



THE REAL WIZARDS OF OZ

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Aaron Royle's bid to end the ITU dominance of the Brownlee brothers and Javier Gomez is being shaped by a little help from his friends, reports **Steve Wilson**

It's the start of the day's swim training. The sun is shining, the squad already in the immaculate pool. The most exciting US female ITU racer of her generation leans over to her Chilean counterpart, clarifying the orders barked out by Canada's national team coach moments earlier (perhaps it was the Kiwi inflection in his voice that made it difficult for her to understand). Instructions now clear, the group start their drills, ploughing the clean, icy water with metronome-like grace and rhythm.

The accents give nothing away – we're not in Edmonton, Wellington, Boulder or, indeed, Santiago. Instead, this scene unfolds in the youthful, beachside town of Wollongong, NSW. It's here that a group of elite athletes have gravitated in search of individual improvement, finding others to train alongside, compete with and measure themselves against on a daily basis. It's a local triathlon hothouse with an international flavour that even has its own unofficial brand name: the Wollongong Wizards. And it may well be the environment from which Australia's next world or Olympic champion – or, who knows, *champions* – will emerge.

"We're not a team, we're individuals within a group environment. We're training with a lot of our big competition," explains Aaron Royle, Australia's leading male ITU racer, fresh from recording a first podium finish at World Triathlon Series (WTS) level in Auckland in April. He has been based in Wollongong full-time since 2009. "But you can use them, as I'm sure they use me, to get the best out of each other. It just seems to work. It's hard to say how we're all pretty good friends when we're such fierce competitors, but we are. You have to be ruthless and selfish, in a way, to succeed in triathlon, but somehow we seem to have been able to gel and make it work."

WORLD IN MOTION

Under coach Jamie Turner – a New Zealander formerly of the Australian set-up and now leading Canada's high-performance coaching program – a squad of internationals and young Australian elites work together, but apart. "Everyone's an individual. There's no team here," says Turner matter-of-factly. "In triathlon, one man's success is another man's failure. They're competing for the same resources. They're competing for the same prizes, money and medals."

Having athletes from different countries working together helps take at least some of the edge off that competition for resources – at least in terms of games spots and federation funding – but is also a vital tool in

The athletes gather to listen to their coach



Pool resistance work includes dipping into the kit bag for shoes – yes, shoes! – to wear in the water



raising standards. Charlotte McShane, the U23 World Champion and a genuine prospect for the Rio Olympics, learns from being around Gwen Jorgensen, the American Olympian and that nation's triathlete of the year in 2013. Grace Musgrove, another bright young thing in the Australian system, can get an up-close look at Barbara Riveros, the seasoned Chilean athlete still getting to grips with the nuances of local dialect in this part of the world.

Ryan Bailie, named in the three-man squad Australia will send to the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow this winter, trains alongside Royle, who booked his own trip to Scotland with a top seven finish at the Grand Final in London last year. They've done so for several →

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GWEN JORGENSEN'S TRAINING TIPS

RUN PERFORMANCE

- 1 Glute strengthening**
I incorporate lots of clamshell-type exercises into my routine, as well as monster walks (stand upright with feet shoulder-width apart and a resistance band around your ankles. With hands on hips, upper body straight and knees slightly bent, make small diagonal steps ahead and outwards, alternating feet). And plenty of planking too.
- 2 Consistency of volume**
I always hit around the 50-70km per week marker – week in, week out.
- 3 Musculoskeletal awareness**
This comes from movement sense – like keeping shoulders relaxed and keeping body leant forward in the run, and having an angle of attack to frequent soft tissue.
- 4 Physio work**
Regular visits and treatments maintaining recovery and identifying areas that need more strength further treatment.



Work on the velodrome is always at a rate greater than that of competition

years now. “I knows when he’s going well,” says Royle. “If I’m not having a great day I try and work off him, and vice versa.”

Familiarity in this instance does not breed contempt, but instead raises both athletes’ standards. “When you turn up for training there’s always someone who’s having a good day,” says McShane. “That forces you to raise your game. There’s no hiding place at all.”

In an individual sport it’s unusual to find a group dynamic quite like this, but it seems to work. And it needs to. The landscape of ITU racing has changed in the last five years and the level of competition is both better and broader than it’s ever been. “I perhaps set the tone, but the dynamic of the group is set by the athletes,” says Turner. “They have to work for themselves. I’m here to help, but they have to take ownership of their own training. I don’t need to set the standards anyway – the world does that. I’m just here to remind them of what those standards are.”

