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INSIGHT

TRIATHLON

Making of an

IRON
WOMAN

Mother-of-two Kate Rutherford just wanted to lose weight when she first started the gruelling discipline, but she has improved so much she's challenging the elite – and beating them

Richard Castka

Kate Rutherford doesn't describe herself as a late starter, but she certainly thinks of herself as a fast finisher.

The Liverpool-born mother-of-two has been racking up wins in age-group triathlons this year, and surprised even herself with a win over a number of elite athletes from the Hong Kong triathlon squad last month.

And she did this at the age of 39.

Rutherford's achievements are all the more remarkable because she has only been competing in triathlons for the past three years – the result of wanting to lose weight after giving birth to her second child.

"After my baby was born I decided to start running to lose weight," said Rutherford, who was then 33. "I didn't like running, and the thought of doing just a 2km run was torture for me. However, I persevered and the weight just came off – for me running was the key to losing weight."

Rutherford said she ran for no more than 30 minutes during each training session, but this proved to be enough to burn



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off an unwanted 24kg, which did not sit well on her normal 55kg frame. Having got fit again she then decided to dip her toe in the pool – something she did regularly as a child. The stroke and technique came flooding back.

"I was surprised at how much I enjoyed swimming again," said Rutherford. "I found that I really missed it."

In 2009, she joined some friends planning to compete in the Bali Triathlon.

"I bought a second-hand bike about three months before the race and started training," said Rutherford. "To be honest my plan was simply to finish the race, but I found myself the second female out of the water and in the top 10 overall.

"I got a puncture on the bike section but decided to keep riding with the flat so I could finish the race, but about 700 metres from the bike-run transition my wheel buckled and I had to carry the bike over the line.

"In spite of all that, I was first in my age group and the sixth female overall, so I was thrilled with the result. That was also my first ever 10km run."

The triathlon bug was now well and truly planted and Rutherford entered more age-group races in Hong Kong and around Asia.

Late last year a friend suggested Rutherford should seek professional coaching and introduced her to former national squad member Andrew Wright, who has a stable of talented athletes under his charge, including Ivan Lo Ching-hin, who

recently secured his second silver medal at the Asian Triathlon Championships.

"I actually tried to put Kate off when she first approached me, but I knew that if she wanted to get better she would still pursue it, and she did," said Wright.

"She hadn't been on a fixed training programme so there were some big differences once she started working with me. I gave her an easy training programme in the beginning but when I saw her talent I ramped it up quite a bit."

One of the added benefits from training with Wright has been the opportunity to train alongside Lo three times a week.

"If you put strong girls in with the boys they tend to get good," said Wright. "Kate was quite a good swimmer in the beginning but her bike and run were weak. Now they are not. Training with Ivan is definitely beneficial for her."

Rutherford has picked up a few injuries since the Bali race, but that's to be expected in a sport such as triathlon. "Last year I broke my collarbone while leading the bike section of the Bintan Triathlon [in Indonesia] when I went over a speed bump on a road through a golf course," she said. "That set my training back quite a bit."

Her achievements somewhat mirror those of British triathlete Helen Russell, who took part in her first triathlon at the age of 30 and is now, six years later, the European sprint duathlon champion and the British aquathlon champion.

Rutherford was not anticipating anything other than to win her age group when she lined up for the Hong Kong Life Triathlon at the Science Park last month, a sprint race that included several of Hong Kong's elite triathletes.

She came out of the water in third position and stayed with the leading pack throughout the 20km bike section.

"I was all fingers and thumbs in the bike/run transition and the other girls just ran away from me," said Rutherford. "But by the time we had returned to the same place – about 700 metres later – I had run right through them."

The win has given Rutherford the confidence to challenge the elite triathletes over the sprint or Olympic distances, but she finds it odd that a part-time mother-of-two is mixing it with Hong Kong's best – and beating them.

Instead of celebrating her win by cheering on her friends and teammates, Rutherford was pulled aside after she crossed the finish line for a "random" drug test. "It was bizarre," she said of the incident. "I wasn't expecting anything like that, as I'm an age grouper. It took me two hours and six bottles of water to be able to produce a specimen, so the enjoyment I might have expected with such a win was simply lost."

With two young children to raise Rutherford leads a busy lifestyle, and has "a lot of early mornings" to fit it all in. However, she plans to continue to compete as long as she is fit and remains competitive.

Internationally she is focusing on a half-ironman event in Antwerp this month and will then compete in the Half Ironman Asian Championships in Phuket in December.

"While I've got the talent I want to be able to use it," she said.



Triathlete Kate Rutherford has improved so much as an athlete after picking up the sport at 33 that she is now coached professionally and has racked up a number of wins in her age group. At first swimming was her strength but she has come on tremendously in the bike ride and the run. Photos: Richard Castka



