




JULIE DIBENS: THREE GOALS, ONE DREAM

In 2010 three-time World Champion Julie Dibens raced three world championship events in five weeks. No mean feat, especially when you realise Dibens wanted to win them all. She knew it was a tall order but was excited by the challenge and enlisted the help of coach Mat Steinmetz from Retul. Dibens came third in her first outing over the Ironman distance in Kona, second at the Xterra World championships a fortnight later and came eighth at the 70.3 World Championships in Clearwater just three weeks after. It was a long tough season for the Brit who currently resides in Boulder, Colorado. We caught up with Dibens and Stienmetz to find out how her season went and how they planned for the triple. It's one of our longest interviews, so grab a coffee, sit down and enjoy.





**“EVERY SESSION
FELT UGLY BUT I
STAYED HOPEFUL”**

How did the idea of the triple worlds come about?

JD: After winning Clearwater in 2009 and being offered a spot for Kona I thought long and hard about what I wanted to do in 2010. Going long was the big decision. I decided to start the season by trying my hand at long distance racing with Abu Dhabi. The longer bike (200K) and shorter run (20K) played to my strengths and was the ideal place to dip my toes in long course racing. The prize money wasn't bad either (laughs). Even though I was excited about the prospect of racing in Kona I wasn't ready to give up the chance of winning the Xterra or 70.3 world titles again. I decided to give all three a go and have three chances of winning a title!

Mat, tell us about Julie's early season training and racing.

MS: The unique distance of Abu Dhabi suited Julie who's considered one of the strongest swim/bikers. The challenge, other than the fact that Julie had never ridden 200K, was Julie decided to stay in Boulder the entire winter. This would mean a lot of quality time on the turbo trainer, which can be mentally draining, yet effective.

Julie, how did you prep for Abu Dhabi?

JD: My training for Abu Dhabi didn't really change much. With it being held in March the biggest challenge was how much riding I would be able to do. This was the first winter that I had spent in Boulder and wasn't too sure how feasible it would be to get some 100 mile rides in. Knowing that I was going to have to ride 200K in Abu Dhabi forced me out on the bike on days I usually wouldn't have ridden. I spent many hours in my basement on the Computrainer. Sometimes I would ride indoors for two hours with specific stuff down on the bars, then head outside to ride. If I was lucky I would persuade people to ride at least three hours with me before doing another hour on my own.

Tell us about your winning race in Abu Dhabi?

JD: The race went well other than the

flat tyre. The challenge of it, the pacing, hydration and nutrition for 200K and then having to run off that got me fired up.

Did this influence your decision regarding Kona?

JD: After my positive experience in Abu Dhabi in March I was pretty sure I would accept my slot for Kona in October. The gap between the two allowed me time to race both Olympic and 70.3 races mid-season.

Following your return from Abu Dhabi didn't you spend time working on your bike position?

JD: After making my decision to go long I knew that to have any success I had to capitalise on my bike strength. The first step was to address some issues of discomfort which over the longer distances would be exaggerated. My first experience with Mat Stienmetz and Retul was at the Trek/Kswiss team camp in January. We discovered pretty quickly that we wanted to make some major changes to my position but it was too close to Abu Dhabi for this. With Retul being based in Boulder this made things pretty easy to look at afterwards.

Mat, what did Julie need to change?

MS: Julie had been successful in her old position but was having comfort issues. I took one look at her and could see why she had pain. If you look at pictures of Julie in Clearwater in 2009 her saddle is positioned rearward relative to the bottom bracket similar to what you'd expect on a road bike setup. Complete with an uncomfortable saddle Julie struggled to find comfort in the aero position. Her posture also created a reach - nose of saddle to back of armrest pads - that was too long causing her back and shoulder pain. This reach didn't allow Julie to support her upper body with her skeletal system, instead, she was forced to use her erectors - muscles of the back - to support her upper body. These fatigued over time causing discomfort. Julie tried to shorten her reach by choking up on her aero bars with her the arm rests located in the middle of the forearm rather than under the elbow.

How did you fix this?