In the men’s field, those elevated world standards are primarily driven by the three men who claimed the medals at the London Olympics: British brothers Alistair and Jonathan Brownlee, and Spaniard Javier Gomez, winner of the first two ITU WTS races this season. “If you speak to Chris McCormack, who raced back in the early 2000s and then raced the Brownlees when he tried to qualify for the last Olympics, he’ll say they’re the best triathletes he’s ever come up against,” says Royle. “You do have to look at them in the same way as Rafa Nadal and Roger Federer in tennis, or Tiger Woods a while back in golf. They’re that good. But there will come a point where someone takes over their reign. It happens in all types of sport at all levels. Dominant eras come to an end eventually.”

Stretching the analogy, then, would that

“TRIATHLON IS ABOUT SUBSEQUENT RUNNING – ABOUT HOW WELL YOU GO AFTER THE BIKE. YOU NEED TO DEVELOP ATHLETES WHO CAN MEET THOSE COMPETITIVE DEMANDS”

make Royle, say, Andy Murray, or Stanislas Wawrinka? He’s cheerier than the former but certainly has the same determination shared by both. And those names are perhaps instructive when assessing the challenge ahead. Both were born to compete in an era when true greats were dominating their sport; athletes who have raised the bar of an entire discipline, taking it to a rarified level. Yet the need to compete with rare talents has forced them to improve, and they ultimately made the breakthrough on merit. Reaching seemingly unreachable standards, in short, is possible.

“I really enjoy seeing them [the Brownlees and Gomez] on the start line,” says Royle. “They’re the best in the business and that’s what I love to challenge myself against. But also I think their tactics marry with my tactics – they like to swim hard, bike hard ... and then run hard as well.”

“If you look at my results from the last four years, I’m closing the gap slowly. And it’s not just me – a few of us are getting closer. Rio’s what we’re about and that’s two years away, so who knows. I have confidence in my ability and definitely think I deserve to have been finishing where I have recently, which is up near the front.”

MAKING THE GRADE

A national level swimmer as a child growing up in Newcastle – doing seven pool sessions a week at age nine because “that’s just the way it was” – Royle also made the state



cross country team without any running background – just fitness and stamina from swimming. He did his first triathlon, on a mountain bike, at 12. The Talented Athlete Program brought him into contact with Turner on visits to Sydney and he eventually moved to Wollongong at 19.

His breakthrough came at the Oceania Championships in 2006 when he pushed Kris Gemmell all the way to the line in Wellington. In 2007, Kinloch was the setting for his first ITU race win; then, in Auckland in 2012, Royle became ITU U23 World Champion. That first WTS podium, on the same course, continued his success when competing across the ditch. "Put eight of the season races on the Auckland course," Royle says, "and I'd be pretty happy!"

Royle's swimming background means he's competitive against anyone in the first leg of the race. And while the perception from outside drafting competition is that the bike section doesn't carry the significance it does in other forms of triathlon, this is something Royle takes issue with. He notes that although the breakaway groups may have been small and margins tight, there wasn't a race in last season's World Series where the whole bunch came together before second transition.

Either way, he can mix it there too. The next mountain to climb, however is finding a way to match the Brownlees and Gomez stride for stride over the 10km run. At the London games Alistair's run split was an incredible 29.07, a time that would have beaten three men in the



The men and women in the squad train together, but with specific individual plans

10,000m final on the track. And he even slowed in the last 200m to milk the applause of a jubilant home crowd. "Triathlon is about subsequent running," explains Turner. "About how well you can run after you've ridden a bicycle. You need to develop athletes who can absorb, or can meet the demands of competition with ease."

The challenge for Royle, and others trying to live with the reality that a sub-30min 10km is a prerequisite for victory, is to find those extra seconds on the road in concert with maintaining form on the bike. This is perhaps the central feature of today's elite Olympic distance racing. "Over the last four years the Brownlees, and to a degree Gomez, but especially Alistair, have changed things," says Royle. "Regardless how hard they ride they still run sub-30 minutes anyway. They can ride really hard, really smash it, knowing they can still produce those run times."

"They'd probably still beat people like [run specialists] Mario Mola and Richard Murray if it came down to a straight running race. But maybe they're thinking, 'Why let it come to that – I can swim better than them, I can ride better than them, why let them in the race at all?' For me, to compete it's both about improving run times, simply getting faster, but also working on getting to the run fresh. You have to swim and bike smart."

HARDER, FASTER

So, despite what you may have heard, the art of bike riding in Olympic distance triathlon is not dead. It has just changed, forced to evolve because of the new generation of athletes. "People speculate about who the best bike riders in triathlon are. For me the best bike riders are the snivelers," says Turner. "They work, and do what they need to do in a race, but it's within their capacity. We still see athletes who go full gas, ride excitedly, ride →

AARON ROYLE'S TRAINING TIPS

BIKE POWER

1 Riding turn for turn in training Don't shirk turns with training partners no matter how bad you feel – make racing easy because training is harder!

2 Gear selection Learn to produce power spikes with cadence – be like a Mazda rotary engine, not a diesel truck, and power with revs.

