

When Chrissie met Paula

As part of our 20th anniversary celebrations, the two dominant female Ironman triathletes of the last 20 years go head-to-head for the first time...



Kona – a place where dreams are battered into submission by the gales that sweep down the Queen K Highway... Okay, that generalisation isn't true for all. Take Paula Newby-Fraser and Chrissie Wellington, for example.

The records say it all. Between them, these two powerhouses have notched up an incredible 10 wins in Kona, with Newby-Fraser alone clocking an astonishing eight titles on

slouch, either, with a best time of 9:06:23. No woman bar Newby-Fraser has beaten that.

Back in October 1989, when 220 was just a few issues old, Paula completed a remarkable first hat-trick of wins in Kona. With Chrissie aiming to repeat the feat this October, we thought it was about time we brought the two of them together for a chat...

220 Paula, in 1989 you won your third Ironman in a row – the same situation

“Athletes race many more events and fields are much larger. Doing triathlons has gone mainstream” PNF

the Big Island between 1986 and 1996. She is the only woman to have finished Hawaii in under nine hours with her 1992 course record time of 8:55:28 still standing. Chrissie, the current World Champion, is no

Newby-Fraser, eight times champion of Kona

Chrissie is in now. What was the media attention like when you won? And can you give Chrissie any advice?

PNF The media attention has always been big around Kona – in many ways it was much bigger then, because there were fewer Ironman events. We'd be expected to fly from Kona to Honolulu for press conferences during race week, and generally the schedule was a bit more loaded than athletes have now.

As for advice... well, I can certainly tell you it never really gets any easier but that's not really advice! Just roll with what the year gives you. Some years it all comes easily, and training and prep goes well, and at other times there are kinks. Don't let kinks in your plan derail you.

PNF Chrissie, how are you coping with the pressure of being World Champion?

CW Well, to know that I'm the best in the world has brought me immeasurable joy and heaps of fantastic opportunities, but it has also resulted in more commitments and pressures – not to mention expectations – both those I put on myself and those that others have for me. The Hawaii crown is as heavy as you let it be, though. The best way to deal with the pressure is to see everything as a positive.

“We need consistent and regular in-competition (drug) testing. There should be mandatory tests for all athletes who've won prize money” CW

The victory has given me a platform to motivate, inspire others, spread important messages, to promote the sport in the UK and overseas, and, most importantly, be the sporting role model and ambassador that I would want to see. I love being World Champion – and I definitely don't mind having the target on my back!

Ultimately, dealing with additional pressures, expectations and commitments is what being a professional athlete is about. Not just being able to perform on race day, but coping with the various demands and being a good role model all the time. It's up to me to stay focused, strong and happy, continue doing what I love and go out there and give it everything I have, and more.

220 What about you, Paula, how did you cope with the same pressures?

PNF I had my 'extended family'. I always lived in San Diego – the friends I met when I started this sport are still the same people in my life now. The commitment to those friendships never allowed the pressure of 'being a champion' to take root.

CW How did you manage the heavy weight of expectation that you and others put on your shoulders?

PNF I didn't, all the time.

CW What are the main changes that you've seen in triathlon since you were competing?

PNF Athletes race many more events and fields are obviously much larger. This means the average level of athlete making up the majority of the field has gone down. It's the same with marathon running: when I first took note of marathons, three hour times were the norm; now they're considered fast. When I first started, a 10-hour Ironman was normal – now it's considered 'fast'. Really, doing triathlons and Ironmans has gone mainstream.

CW Do you see drug-taking as a problem in modern triathlon?

PNF When I started racing, triathlon was such a grass roots, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants thing that the drug

thing seemed so far removed. You know, something track and field and Olympic athletes did because of the high profile of their sport. Obviously it's edged its way into triathlon now.

CW What should be done to combat it?

PNF Our organisations need to be proactive towards testing in the way that UCI [cycling's international governing body] has had to be retroactive in trying to rebuild the image of cycling. Out-of-competition testing and profiling has to be the way forward.