MS: The fix for Julie was quite simple — her saddle. The saddle is the most important contact point on the bike. You can have everything dialled on even the most expensive bike, but if your saddle prohibits you from reaching your optimal position you will never be comfortable. Saddle choice is personal and I encourage athletes to try multiple brands before deciding what works. I let Julie try out a few and she immediately loved the ISM saddle. This saddle allowed Julie anterior pelvic rotation opening up her hip angle allowing her to naturally ride in the aero position. This drastically changed Julie's position and the biomechanical improvements instantly alleviated the discomfort she was experiencing. After several trials there were zero changes made to Julie's bar position. The saddle position instantly fixed all her issues.

Did this effect the aero positioning?


MS: After the fit Julie visited the San Diego wind tunnel to test the position we arrived at was as fast as possible, yet remained biomechanically sound. During the session Trek's engineers dropped the front end down an extra three centimetres. We found this closed her hip angle. In theory more drop would be aerodynamically superior, but going lower was slower for Julie because she wasn't as comfortable dropping her head, or "doing the turtle" as she calls it. Getting your head out of the wind decreases frontal area and is faster than pushing the limits on the drop.

Is the wind tunnel necessarily the best place to determine fit?

MS: I feel the wind tunnel is a great place to work on making the rider faster but it's not a great place to determine a rider's fit. Small adjustments such as hand height or elbow width that don't effect biomechanics, and the best place to locate bottles or helmet choices are fine.

Julie, how did you end up working with Mat?

JD: I had been self coached for the last four or five years and was comfortable doing that up to middle distance racing. When I stepped up to long



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course I felt like I was shooting in the dark as to what I should or shouldn't be doing. I felt the training requirements for Ironman were different and was unsure how to approach things. During my Retul fits Mat and I would chat about equipment choices, position and training ideas. I knew he had a close working relationship with two-time Ironman World Champion Craig Alexander and had a background in exercise physiology. Probably more important to me was the fact we got along and could have a laugh while getting things done. About halfway through the season I reached

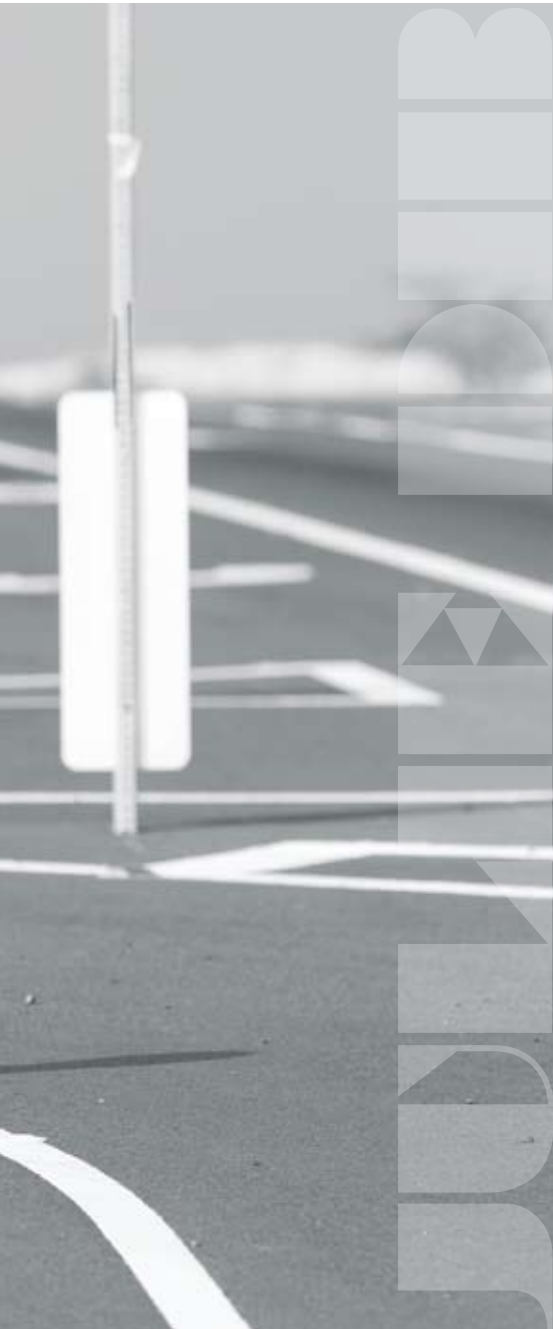
out to Mat to see if he would be willing to help advise me more from a coaching role and things went from there.