3 Riding position Establish a performance position on the bike with a great fitter who knows your training, your coach and how you want to race both on the bike and, just as importantly, when you get off it. The right position ensures you have the flexibility and strength to ride such a position and get the most out of myself regardless of pressure, fatigue or course demands.

4 Key session Love/hate – 6x4min maximal mean power

Done on a slight gradient uphill with 4mins flat out and 3-4mins recovery My favourite climb to do it is "Puerto Zaldiaran", a mean hill at our training base in Vitoria-Gasteiz in the Basque Country, Spain. It's a nice 3-5% gradient that allows me to keep the cadence in the mid 90s throughout the efforts and ride a solid gear

I can get 6.5watts/kg out of myself for these six efforts if I'm in good form.



“TRAINING NEEDS TO BE A LOT HARDER THAN THE DEMANDS OF COMPETITION ... THOSE FRONT SKILLS ON THE BIKE AND IN THE WATER NEED TO BETTER”

aggressively ... but they don't feature in the final results. You need to be able to go turn for turn when you're in the lead group, but be able to do that without it being at the nth degree of their vocabulary on the bike.”

To achieve the holy grail of a powerful bike that still leaves you fresh for the rigours of a blood-and-thunder run is one of the core things Royle and his peers in Wollongong work on. Before today's pool session, the squad had a hard session on a local velodrome, chasing Turner on a moped, dropping out and back in again, testing their power outage and stamina.

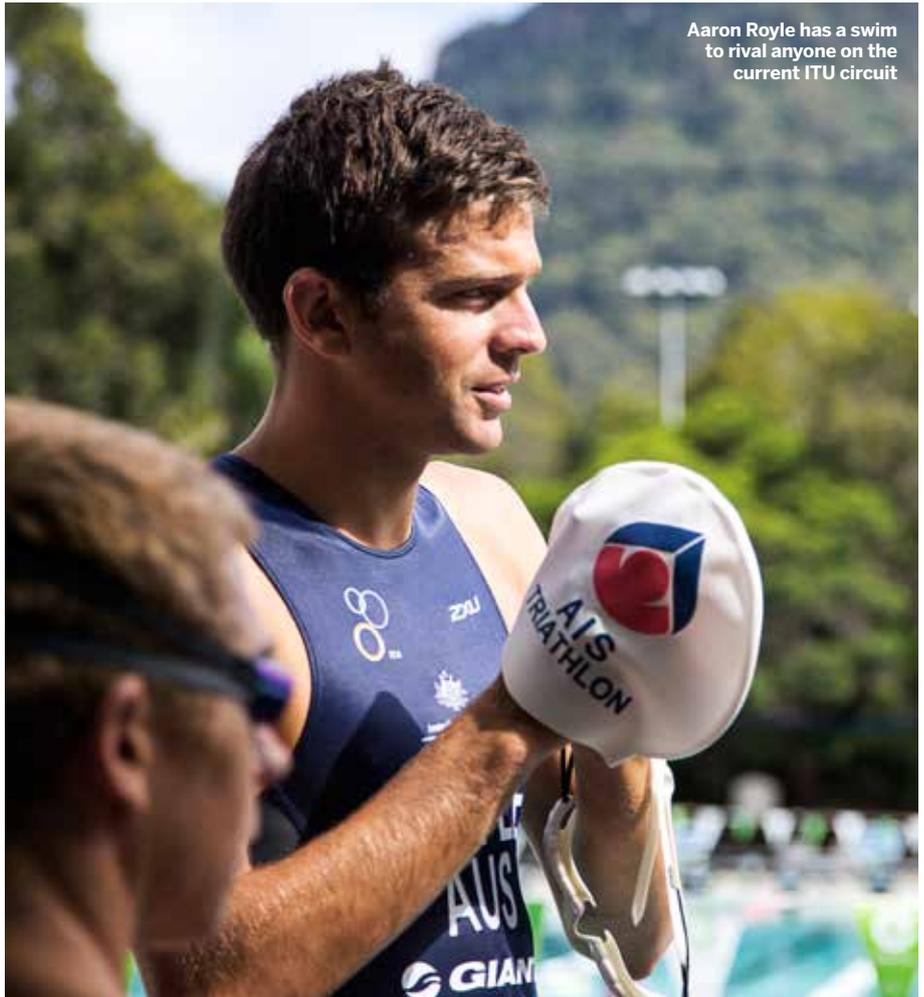
“Training on a bike needs to be a lot harder than the demands of competition,” explains Turner. “This morning was about developing power through acceleration and cadence. Low crank torque stuff. The peak cadences generated today were way beyond what normally happens in a race. Those front skills on the bike, and in the water, they need to be better than what the competition demands of you. But on the run you just have to give everything you've got.”

