



DOING IT HER WAY

One regular woman becomes a champion – and not just in triathlon

What exactly is this *beaten path*, the trail that so much of the advice we receive suggests we not follow?

The answer, of course, is no more obvious or certain than the meaning of life: it's different for everyone. Nonetheless, let me offer a peek into the life of an athlete whose struggles and successes reflect the outcome of a conscious decision *not* to follow the herd.

One could craft a resume for Meredith Kessler as follows: highly successful career woman, happily married wife, devoted friend and family-member. Oh, and: gregarious, blonde and pretty. Surely, enough right there for anyone, right? Well, no. There's this other little thing, too: in August, she won Ironman Canada. But don't stop reading just because Meredith is an Ironman champion; things absolutely did not have to turn out that way.

Meredith is one of those rare people who simply radiates kindness. I'm not much of a believer in auras, but if they existed, hers would be a blend of modesty and caring. Much of Meredith's life is perhaps most remarkable for its normality, and this makes even more startling the manner in which she has been able to execute the aspects that are not quite so commonplace.

Having grown up in Ohio and graduated from Syracuse in 2000, she works fulltime in a high-pressure financial position, managing a team in the capital markets at the Royal Bank of Canada's San Francisco office. Meredith and her husband Aaron keep an unusually full social schedule, and she describes the role of family and friends in her life as "paramount." When asked what she strives for in life, Meredith is unequivocal: "Balance."

Hardly off the beaten path, is it? Thus far, no. But this is where things get interesting. Always an athlete of some kind, Meredith was a four-sport star and a hall of famer at her high school. Those years at Syracuse? A Division I athletic scholarship: field hockey and track. Impressive, but not rare – there are many thousands with similar credentials for whom, ten years after graduation, sport has faded into a set of pleasant but distant memories. Meredith? Not so much.

Using her graduation money to buy a bicycle, Meredith dived right into the deep end of triathlon, entering her first full Ironman two weeks later. Over the next seven years, there was quantity aplenty (count 'em, 17 full Ironman events!) but by her standards, only modest quality: no top five finishes in her age group, and



nothing faster than 11:20. Then, three years ago, she sought out coach Matt Dixon, who tells of how she spent most of their first meeting alternately thanking him and apologizing for taking up his time: self-deprecating to a fault. But she said something else, too: she wanted to win an Ironman. And it is here where Meredith Kessler veered from that beaten path.

In the three years since that first meeting with Dixon, Meredith has metamorphosed from decent amateur age grouper to professional champion. She followed Dixon's guidance with patience and resolve, demolishing all comers in the amateur field in 2009 and accepting the time and process required for an optimal transition to the professional ranks in 2010. Only able to train about 15 hours per week (perhaps half the time many pros devote), the results were nonetheless stellar. Earlier this year, she took second to Heather Wurtele at Ironman St. George and second to Linsey Corbin at Ironman Coeur d'Alene.

When I met Meredith and Aaron for dinner after Coeur d'Alene, before I could even get the word congratulations out, she was already asking how *my* race went. Are you kidding me? I finished two hours and change behind her – who *cares* how my race went? Easy answer, actually. As with most things, Meredith cares.

And when Meredith Kessler finally won at Ironman Canada in 9:13, it was utterly in keeping with her quiet, undemonstrative character when she paid tribute to Wurtele, Corbin and coach Dixon in her victory speech, remarking how privileged and grateful she felt to be in their company.

Most notably, however, through and beyond the transition from recreational participant to world-class professional triathlete, she has remained devoted and accessible to her husband, family and friends, and committed to her demanding day job. The training regimen she and Dixon have implemented is (by the standards of other world-beaters, in triathlon and other sports) subtle but simple. No anti-gravity treadmill, no high altitude chamber to sleep in, no post-workout compression boots, no exotic supplements, no prima donna attitude.

And two days after that epic victory in Canada? Back at the office, for another 60-hour week. Smiling. Modest. Balanced. And in the world of professional sports, very far off the beaten track. <<

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