Mat, give us your take on it?

MS: Julie had some apprehension about racing Ironman and came to me looking for ideas, and things progressed from there. Over the previous year I had worked closely with Craig Alexander in his preparations for Kona, so knew what she was up against in Hawaii. Towards the end of July all three of us went to Kona for a recce camp and this is where things really started moving forward on a coaching front.

Did this help to form a coach/athlete bond?

MS: I got to see how Julie operated in training and she began to trust my judgment more. Our relationship is definitely not a dictatorship. I don't take the approach of stepping in, puffing out my chest and saying: 'forget everything you know, we're doing things my way now'. This might not be your traditional coaching style but in my experience is the best way to work with a world class athlete. Successful athletes have obviously done something right in the past to get to where they are today. I'm not saying what they've done



has been perfect and I'm sure there's been road blocks that have held them back along the way. I think a big part of my role with Julie was to discover these hiccups, bring them out in the open and look at ways to eliminate them. Athletes change over the years too and what worked three-years ago might now produce the same results. Suggesting new training ideas is a big part of what I do.

Did you take on Julie's ideas?

MS: I'm very open to an athlete's suggestions. If I think it won't work I discretely tell them. This approach allows

me to earn an athlete's trust because I respect and listen to them. Without this trust the athletes would not be willing to try something they are skeptical of. With this trust they are happy to try out one of my new ideas no matter how stupid it makes them look — like wearing a cap that resembles a 1930's American football helmet to help cool their bodies.

Julie, tell us about your Kona camp?

JD: At the end of July I switched out of race mode and started to focus purely on Kona. Franko Vatterot, my manager (who is also Alexander's manager), told

me Crowie was going to Kona for a week at the end of July and asked if I would like to go along. Naturally I jumped at the chance. Not only would it be a great opportunity to see what the Kona fuss was all about having never been there, but it also gave me a chance to train alongside Alexander. This was my first real taste of long distance training and it definitely opened my eyes. While I loved every minute it was the biggest week of training I had ever done. I was thankful to hear after the week was over that this wasn't a typical week's training in the life of Alexander either.



Mat, what did you try out with Julie in Hawaii?

MS: The goal of this camp was to familiarise Julie with the Kona course and to see how she'd respond to the climate. We were looking to develop a personal thermoregulatory protocol that could help aid Julie during the race and in training. We experimented with various recovery techniques that would help her bounce back after training bouts in the heat. We played around with ice vests, fluid composition, fluid temperature and volume, slushies, ice baths and compression. We also looked at equipment choices such as helmets, arm coolers and different wheel and tyre combinations to test durability and handling characteristics in the Kona wind.

So you were pretty tech?

MS: We started with a control day where Craig and Julie would ride the course fuelling as they wished. I just sat back and monitored the weather, core temperature, intensity, fluid intake and weight loss. Julie discovered a new weight

loss strategy as she ended the day over three kilogrammes lighter. Throughout the rest of the week I would control a variable such as forced hydration, and would then measure its impact on their ability to thermoregulate, and whether the variable hindered performance.

How important are field tests?

MS: Field tests are a great way to see if something actually works or not. The biggest problem is controlling the variables such as temperature, humidity, wind, exercise intensity and hydration. The conditions varied so much day to day that it was hard to establish a real baseline. While we didn't learn as much as we would have liked, we did discover that Julie needed to drink more. Based on this testing I have some new protocol ideas for testing in 2011.

Julie, what were your biggest concerns about going long?

JD: After I stopped racing ITU and focused more on non-drafting and Xterra I have

been enjoying myself more in both training and racing. I knew I wanted to keep this enjoyment level up and this was why I was a bit hesitant about stepping up. You hear stories of what training people are doing and I was worried my body wouldn't be able to handle the load. I have found during heavy training loads I got super tired and don't handle it so well. I get frustrated when I am tired and don't enjoy the feeling for being smashed all the time.

Mat, what is your coaching philosophy and how did you help Julie?

