathlon, two-time World Champ Lesley Paterson is the undisputed queen of the trails. She tells **Mike Anderson** all about California, crashes and the Commonwealths...

**S**trange as it may seem, but Lesley Paterson's triathlon "calling" actually happened when she gave up the sport. Growing up in Stirling, Scotland, Paterson first found her way into tri as a junior, before working her way through the Scottish Triathlon system and into the national squad. At the time, everything was geared towards ITU racing and international competitions, such as the Olympics and Commonwealth Games. As a result, there was a huge emphasis on the swim, although Paterson freely admits that she was "not a swimmer". Forced to put in more and more time in the pool, her early enthusiasm for the sport began to wane.

"I found myself doing 10km in the pool every day and not really getting anywhere," she explains. "It's not that exciting. I mean if it was, I would have been a swimmer!"

But that experience, combined with missing out on selection for the 2002 Commonwealth Games ("by something stupid like two seconds"), combined to force Paterson to completely lose her passion for tri. As a result, she simply quit the sport.

## END OF THE BEGINNING

Around the same time, she got hitched to sports psychologist Simon Marshall and the couple moved out to California when Marshall was offered a job at a university in San Diego. "I couldn't wait to get out, to be honest," she admits, the tone of her voice suggesting that the memories still bring back painful associations. "I was a complete failure as an athlete in my eyes and wanted to reinvent myself as someone else." That someone else was Lesley Paterson the actor, so she went back to university and studied for a Masters degree in theatre to complement her BA in drama.

As enjoyable as the acting was, Paterson was restless. Before long, she was looking for a new challenge – along came Xterra. "I saw it in a magazine and thought 'Oh, this looks totally wicked'. They had one of the

US Cup races near San Diego and I thought I'd give it a go."

Although she'd found a new passion success wasn't instant, and her first race back ended with a classic triathlon pitfall: cramping. "I came out of the water with Michele Jones, which was ironic given that I was never a swimmer. I got on the bike and went into the lead, but it was about 110°F out there and I didn't really drink or eat. So I came off the bike, cramped like a bastard and had to walk the run!"

She came in "a little way down", but it was enough to reignite the sporting passion. "Not only did I enjoy it, but I knew I could be good at it, too."

## A NEW PHILOSOPHY

One of the things that Paterson emphasises as we chat is how her previous experiences have shaped her, making her reassess and giving her the knowledge to become the athlete she is today. And from that, she's developed an innovative, holistic training programme to help herself – and the athletes she coaches – avoid the issues that blighted her tri ambitions as a youngster.

"I think what was most important for me, was to learn how I work emotionally more than physically," she says. "When I came back to the sport for a second time I found a different way to work and ended up understanding what I wasn't getting from myself, and developed my own training philosophy."

The method is a relatively simple one that involves rating each session on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of physical effort, and 1 to 10 for emotional strain. This way Paterson can make sure she's getting what she

## LESLEY'S FACTFILE

Age 33

Lives San Diego

Top three results

1st, Xterra World Champs, Maui, 2012

1st, ITU World Cross Champs, Alabama, 2012

1st, Xterra World Champs, Maui, 2011

needs physically, but not running herself into the ground mentally at the same time.

"For me, something like a time-trial down the A20, on a TT bike, into a headwind, would be an emotional 10, but might only be a physical four," she explains, perhaps revealing at the same time part of the reason why she doesn't get on as well with 70.3 racing. "Because of the emotional 10, I can't actually get my heart rate up that high. I find it really hard to suffer. But give me Alpe d'Huez... That's an emotional one for me because I love that stuff, but it's probably a physical 10 because I can push that hard."

This technique has been a revelation for Paterson, making her realise that doing things her own way doesn't mean it's the wrong way. "As younger athletes, you look up to your idols and think 'If I want to be like them, I have to train like them'", she explains. "And I don't think the same way that, say, Tim Don or Julie Dibens thinks, and that's okay. Because it doesn't mean I can't be the best – I just need to find my own path."

## HITTING THE TRAILS

With California the mecca for mountain biking, Paterson finds herself spoiled for choice when it comes to the perfect training terrain. "Go 10-15mins out of the city and you've got Alpine climbing," she reveals.

"I've done 50-mile mountain bike races with 10,000 feet of climbing and it's very sandy and dry, so a different style from European, and certainly British, riding."

Even though she does occasionally race 70.3, Paterson's training is very much off-road-focussed – not that this necessarily means MTBing it all the time. "It's probably 50-50 on the bike, road versus mountain. As I come closer to races I do more group-riding stuff, chaingangs, lots of stuff with fast accelerations and high-intensity intervals. Hopefully I can do some 70.3s in →

"IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO LEARN HOW I WORK EMOTIONALLY MORE THAN PHYSICALLY"





LESLEY’S TRAINING WEEK

A typical Paterson race-preparation week might include...

