

A GANG OF WIZARDS

THEY'RE PERHAPS THE MOST SUCCESSFUL TRAINING GROUP IN THE WORLD, LED BY A COACH WHOM NO ONE SEEMS TO KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT. SO JUST WHO ARE THE WOLLONGONG WIZARDS?

BY CHRIS FOSTER : PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN HUGO

It's 11:15 on a sunny Saturday morning in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain. Slowly, in small groups, the athletes trickle up to one of the nicest coffee shops I've ever seen and pull up a seat outside. Eventually I'm joined by almost a dozen triathletes. Over half of this group will compete at the ITU's Rio Olympic Test Event held at the end of August. Almost all of them are still shivering from the morning's chilly open-water swim. Today, I am having a fancy coffee with some of the top ITU athletes in the world—

a training group known as the Wollongong Wizards.

On this particular morning, almost 30 pro athletes swam with the Wizards at the Ullibarri-Gamboa Reservoir in Vitoria, all of them either highly ranked in the ITU or developing athletes with Olympic potential. Their diversity rivals the United Nations. The Wizards bring their own buoys to open water sessions, and over coffee had a brief argument over the use of the word "buoy" versus the Aussie name "can." Quickly, the Canadians got involved and claimed the word was pronounced "boy." Wars have started over less.





While there are great venues for open-water swimming in Vitoria, the pool is pretty hard to beat.

The cans or “boys” (or whatever) were set up specifically to the group’s next event, the ITU World Triathlon Series race in Hamburg. Hamburg was the next major race on the calendar for many in the group, so the buoys were set for right-hand turns. For other races, like the Tiszaújváros World Cup—which has a very short distance between the start and the first turn—adjustments are made accordingly. This sort of very race-specific training style is only a small example of the unique techniques from the Wizards’ coach, Jamie Turner.

Jamie Turner coaches no age groupers or long course athletes. Turner has no interest in selling training programs. He only coaches Olympic-caliber ITU pros. Though little information is available publicly about his group, he has been quietly training an army of champions from his bases in Spain and Australia for years. To get a sense of his personality, in response to my

request for a bio, Turner’s simple email reply was, “I’m not American, mate. So I don’t have a website, a CV, or do much Twitter.” Turner is a man of few words who likes to let his athletes—and their results—speak for him.

Turner grew up in New Zealand, just outside New Plymouth, where as a young man, he played rugby, ran a bit and rode BMX. While earning a degree in physical education at the University of Wollongong in Australia, Turner developed a passion for coaching as he worked with a few young triathletes on their cycling. From there, Turner worked hard and steadily rose through Australia’s coaching ranks, working with more and more upcoming talent until he was brought on full-time by Triathlon Australia in 2005. Since then, Turner has worked with Australia’s young athletes, until the addition of a few non-Australian athletes into his group caused a slight disturbance with Triathlon Australia’s management in 2013. One of the ath-



Jorgensen out for an “easy” run on one of Vitoria’s many trails.

letes who was central to the conflict is also one of his most famous: reigning world champion and soon to be two-time Olympian Gwen Jorgensen.

A few days after the team coffee, I visited Jorgensen at her “summer home,” an apartment in a three-story building on the outskirts of Vitoria that vaguely resembles a Motel 6 from the future. In the moments before her first swim session of the day, her husband Pat Lemieux (a former pro cyclist who now assists Gwen full-time) rushed around, preparing food and equipment for the day. As we sat at the small kitchen table, Jorgensen recalled Turner asking her some tough questions when she first asked to join his group. “Jamie was challenging me,” said Jorgensen. “He asked me, ‘What’s going to change from where you’ve been in the past? In the past you haven’t wanted to travel. You haven’t committed fully to triathlon.’” In fact, Jorgensen hadn’t even trained with other ITU athletes before.

Before accepting her into his squad, Turner also watched Jorgensen train on her own and had a few other observations. Turner said, “Well, you’re not leading the lane. Why? Why aren’t you taking some initiative there?” Even after looking at herself in the mirror and making the commitment, there was still the issue of asking the group, who was at the time entirely Australian.

Though the group accepted Jorgensen, Turner’s employers, Triathlon Australia, weren’t so sure about bringing in a foreign athlete. The rift eventually widened, but in characteristic form, Turner remained committed to his new athlete rather than to management. His decision meant a swiftly changing role within Triathlon Australia.

So in 2013, Turner was hired by Triathlon Canada with the allowance that he would be able to coach non-Canadian athletes. Now the group resembles

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These wizards truly are a unique (and talented) bunch.

a global all-star team, including top-ranked Australians Ryan Bailie, Brendan Sexton, Aaron Royle and Charlotte McShane, as well as Canadians Sarah-Anne Brault and Matthew Sharpe.

Some athletes, like Royle, have been with Turner since the beginning. Royle was 13 years old when he first met Turner through Australia's Talented Athlete Program. Four years later, Royle moved to Wollongong to train with him, and their athletic careers have paralleled ever since. In the past year, Royle has made huge leaps, finishing fifth place in Hamburg and sixth at the Rio Test Event in August, earning himself an early nomination to the 2016 Australian Olympic Team.