MS: I rely heavily on science, communication and common sense when working with athletes. I don't fit into either the long slow camp or low volume high intensity world. You need to train all energy systems to build the highest level of fitness possible — it's not that complicated. Julie had been injury prone in previous few years and we weren't sure how her body would handle the increase in volume. We needed to get Julie ready for our Kona camp and not be limited by her conditioning while not taking any injury risks. I gave her a

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three-week block with the appropriate mix of volume and intensity. This worked perfectly with zero injury scares at the camp.

What about Julie's running problems in the past?

MS: Running was the big unknown. I knew Julie would need to build durability and strength to run a solid marathon. While she did some fast running workouts in training my main priority was for her to hold pace and not slow down. I rarely prescribe long mindless running miles and saved the easy stuff for non-key sessions to add time on her feet. Julie did a number of double run days with the second run of the day usually taking place on the treadmill. This worked and Julie's form and fitness continued to improve.

How did you give Julie the confidence to believe in her run?

MS: One of our key sessions was a 95 mile race pace bike followed by a run over rolling terrain on both pavement and trails. I wanted Julie to run as long as she could

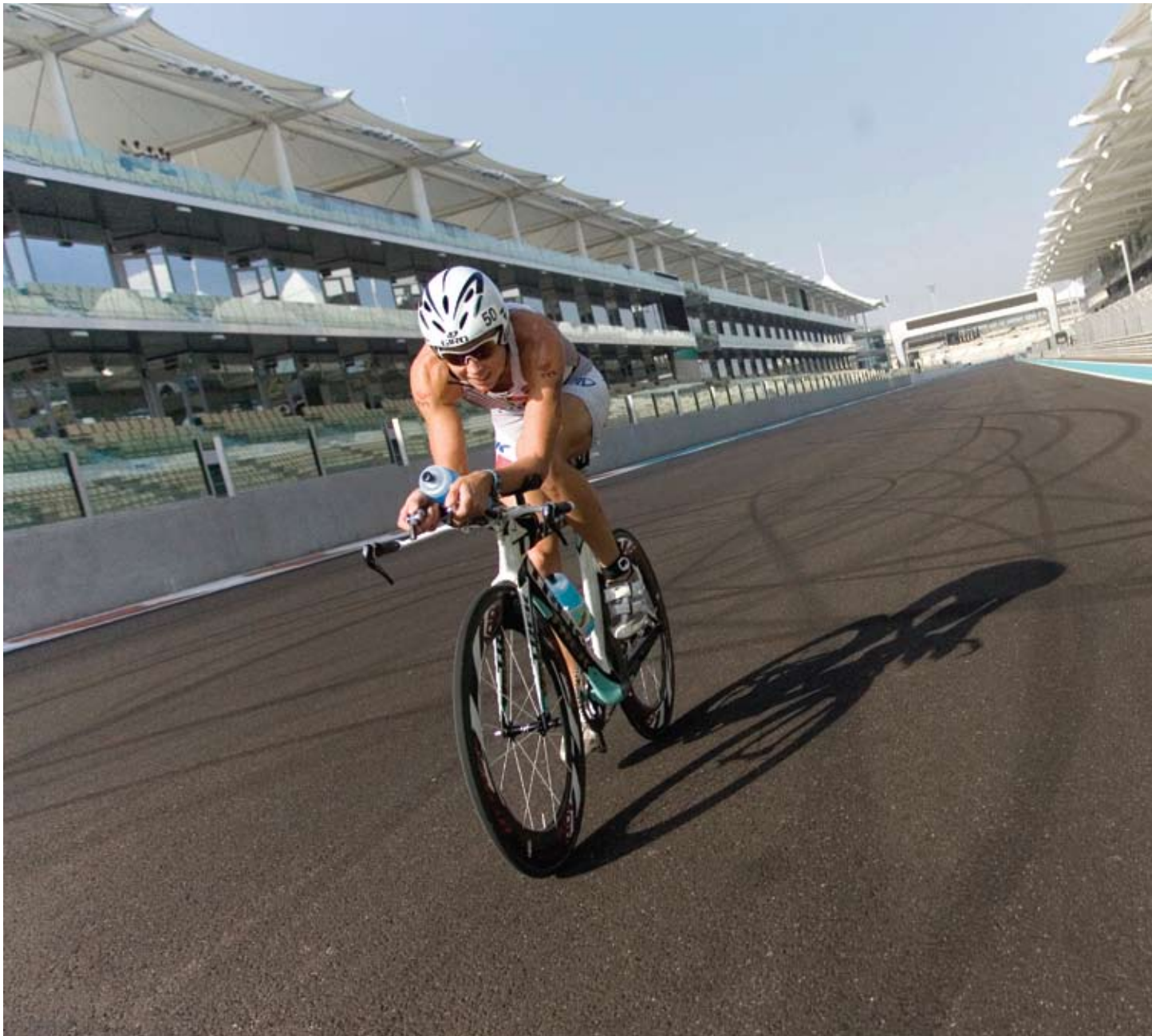
and shut it down once she felt she was starting to dig into her race mojo. I rode next to her on a bike with nutrition and was ready to get in her ear if she started to wimp out when I thought she had more. I never had to motivate her once and she ended up running 31K at a great pace. The session exceeded both of our expectations, however, we both knew it would be hotter and more humid in Kona.

