

# Q&A

With Chrissie Wellington

## Chrissie Wellington: ALL SMILES!

**One name noticeably absent from the Kona start list** this year will be four-time world champion and Ironman world record holder Chrissie Wellington. We caught up with triathlon's smiling assassin to find out how she is spending her sabbatical.

TEXT BY HOLLY BENNETT | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LARRY MAURER 

If you think Chrissie Wellington has been sitting idly on the sidelines during her hiatus from competition, think again. One look at her schedule reveals a calendar jam-packed with commitments to promote her autobiography and serve as an ambassador for charities close to her heart. *AT's* Holly Bennett caught up with Wellington during a brief break in her hectic schedule to learn how she is enjoying life off the race course.

### **AUSTRALIAN TRIATHLETE:**

Your 2012 season has been a bit different than in years past. Along with tackling a demanding book tour for your autobiography *A Life Without Limits*, you recently worked alongside Greg Welch doing the live broadcast for Ironman Texas and you spectated while Tom [Lowe, Wellington's boyfriend] raced at Ironman Austria. How was that for you, being on the sidelines?

**CW:** Of course it was tough! I love – love – to race, and to not be out there annihilating and testing myself was difficult. I always knew it would be. But the question I asked myself at the end of last year was never, "Do I want to race?" The answer to that is always a definitive "Yes!" The question was whether I wanted to devote every minute of every single day to that race. And to find an honest answer to that question I felt I needed to take a step away. I needed to get some balance and perspective and really celebrate all that life has to offer, rather than simply have it revolve entirely around triathlon. So, yes – it was very hard, both at Ironman Texas and in Austria, to watch the race. But I made a choice, and I made it for reasons that were right for me, and so I stand by the path I have chosen for this year with no regrets. Even if I did want to jump into the water just as the gun went off!

**AT:** Perhaps you can confirm or deny the suggestion that it's harder to spectate at an Ironman than it is to actually do the race?

**CW:** I had so much fun spectating at Ironman Austria – being able to support Tom, just as he has supported me so much over the last few years, as well as cheering like an absolute lunatic for all the age groupers. But I have to say, it's a long, nerve-wracking and mentally and physically exhausting day watching your loved one on the race course. I tried to be absolutely everywhere, so I think I probably did a good solid 100km of cycling trying to spread the love!

**AT:** What are some of the things you've been able to do with your various charities that you would not have had the time or energy for if you were still training and racing triathlon?

**CW:** My desire to work a lot more actively with all of my chosen charities was a key reason for my



**NEW  
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THE WORLD  
CHAMP'S  
PLANS  
FOR HER  
SABBATICAL  
INCLUDE  
A BOOK  
TOUR AND  
CHARITY  
WORK

decision to step back from full time training and racing for this year. As world champion I have an amazing opportunity to use my platform to raise funds and awareness for causes that are important to me, and I simply felt that I couldn't do as much as I wanted to do whilst also trying to be the best athlete I could be.

The charitable work is focused on those that I am already actively supporting, such as the Blazeman Foundation for ALS, Girls Education Nepal, Jane's Appeal and Challenged Athletes Foundation, as well as helping to grow GOTRIbal.

I did a 1000km ride for Jane's Appeal in April and have organised four "Runs with Chrissie" in the UK and Ireland in aid of the appeal. These have been really successful, and comprise a 5km run, a presentation, some food, a Q&A and the opportunity for autographs and pictures. I have also attended a number of clinics for the

Challenged Athletes Foundation, working closely with the beneficiaries of this wonderful organisation. I arranged a 5km fun run with GOTRIbal members, which was also a means to raise money for CAF, and I've been working with Girls Education Nepal to get bikes for disadvantaged girls in remote regions of Nepal, so that they can get to school. I am also fortunate to be able to use other projects (such as the coaching and motivational downloads I made with Audiofuel) as a vehicle to support worthwhile causes.

**AT:** Why did you choose to write your autobiography?

**CW:** I have invested so much time and energy into writing the book over the past few years. My motives for wanting to publicly recount my life story in print were varied. Selfishly, I craved the intellectual and emotional challenge, and

fulfillment, that comes from self reflection. I also wanted to use it as a means to thank all those who have played a part in my life, both before and during my career in professional sport. Of course I wanted to share some practical tips for the triathletes out there, but more important are the life lessons and philosophies that transcend sport and are applicable to anyone – whether they are a pro athlete or a coach potato. These come from all areas of my life: my childhood, academia, whilst travelling, during my career as a civil servant, in Nepal and also through sport. Through my words I want to encourage people, young and old, to take up sport, to travel and to pursue their dreams.

I want to inspire people to take a chance, to attempt to defy what they deem impossible and to be willing to look fear and adversity in the face and live their lives without any preconceived limits. The book is one such vehicle for doing this.

In writing a book that transcends triathlon I wanted to try and take the sport out of the minority and into the psyche of the majority. I wanted to showcase our sport to those that may have never heard of Ironman, and show that it truly is accessible to the masses. It's a lofty ambition perhaps, but the more exposure I can get for the book and for triathlon in the mainstream media, the closer I get to making this pipe dream a reality. And that's why I also want to invest as much time in promoting the book as I did in creating it.

**AT:** Any idea how many people you've met while on tour for the book over the past six months?

**CW:** Thousands. Perhaps close to 5,000 now – enough to make my signing arm double in size!

**AT:** Give us an idea of a typical 48 hours on a book tour?

**CW:** It's a little bit like training, which goes something like: sleep, eat, swim, eat, bike, eat, run, eat, sleep. But instead it's: jump on a plane, collect luggage, check into hotel, have interviews with local media, arrive at the venue, give a presentation, do a Q&A, sign, smile, sleep, jump on a plane, collect luggage... and on it goes! But seriously, it has been an amazing opportunity to meet some fantastic people, interact with them on a very personal level, spread my love and passion for triathlon, sport and life, as well as getting to see some great places and collect a few handy air miles!