On the other end of the experience spectrum, Sarah-Anne Brault is relatively new to the Wizards. Brault ran cross country and track at West Virginia University, where she qualified for NCAA Division 1 Cross Country National Championships in all four years of her eligibility. Her collegiate career highlights include a 10th-place finish in the 10K on the track at the NCAA National Championships. She also boasts a sub-34-minute 10K PR. Though West Virginia was an established program, Brault maintains that it was nothing compared to the professionalism of the Wizards. "[At West Virginia] there were really good girls, but there were the walk-ons too," says Brault. "[With the Wizards] this is all people do."

An alternate on the Canadian Olympic Team in 2012, Brault says everything changed after London. "Ever since I've been with Jamie, it's been

real," she says of her quest for Rio in 2016. "With Jamie, [the Olympics] went from being a dream to being a plan." After a brief test with Turner in 2013, Brault officially began with the Wizards in 2014. She admits her first winter was difficult. "I don't think I took a full stroke for two months," recalls Brault about her early days swimming with Turner. "I've never had someone care so little about not going fast. [He] basically reinvented my freestyle. It meant a lot of kicking on my side, single-arm drill and catch-up drill."

Despite his specific way of approaching training, Turner still has a very hands-off approach and likes to give athletes ownership of the process. "He won't give us all the answers," explains Brault. For instance, Turner sometimes tells the athletes that the main swim set will begin at 7:15 a.m. and that they should do whatever they need to prepare beforehand. Brault's teammate, Aaron Royle, speaks of how Turner will prescribe the workout, but only give a set and a time to hit at the end.

"For instance, Jamie will say, '12 x 200 descend one through four, with the last one at threshold,' but not give a recovery interval and leave it up to the athlete," says Royle. "However you choose to do it, whatever times you hit on the way. Whatever it takes to achieve the outcome." This lack of structure is enough to make any type A triathlete sweat, yet it requires a high level of responsibility from the individual. "[Jamie] doesn't like to instill discipline in you," adds Royle. "He likes to instill self-discipline."

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In the days leading up to a major race, the Wizards may stay in different hotels, always grouped together by national federations. Sometimes they will do the swim familiarization together, but for the most part, the Wizards are on autopilot before big events. "The work's done," says Royle of the days leading up to a race. "I don't need Jamie there. I know what works for me leading into a race and what doesn't." And yet when all of the training is done, when all of the racing is through, it's right back to being the Wizards. Like any big group of talented athletes, someone is going to do well, and they celebrate accordingly.


There is also an added effect. "If you haven't had a good race, then you know that the program's working, what you're doing is working. It's just, you might have been off a little bit," explains Royle—who feels that if his teammates have success, then his success is likely right around the corner. In the same way that the Wizards make themselves responsible for their performances, they also take ownership of the team's culture.

Brendan Sexton, another top Australian ITU athlete, has recently taken on the role as team manager. "It all comes back to Jamie giving us control of ourselves as a group. He takes care of the coaching, whereas we take control of the Wizards," says Sexton, who explains how good the Wizards' natural chemistry is. "Because we have such a high-quality group, people expect there would be a lot of friction," but Sexton notes that it's just the opposite. "We're almost like a family, I suppose."

And like any family, the group has a few interesting traditions. The first is the "Annual General Meeting" or AGM. Investopedia.com defines AGM as "A mandatory, public yearly gathering of a publicly traded company's executives, directors and interested shareholders." The Wizards have a different definition. "[AGMs] are the parties that we have," says Sarah-Anne Brault. Though they usually happen during the off-season in Falls Creek, Australia, a recent gathering took place during two days off in Bilbao, just outside of Vitoria. "We only had one night, and the town was absolutely dead," recalls Brault. "We kind of had to make our own fun, because no one else was out drinking!"

Another, more permanent team tradition are wizard hat tattoos that adorn a few of the athletes. The origin story for the first round of tattoos involves a quiet training camp in Falls Creek, cabin fever, an artist friend and a quick Google search for "Tattoo Parlor" in the nearby town (it was called Wizards of Ink—an omen!). "When we got there, it was the dodgiest tattoo parlor ever," remembers Royle, but that didn't stop them. Meanwhile, other traditions didn't last so long.

"It used to be that if you won a race, you'd have to do a wizards symbol as you crossed the line," explains Royle, holding up a "W" with his fingers. Unfortunately, some of the mothers put an end to that. "They said we looked like some kind of gang," says Royle, to which he responded, "Well, we are. We're a wizard gang."

And much like any successful gang, Turner and his Wizards like to keep their profile low. Unlike other equally established coaches, it's unlikely that Turner will be writing a book anytime soon, or offering camps where age groupers train alongside his Wizards. "With Jamie, it's about the athletes, not about him," says Royle. "He doesn't want praise; it's not about his recognition." Even more than being a group, or a family, or even a gang, Turner's Wizards are really about one thing only: "It's all about hands in the air," said Sexton, quoting his coach as he held an imaginary finishing tape high above his head. "In the end it's about winning races." 



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