Julie, how did you feel the Kona preparation went?

JD: During this training phase I achieved things I never thought I was capable of. I've had a lot of injuries in the past and was concerned that my body would rebel and break. Thankfully I got stronger as we went along and found that the increased run volume helped my running. On the bike the increased volume made it harder for me to do shorter TT tests that I loved smashing in the past. Just the thought of them made my legs hurt. I had to be patient and believe that once rested things would come around.

Mat, how did you plan training over the three world championships?

MS: The plan was for a proper taper leading into Kona. Following the race Julie would take a few complete days off and focus on active recovery with swimming and biking only. This was to speed the body's recovery process by delivering oxygenated blood to the recovering muscles. Leading into Maui I wanted Julie to spend most of her time on the mountain bike since she hadn't ridden it the entire year. During Maui race week we used the varying terrain of MTB riding to place a little load on the legs to see how she felt. Julie also started some easy running with a few pickups just to feel the movement of race pace running. Kona takes a lot out and the goal was to be as fresh as feasibly possible. After Maui Julie did another week of easy aerobic recovery training. She then did a 10-day block of Clearwater-specific preparation. Julie's fitness was so high leading into Kona that she would be able get race-ready with a short block of high intensity training.



How do you think Julie faired in Kona?

MS: Julie went to Kona four weeks out to get used to the heat and understand the course better. More athletes are starting to spend time out in Kona pre-race, and in hindsight I'm not sure this was the best plan of attack. Some move their families out and it's a home from home, but for Julie it was time away from her family and routine. This can lead to nervous energy that surrounds every athlete on the island and there's too much time to start second guessing the training they've done. Many athletes like to share their insecurities with others in the form of advice creating a domino effect of second guessing.

How did Julie cope in Kona at this time?

MS: Julie's four weeks in Kona went well. She did all the prescribed training and as we got closer focused on resting. She did struggle a little with other athletes on the island offering up their opinions on what she should or shouldn't do. This can mess with an athlete's head. It's just part of the game and you have to block those people out.

What about the race itself?

MS: It started out with a mistake in the swim that saw Julie going off course following a few of the front pack men. The swim was going to be key for Julie

creating an early lead. In reality it didn't cost her much time, but time is time. On the bike she quickly found a rhythm and followed the plan of distancing herself from her competitors. Her powermeter didn't work, so using power to pace went out the window and she relied on perceived exertion. The objective was to hold back early and pick the pace up on the back half as others tired. Julie being an off the front cyclist rode her own race and didn't have to worry about attacks and accelerations that often figure in the men's race. I was hoping Julie would get 15 minutes on Mirinda Carfrae coming into T2 but this was 11 minutes in the race.



What about the run?

MS: If Julie ran to her capabilities I thought she could hold off Mirinda for the win. Mirinda went out hard and took two minutes out of Julie in two miles, but I knew once she settled that pace would drop. Julie looked great for the first 10 miles and things looked promising. Once she hit the Queen K her pace began to slow and the race took its toll. At this point Mirinda made the pass. Caroline Steffan later caught Julie as she walked sections in the Energy Lab. I reconnected with Julie around 20 miles and told her to stop at the next aid station, get it together and start running like she knows how.