**“I want to encourage people, young and old, to take up sport, to travel and pursue their dreams.”**

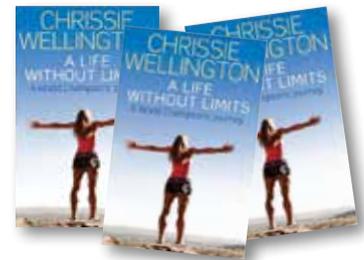
– Chrissie Wellington

**AT:** You disclose a great deal of personal information in your book, especially surrounding your struggles with an eating disorder. What has the public reception been to this part of your personal history?

**CW:** Effectively conveying the messages and lessons I mentioned earlier meant “humanising” myself. I am sometimes held up as this robotic, infallible “freak of nature”, but of course I am no such thing. In order for the reader to be able to relate and identify with me I had to expose the good, the bad and the ugly. I wanted to reveal my strengths, my weaknesses, my fears, my concerns, my likes and dislikes, my passions – my true nature. There are things in the book that people may not have known – for example, like you said, my battles with eating and body image. But it is only by sharing some of these stories that I can break down the façade and really impact – and hopefully inspire – the reader.

For some of my young adult years I disliked many aspects of my external body. I compared myself, self-depreciatively, to others. I would stand

in front of the mirror, my mind full of criticism at the image that stared back at me. I ignored the fact that I had a body that enabled me to achieve the highest academic grades, to play sport, to climb mountains and to live my life to the fullest. My autobiography is the place where I really publicised my problems and how I managed to overcome them. I hoped to hold out a light to other sufferers around the world, so that they would know that they are not alone and give them confidence that



Chrissie's book *A Life With Out Limits* (Constable, 2012) is available in stores now

**NO. 1 FAN**

CHRISSIE'S HIATUS HAS ALLOWED HER TO EXPERIENCE THE OTHER SIDE OF COMPETITION, SUPPORTING BOYFRIEND TOM LOWE AS HE RACES



“I never set out to be a world champion – not many ordinary girls from Norfolk do – but I never wanted to be left wondering, ‘What if...?’” – Chrissie Wellington

**OLD HABITS**

CHRISSIE DESCRIBES STEPPING AWAY FROM IRONMAN AS ONE OF THE BIGGEST EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES OF HER LIFE



this illness can be overcome. I also hoped that the relatives and friends of those suffering from eating disorders/disordered eating could draw on my words to better understand the illness and how they may be able to help their loved ones. Hence, the book (and subsequent, follow up articles like this one!) is hopefully serving as a platform through which I can continue to convey these deeply important messages.

From the comments and responses I have received I think most people have welcomed my honesty and openness. They have been able to identify with me that little bit more, and hopefully have taken some inspiration from my life journey and applied it to their own.

**AT:** How much are you training these days? Has it been difficult for you – in terms of how you feel physically and in terms of body image – not to maintain the same level of fitness as when you were training and racing full time? Or do you feel healthier and more balanced now, not pushing yourself to such extremes?

**CW:** The last six months have been amazing and wonderful. I am living life to the fullest, doing things I haven't done in ages, seeing friends that I haven't seen for a long time and just releasing myself, a little, from the pressure to perform. But whilst it's been wonderful, I won't say it has been

easy. To be honest, it's been as mentally hard as I expected it would be. In fact, to step away from Ironman has been one of the biggest emotional challenges I have faced thus far in my life. I am a creature of habit, I love structure, and yes, I am a control freak.

So the "Ironman life" – the single pursuit of a goal, the focus, the discipline, and the structure – appealed to many aspects of my personality. Removing myself from that has been really hard. This is precisely why I needed to do it. I needed to test myself in a different way – to challenge myself to cope when I don't have a routine, when I don't have a single goal to focus on, where I have to be a bit more spontaneous.

As for training, I am still doing bits and bobs. I am a sport addict, and the passion for exercise will always course through my veins. But at the moment I am doing things as and when I feel like it, rather than following a regimented daily routine. I do something active most days, anything from one to four hours depending on my schedule. But the key is that I am not following a program. I am doing a lot of different sports – rowing, hiking, mountain biking – with no objective or need to tick the box of a structured session.

It's sport in its raw form, rather than training for training's sake, if that makes sense. And I am loving every minute!

**AT:** Of course everyone wants to know: Will you come back to Ironman?

**CW:** Ask me at the end of the year!

**AT:** Where do you see yourself in five years?

**CW:** I think this question is best answered by plundering the final paragraph of my autobiography. It goes a little something like this:

"...how can I speculate on what the future holds, when the present is so astronomically removed from whatever expectations I might have had in my youth? My only policy throughout has been to keep an open mind and, whatever I may do, to give it my all. It still takes my breath away to think where that simple outlook on life has taken me. I never set out to be a world champion – not many ordinary girls from Norfolk do – but neither have I ever wanted to be left wondering, 'What if...?' At so many stages along the way, the limits that I thought I could see lying ahead dissolved as I approached them. And that has been the most exciting discovery of all."

**AT:** How would you rate your happiness right now, on a scale from 1-10 (10 being the highest)?

**CW:** I am in Italy with Tom. I have just eaten a gelato. It has to be a 10. I'm all smiles! **AT**