220 Do you agree with that, Chrissie?

CW Yes, but I think we should go further. Firstly, we need more consistent and regular in-competition testing. Not all Ironman races undertake testing, even though prize money is being handed out. There should be mandatory tests for all athletes who've won prize money. Linked to this I'd also like to →

Chrissie and Paula by numbers

The stats that matter for the conquerors of Kona...



Chrissie Wellington

Kona wins 2 (to date)
Total IM/LD wins 10
Fastest IM time 8:51:24

Chrissie background

Chrissie was born in Bury St Edmunds on 18 February 1977. A competitive swimmer as a teenager, Chrissie only took up triathlon in 2004....!



Paula Newby-Fraser

Kona wins 8
Total IM/LD wins 24
Fastest IM time 8:50:53

Paula background

Paula was born in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1962, and raised in South Africa. She was a nationally ranked swimmer before moving to triathlon. The rest is, well, history.



Wellington, going for three in a row at Kona



Look closely! Chrissie (left) and Paula (right) paddle boarding in San Diego post-Kona 2008

see out-of-competition testing for all professional athletes. In the United Kingdom, the only triathletes who are subject to the World Anti Doping Agency's Administration & Management System (ADAMS) are those on the British Triathlon Olympic programme.

Secondly, I'd like to see the national federations, athletes, the WTC [World Triathlon Corporation] and race organisers adopt a stricter anti-doping policy.

And thirdly, all athletes need up-to-date, accurate and easily understood information about what they can and cannot take.

“So much of what happens in a year is dictated by a Kona result. A great year of racing can be totally devalued by a crappy performance there” PNF

It's only by speaking out that athletes can effect change, uphold triathlon's integrity, ensure that competition is fair and provide proof that people can achieve great things without the need to cheat.

220 Chrissie, how do you perceive Paula's era in terms of training and racing?

CW It was sport at its rawest, with none of the gadgets and gizmos we have today. Just hard work and hard racing.

220 One thing that hasn't changed in 20 years is Kona times. In 1989 Paula's winning time was 9:00:56, and in 2008 Chrissie's 9:06:23. Why do you think that is?

CW Because the winning women then were as talented as they are now. If not more.

PNF I think the changes in the course have a lot to do with it. We never had those long runs around transitions that athletes have today. I think the first six miles of the ride makes for a slower bike course. The fact that athletes race many more Ironmans in a year nowadays also makes a difference.

220 What's the hardest thing about Kona?

CW Having to resist the urge to drink Mai Thai cocktails in the week before the race!

PNF So much of what happens in a given year is dictated by a Kona result. A great year of racing can be totally devalued by a crappy performance there.

220 Paula, how did you maintain your drive and ambition to win eight titles?

PNF Ironman Hawaii was – and still is – the biggest event in the sport, so it was everyone's focus each year to try and win there. It was just part of the annual routine to focus on doing well there, because everyone around was focused on the same thing.

CW Did you manage to keep a balance in your life while you were competing and training?

PNF I never ever abandoned my social schedule. I kept what would now probably be considered a relatively unfocused, overly social lifestyle. My training revolved around friends and my social group, as did my travel and racing. That kept things from going overboard in terms of balance.

220 What about you, Chrissie? Do you manage to keep a balance in your life?

CW Professional triathlon can be all-consuming, but I have to be able to switch off. I do this by speaking to friends, reading non-triathlon-related books – currently *City of Joy* – and magazines, going out to dinner, watching *Masterchef* and playing *Scrabble* against myself. Losing against yourself is very demoralising! I've also helped set up GOTRIBAL, an organisation to help women and girls overcome the hurdles preventing them from reaching their goals.

220 What are your goals and ambitions?

CW To inspire and encourage as many people as possible to take up sport. I would love to organise a huge global community workout, taking place in a public space on the same day in cities and towns around the world. Also, to help GOTRIBAL go from strength to strength, and set up a foundation to help underprivileged kids empower themselves through sport. I'd love to win Miss World, but I don't think I have the requisite assets!

PNF My dreams and ambitions are the same as they've ever been – to be a constructive and compassionate member of society. 