Did she respond?

MS: I know it killed her but Julie is a competitor. Getting in her ear fires her up and she started running again. I thought she might have a chance to regain second, but Caroline was having a great race and Julie was only matching her pace at this point. I was very proud because she was flat out done, suffering cramps and dehydrated but kept going. Julie ran a 3:16 marathon - not bad for someone who was walking at one point.

Julie, how did you pull up after the race?

JD: I didn't know what to expect leading into Maui. Having never run a marathon, let alone race an Ironman, I didn't know

how my body was going to recover. Add an awesome post-race party in Kona and my body was really hurting. I never really felt great in the two weeks leading up to the race. Every session felt ugly but I stayed hopeful that I might pull something out come race day.

How did Maui go?

JD: My race went okay. I swam with the front pack which was my goal and biked solidly for the first 15-kilometres. I struggled to find that top gear I had the last three years and felt I was slipping back further in the field than normal. Having not ridden a mountain bike since Maui last year started



to take its toll. I lost a lot of ground to the eventual winner, Shonny Vanlandingham, over the last few rocky sections on the course. I got off the bike about a minute and a half down and believed I had a chance to catch her, but I knew with how my body was feeling and it was going to hurt a lot. Surprisingly I felt good for the first couple of kilometres along the flat but as soon as the trail started going uphill it got messy. The tank was empty. I closed the gap to about 45 seconds at one point but it never got any closer than that. I ended up finishing second a minute and half down. Vanlandingham had an awesome race, PB'd by 10 minutes and totally deserved to win on the day.

How did you feeling about going to Clearwater after all of this?

JD: I was so excited to be home after being away for seven weeks. I was triathlon'd out and wanted to put my feet up for the season. The emotional stress of racing in two world championships combined with the physical effort after a long season left me totally drained. But I had set the goal of three world champs and having failed to win the first two, I knew I probably wouldn't win the third, but if I didn't start I'd never know.

How were your sessions in the lead up to Clearwater?

JD: Every session pretty much sucked. I

got through them but I wasn't setting the world on fire. My mental state wasn't good which is unusual for me. I am normally motivated to train and race hard but neither my mind or body were playing ball. I struggled with turbos but Mat helped me through those. I toyed with the idea of not showing up. I'd DNF'ed a few races early in my career because my head wasn't in the game and promised myself I wouldn't race again for the sake of it. I struggled with this but wanted to give myself another chance at a world title. I had nothing to lose. I flew to Clearwater three days out and was surprised at how excited I felt to be there.

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How did the race go?

JD: Once the race started, much like in Maui, I sensed I wasn't on my A-game. Mat and I had talked about this, and I knew there was a chance I wasn't going to feel great. We both believed I still had the fitness to earn a medal. The swim went okay and I lost a bit of time to Jodie Swallow, which was no surprise because she's an awesome swimmer. Once again on the bike I struggled to find that top gear. I told myself to push harder but my body wouldn't respond. I came off the bike in second but hadn't had my usual ride. I lost time to a couple of girls behind me and was actually glad to be off the bike for once.

How was the run?

JD: I pushed hard for the first six to eight kilometres and sensed early on that Jodie had this in the bag. At this point things got ugly. I no longer wanted to be there and my body started to hurt even though I wasn't running hard. I taught myself a long time ago to finish a race however long it takes because you can always take something away from the experience. It got ugly but not as ugly as the after party, which was legendary!

Mat, what changes will you make to Julie's training and strategy for the year?

MS: Starting with Julie at the beginning of the year makes planning a season

easier. We will keep what worked last year and work on her weaknesses. We will go back to Kona early this year and conduct race simulation testing and training. We'll also head to the wind tunnel to try a few options and make a few data driven decisions. I'm also looking into a major crank length change this year too. I'm not expecting to see power increases but want to decrease the range of motion and open Julie's hip angle to enhance her overall ability to perform. We are also going to reintroduce Julie to training with power again. This will provide some great feedback and allow us to maximise her biking effort without effecting her run. **📍**