







# The Curious Case Of KEVIN FERGUSSON

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The elite ranks of triathlon have traditionally been the domain of those under 40. But someone forgot to tell that to South Australian stalwart, Kevin Fergusson. Instead of ticking the '50-54' box, he still finds himself checking the odd 'elite' category at local races in South Australia. *TMSM's* Tim Guille caught up with Kev to find out what makes the ageless champion tick.

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**T: What got you first into the sport of triathlon?**

**K:** It all started as a joint decision with my brother Grant. At the time I was a commercial diver so I would spend a lot of time away from home. Often I would stay in pubs, which led to a lifestyle of a lot of drinking and smoking. I knew I was heading in the wrong direction, and after a chat with my brother one day we decided to get fit again and picked a triathlon to do as a bit of a goal to keep us on track.

**Did you compete in any sports growing up?**

I grew up in the country and, like all good Aussie country boys, I played footy.

**Do you remember your first actual race? How did you go?**

I certainly do, it was December 1992. I looked around and thought to myself, what the hell have I got myself into! There were so many fit-looking people and flash bikes everywhere. I had an old Repco bike that I used to ride around. It even still had reflectors, a stand and a bell! I did feel totally out of place there, but was glad to have had my brother with me at least. The race itself was 300/10/3 and was called a 'Tinman'. I actually managed to do OK in the end, placing 40th out of about 120 people. I will never forget this race because my brother was 120th!

**Were you hooked from that moment?**

My first race was certainly life changing to say the least. It was the first time I had beaten my brother in any sport, and I enjoyed the feeling of pushing myself to the limit and crossing the finish line. That race really changed both my brother's and my life. We both made New Year's resolutions to give up smoking and to try out another race in January '93. I think the best part of the whole thing now is that my brother and I still train and race together. But he still hasn't beaten me!

**What were some of your notable early results in the sport?**

I would have to say that one of my most memorable early results came when I was racing in an age group race in my home state of South Australia. At the presentations they mentioned that if I had been racing in the elite category I would have taken home the overall

prize money! I must admit, that really boosted my confidence and prompted me to start racing at that level and against some of the best in the state. I can also remember back in '04 at the Tasmanian Half Ironman in Ulverstone, I was having a great race and was flying on the bike, passing a lot of gun triathletes on the way. I remember passing Jason Shortis, and soon enough the only thing left in front of me was the lead motorbike. It was such a buzz to come into transition with the lead. I managed to hold off Jason until about halfway through the run. Later on I was also passed by Joe Gambles and ended up finishing in third place, which I was absolutely rapt with.

**You began racing among the elite ranks during the early years of the sport. What were some of your memories of that time?**

Malcolm Robertson, one of our race directors, had a vision to enhance the elite sport in our state. Initially we had to find a sponsor to the value of \$250, which paid for our race entry and then the rest went into a prize pool for the athletes. It was an amazing series of six races, with each race being in a different format. They also were conducted after the age group race had finished, so we had lots of spectators cheering us on. It was really suited for the young, fast guns of our sport, but I managed to win the state elite series three times – not bad for a 40-year-old!

**I'm sure things have changed significantly since then. What are some of the bigger changes you have seen in triathlon?**

When I first started racing in my local 'Gatti' races, they were getting around 500 entries. In the late '90s and early '00s the numbers really started to drop off. But it's been great to see the numbers coming back up close to 500 again over the last couple of years.

Ironman racing has gone through the biggest change over the years, from my perspective. It used to be a challenge to qualify for an Ironman race by doing really well in a Half Ironman event. I know that as an example, at my local tri club, the Lakers, we used to have up to 30 members competing at races around Australia just to try and get



**ABOVE:** Kevin flying on the run at Ironman Cairns earlier this year

an Ironman entry – it made the presentations tense and the racing a lot of fun. The only challenge now is to have the fastest internet connection and the money 12 months in advance to pay for your races. I would love them to bring back the qualifying races, even maybe just for the Australian Ironman Championship.

**Fast-forward to 2009, and you claimed four different world championships in the one year. Can you talk to me about that special year?**

It was a great year. I should also say it was a very expensive year! I wouldn't have been able to do it without Regency TAFE, the Lakers and most importantly, Anna, Justine and Benjamin for all their support.

I always look back and say to myself, 'what was I thinking, four world championships in six weeks' – which included the pinnacle of our sport, Hawaii. It certainly took a lot of planning, not just for each world championship, but to qualify as well. It made it more achievable with three of the races being in Australia.

The four races were all very different and special in their own right. To win my age group in Hawaii was just amazing. I remember I was so happy, yet sad at the same time, as my family was not there to share what has to be the biggest 'goose bump experience' you can ever get. The Gold Coast (Olympic- and Sprint-Distance World Championships) were huge, especially with lots of Lakers supporting me, and having my family there, too.



After a very tough race in Hawaii, I must admit that I started to have a few doubts for Perth (World Long Course Championships). At the 'carbo party', Pete Murray interviewed me in front of the crowd, so everyone knew that I had won three world championships and I was going for number four – no pressure at all! It actually worked to my advantage though, as I could

not believe the support I got from the crowd, with heaps yelling out 'Go Kevin, number four is yours'. It certainly inspired me to keep pushing even though I was in all sorts of pain. That year really proved to me that if you put your mind to it, and have the desire and will to have a go, who knows what is possible. Oh don't forget, you have to train your arse off as well!