The day ends with a group run, starting from the beach. It will again take the athletes beyond race requirements – five sets of 2,000m at race pace and another 1,200m on top of that. There's a spirit between them that's reflected in the jokes and smiles they share ahead of the sessions, but there's also a seriousness and work rate that's necessary to progress.

Royle's own progression will be tested at the Commonwealth Games, where the Brownlees again loom large. His principal target for the year, to reach the podium of a WTS race, has been ticked off early. Now it's all about Glasgow. “A good year for me would be to back up that result in Auckland, get a result at the Commonwealth Games in the individual and the relay, and to be in the top eight in the world at the end of the year,” says Royle. “If I can be consistent at that level across the year, that would be an achievement.”

Turner concurs, stressing the need to keep coming back to the well and doing the right things over a period of time. “If these athletes can invest in process day after day, if they can give their best under any level of stress, if they can carry that stress and get the best out of themselves, that's all you can ask of them,” he says. “They recognise that performance comes from consistency, not from a single session. It comes from graft.” **220**

Aaron Royle has a swim to rival anyone on the current ITU circuit



Training as a group of individuals means someone is always on their game, forcing the rest to push on even if they're having an off day



TRAINING DAY

DAWN TILL DUSK WITH THE WOLLONGONG WIZARDS

BIKE

- Roll out with 30min warm-up pre-session on the road
- Motor-paced “point score session” at the velodrome
- 3x10mins “on” with 3min recovery
- The velodrome offers a controlled environment – the banking encourages and rewards power production with cadence and enables the athletes to rev up quicker

WITHIN THE “ONS”

- Athletes ride high on the velodrome and ride in a line – staying behind and above the wheel in front of them – riding approximately 28-30km/h.
- When the motorbike comes up underneath and behind them they stay in order, accelerate and dive down the track to chase and hold the motorbike (motorbike is going 48-52km/h)
- They chase and hold the motorbike until they approach the second group of athletes, and those on the motorbike pull up the track and first wheel goes to last position
- Then the next group chases the motorbike
- It’s optimal, where possible, for athletes to produce power with cadence and minimise the crank torque
- In this session we are looking at start cadences of around 75-80rpm – women ride 50T/15, men 53T/15



A SAMPLE EFFORT FROM RYAN BAILIE

- 7-8 efforts per 10min period
- 40-42secs of work per effort (equal rest between)
- Max power 950 watts (16.10 watts/kg)
- Start cadence 75rpm
- Max cadence 122rpm
- Start speed 30km/h
- Max speed 52km/h (just before getting on motorbike wheel)

In an Olympic distance ITU race athletes will typically be required to do anywhere between 60-220 efforts of high power (greater than 7.5 watts/kg). Most are short efforts 1-20secs

SWIM



This was predominantly a “pull” set. We rode short but powerful in the morning session and had a threshold run session in the afternoon. I wanted to give the legs “time off” in the swim.

Different athletes / genders use different equipment. I like the women to use shoes (run shoes) in the swim when doing faster pull work; it adds resistance at faster velocities and doesn’t compromise body position. What bank of swimming athletes have behind them determines what gear they use. Aaron Royle, for example, has more under his belt, so he will not use paddles as much as, say, Ryan Bailie. Athletes use a stroke timer to provide feedback on their stroke rates.

WARM UP

- 400m freestyle
- 2x25 at 200m freestyle pace
- 200m freestyle – a little quicker than the 400m pace
- 2x25 at 200m freestyle pace
- 100m freestyle – a little quicker than the 200m pace
- 2x25m at 200m freestyle pace
- 4x50m – 35m relaxed, 15m build to sprint velocity

MAIN SET

3x through:

- 400m negative split (last 200m quicker than first 200m) at 2.40 – 2-beat kick throughout – negative split with upper body strength as opposed to kick increasing
- 2x50m paddles only – 35m relaxed, 15m build to sprint velocity at 50m
- 3x100m pull buoy and band (women also wearing shoes) at 1.30 – holding a stroke rate 2-4 stroke cycles less than “1km time trial threshold”
- 2x50m large paddles, pull buoy and band (women also with shoes) at 50m – holding a stroke rate 2-4 stroke cycles greater than “1km time trial threshold”

WARM DOWN

- 200m loosen freestyle/backstroke

RUN

- Run – pace extension
- 5x2km with 1200m faster

The 2km are run at target 10km pace for the upcoming competition. Athletes are free to adjust the recovery between intervals to ensure they “model” or hit desired paces. Recoveries may get larger throughout the set.

The back 1200m is the athletes’ opportunity to see how many “gears” are left. So rather than running faster than

the demands of the upcoming race, I like to target the pace one wants to race and then extend it out with a further component at the end.

The “performance markers” – assessing an athlete’s form, fatigue and fitness – are based off given workloads (so, for example, Gwen Jorgensen ran these at 3.16-18per/km pace) and then quicker for the 1200m – as she was targeting 32.40-33.00 10km pace for Cape Town.