Monday	Swim: 90min longer aerobic swim – 300s, 400s, 800s – strength focus with pull and paddles; Gym: 60mins dynamic/functional strength work with plyometric-based running drills for power and speed.
Tuesday	Bike: race-pace MTB laps, anything from 10-30min laps at threshold to 2-3hr; Run: 60-90mins off MTB hill repeats (1.5hr run with 20-30mins of threshold or above hill repeats); Swim: 60mins easy recovery swim with drills.
Wednesday	Bike: 3-4hr long tempo efforts on road bike or MTB, including 1-2hr long interval for sustained work, sometimes overgeared to add a little bit of strength; Run: off bike as easy 60-90min run on trails.
Thursday	Swim: 90mins hard threshold swim – 50s, 75s, 100s; Run: 90mins speed work on track or treadmill – 400s, 800s mile repeats; Bike: 1.5-2hrs short hill sprints (30-60secs) with high cadence.
Friday	Swim: 60-90min sprints – 25s to 100s (60mins dynamic strength work with emphasis on mobility).
Saturday	Bike: 3-4hrs MTB race or group chaingang, high-intensity threshold or VO2max riding either through race or local group road ride; Run: 60-90mins off bike – hill repeats and/or treadmill/speedwork. Longer intervals and 1-2 mile repeats.
Sunday	Swim: 90min IM work and technique; Bike: 2-3hrs easier aerobic MTB with some tempo work if feeling good; Run: easy 30-40mins off bike, with running drills if legs feeling good.

Total training hrs/week: approx 25-30hrs



JARGON BUSTER

**MTB**  
Abbreviation of mountain bike.

**CHAINGANG**

A group training ride where the riders form a pace line so that everybody takes turns riding on the front.

that phase, too, because it’s the perfect time to do them.”

In terms of running, her training is similar to the bike, but with less volume, and almost all (“80-90%”) is done off the bike. “A lot of the tempo work I do is hill-based, because I’ve found that, if I do a lot of flat concrete or treadmill work, I’ll get injured. And I’ve also found that if I do too much running, it really takes away from my strength on the bike. Towards bigger races, I’ll do maybe a month of high-intensity running for leg speed, but I only need that much and my running’s on top form.”

FULL CIRCLE

Back in March, Paterson “rocked up” to one of the US Cup mountain bike races, part of the prestigious Cannondale Triple Crown series, intending to use the race as training. She was coming off the back of a hard training week and had actually done a run that morning, but when she got there, she found that it was a bigger race than she’d expected. “They were calling everyone up [to sign in] and they called up Annie Last, who was eighth at the Olympics, and a bunch of

other cats who were Olympians. I was like ‘Shit! I’m going to get my ass kicked!’.” But even though a crash on the training lap had left her with the appearance of “a right beginner, bleeding all down my jersey” – and a struggle with her pedals at the start meant she started “at the back of the bloody field, looking like a right idiot” – the day wasn’t all bad.

In fact, things couldn’t have gone much better, as not only did Paterson rejoin the field, but she rode through it solo to victory. It was the first ‘proper’ mountain bike race she had ever competed in, let alone against a world-class field. After that, Scottish Cycling made contact with the suggestion that Paterson might want to try to qualify for the mountain bike race at the 2014 Commonwealth Games. She ratified their faith with a win in the Whiskey 50 – the race with the biggest prize purse in mountain biking – a few weeks later.

So next season will have a distinct bike flavour to it, with Xterra resigned to a back seat as the Glasgow-hosted Commonwealths take centre stage – although she thinks she can still “get away with” doing a few Xterras early on.

TAKEAWAY TIPS

- Look for races that excite you. If you’re no longer enjoying the sort of racing you’re doing, maybe it’s time to look for a different sort of challenge...
- Remember to address your mental needs as much as you think about your physical training. Use a system like Paterson’s to keep track of how hard you think you’re working mentally in order to make sure you avoid burn-out.
- When you can, try to run off the bike. Paterson does almost all of her run training straight off a ride, and there’s nothing that will get your legs used to that feeling like practice will.
- If you find you’re getting injured a lot when running, try taking things off-road. Pounding the pavements gives your joints a beating, but opting to do a run on the trails will lessen the impact significantly.

“I gave up triathlon because I didn’t qualify for the Commonwealths in 2002, so wouldn’t it be ironic if I qualified for the mountain biking next year?” Ironic maybe, but it would also be an amazing end to Paterson’s 12-year relationship with the Commonwealths. And proof that, eventually, class wins out. **220**

LESLEY’S OFF-ROAD DRILLS

As well as getting in bike and run miles, Paterson also regularly undertakes drills to improve the off-road specific part of her skillset. Here are four that focus on technique, strength and power...



**1** Set out a slalom course on an off-road descent with cones. Move side to side across and down the trail, focussing on quick foot work, strong ankles and outer leg, and push-off around corners.



**2** Steep off-road hill repeats off the bike. High knees drill up the hill to exaggerate hip flexor, calf and thigh strength.



**1** Do steep 30sec hill sprints in two gears, tougher than what feels comfortable in order to develop good torque for tough terrain. Practise in-saddle and out-of-saddle.



**2** Off-road figure-of-eights. Find a climb and set out cones to make a figure of eight. Follow the pattern on the way up and the way down to practise balance on uphill and downhill turning on both the left and the right.