**“ AS SOON AS YOU WALK OFF THE PLANE IN KONA, THE REALITY SETS IN THAT YOU HAVE MADE IT TO THE PINNACLE OF OUR SPORT. ”**

**Was there a highlight out of your incredible 2009 season?**

It has always been a thrill and honour to represent Australia and go to world championships as a team, for me. Hawaii is completely different and can be really lonely, but it is Kona after all, and it is the race most of us dream of doing when we get into the sport. So, of course, it was my dream and for that dream to become a reality, and to win my age group, it's a highlight I will cherish forever.

**You must have some great memories of racing at Hawaii?**

As soon as you walk off the plane in Kona, the reality sets in that you have made it to the pinnacle of our sport.

Seeing that car floating in the ocean and swimming out to the floating café to grab a coffee in swim practice is amazing.

The actual race at Kona is incredible, seeing the reef and tropical fish in the swim and the scuba divers sitting on the bottom filming. The bike course has fantastic views of that black lava, and then for something different, more lava. Oh, and did I mention the lava? And don't forget wind, of course. I remember in 2004, I saw a rider blown off his bike when he came out of a cutting in the road. Hawaii is certainly different than any of our courses in Australia. The run starts out flat and picturesque along the coast and then, believe it or not, that bloody lava again for the next 30 kilometres. It is tough, but if you make it to Hawaii you have earned the right to take it on. Running down Ali'i Drive to the finish line knowing that I was the world champion was





just so overwhelming. I couldn't even keep on my own two feet, having a bit of a tumble 100 metres from the finish. It was really nice of Mike Reilly to spot it and share with the crowd that I had fallen over!

**This season has been another great one for you so far. Just over the nine-hour mark at Ironman Melbourne. How was that race? Tell me about your amazing bike leg?**

I had heard that Melbourne was going to be a fast course if the weather was good, and it was indeed. The bike was incredibly fast on the way out; I really could not believe the pace I was holding. I was even more surprised, and a little bit worried, that I had gone out too fast when I reached the turnaround at the 90-kilometre mark, and they called me out as the first age grouper. It was the first time I had raced with my new Giant Trinity, and I will

**BELOW:**  
Kevin achieving his dream of finishing the Hawaii Ironman



say (sorry Lance!) it is all about the bike! It was very lonely race out on Eastlink, but it was definitely worth it for the smooth and fast surface. The finish in St Kilda was electric and fantastic. That was a great race – big well done to Shane and the crew – they have created one of the best Ironman races in the world.

**A couple of months later at Ironman Cairns, I'm told that you got to live a lifelong dream of running side by side with a certain world champion, Chris McCormack. Can you tell us about that experience?**

Wow, what an experience that was! I managed to ride past Macca around the 120-kilometre mark, and by the turnaround at Port Douglas, I had actually put a two-minute gap on him! But true to his character and talent, he rode past me just before transition and managed to say to me as he rode past, 'I'm back!'

I started the run feeling pretty sluggish. Damien Angus caught up to me and encouraged me to go with him, and I remember thinking 'mate, you are kidding', but I managed to hold onto the pace. This brought Macca within striking distance, and I said to myself, 'this is never going to happen again, so lets go for it'. I managed to catch Macca not long after, and had the privilege of running with him for around 10 kilometres. I remember we were chatting like old friends and I was feeling pretty good. That was until Macca said that if we keep up this pace we would be well under sub three-hour marathon. That's when the alarm bells started ringing, and I was thinking 'you are going to pay for this'. But, at the end of the day, I didn't care, as I had just ran with my triathlon idol. It was an incredible and unforgettable experience to say the least.

**So tell me – outside of triathlon, what does life for Kevin Fergusson look like? What do you do for work and leisure?**

I am employed by TAFE South Australia, as a lecturer in Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, teaching all those 'really boring' things like scuba diving, bushwalking, kayaking, power boat handling, cycle tour leading, tour guiding and snorkelling. I think that pretty much covers my leisure time! As far as 'work' goes, I am

working on still racing elite in South Australia, and will do so until I don't make a podium in a race year. I was originally hoping to make 50, now like all jobs you have to adapt and change, I am seriously aiming for 60 now. I love my 'job'.

**What does the average week look like training-wise for you?**

I have just had my recovery block, along with plenty of blocks of chocolates also! So I am just starting my preparation phase, which means swimming three two-hour sessions, riding three hill sessions, ranging from 80 to 120 kilometres and two flat sessions of around 50 kilometres. I also ride to work every day, which actually helps me recover. Running is usually made up of one hill session – anywhere from one to three hours, one undulating 15-kilometre session, two flat runs around 10 to 15 kilometres and then a couple of easy recovery runs of five to eight kilometres per week.

**What would be the top tips you would give to an age-group athlete starting out?**

I would say to anyone that wants to listen and you have all heard it before, but be consistent in training. You need to ask yourself: Are you really consistent? Answer honestly, as there are no excuses. Train with a club or friends – racing is lonely enough. The hills are your friends – get into them. And last, but not least, remember you are doing this sport for enjoyment.

**So, what are your next steps from here in the sport? Is retirement on the cards?**

I have signed up for Melbourne again, really aiming hard for a sub nine-hour performance. I am seriously thinking about Challenge Wanaka, they are offering free entry to Challenge Roth if you win your age group. Racing Roth and watching the Tour de France is on the top of my bucket list, so this would be a good outcome! As for retirement, I can't afford retirement, how on earth would I pay for race entry and travel? Triathlon has changed my life for the better and I will look at ways I can give back to the sport if I can't make the start line sometime in the future.

**Thanks Kev for your time and good luck in the upcoming season.**

My pleasure Tim, see you out on the track! 📷