



AGE GROUPER OF THE MONTH

CONGRATULATIONS CHRIS O'DONNELL





CONGRATULATIONS TO NOVEMBER AGTM AGE GROUPER: CHRIS O'DONNELL.

A special tribute written by Chris's wife, freelance writer, Kelly

Inspiring others:

As an amateur age grouper in the 40-45 group, Chris O'Donnell gets satisfaction in being able to combine fitness and the challenges he encounters in endurance triathlon events, as well as inspiring others to lead a more active lifestyle.

Chris, a Melbourne-based triathlete who grew up in Sydney, took up competitive sport late in life. He led an active childhood where he rode his bike around the local neighbourhood of Lane Cove. He used to catch a bus with his surfboard to Manly, where he would spend the day looking for the elusive wave. Although active, he wasn't into competitive sport and never thought of himself an athlete.

Chris commenced his journey to becoming an athlete when he

started running. After a few years though, he was "a bit over running" and decided to start swimming laps as well. He soon grew bored of swimming, and when he opened his own business in Hawthorn, he turned to cycling as a way to get to work.

Enjoying his new found enthusiasm for cycling, Chris looked around for races to challenge himself. He found that most cycling events were held on Saturday, which was when he worked. After much searching, he found "triathlon kept popping up" and thought "I can swim, bike and run, I'll have a go".

After having a go with a sprint distance in St Kilda and enjoying it immensely, he signed up for more. His next race was an Olympic distance event. He was on a flat bar road bike, "so it wasn't even a racing bike" and with no wetsuit, his attitude was to "just get out there and have a go" and to enjoy the challenge.

His coach of ten years, Tony Benson, a former 1972 Olympian and sub 4 minute miler, "taught me to enjoy what I'm doing," says Chris. Tony has been instrumental in Chris' achievements. Tony

has “challenged me to always go further and push myself,” says Chris. His coach has helped him approach the endurance events much better prepared than he was for his first marathon (when he didn’t have a coach).

He remembers his first marathon as a mess. He didn’t train well enough, nor did he have a nutritional plan in place. He “struggled all the way through the race” and only just made the cut off. He says that in a longer distance event, like Olympic distance or greater, that “nutrition is about 30% of the race”. That if you don’t have a good nutrition plan that “it’d take 30% longer” and he says it’s definitely is a big factor in the training and preparation for an event.

Chris spends around 15 hours a week training, and for a full Ironman race he trains for 10-12 months leading up to the event to give it his best shot. He admits it is often difficult to get the balance right in his personal life. That he needs to enjoy his life outside triathlon whilst still being able to enjoy his sport. It’s definitely a balance most endurance triathletes face so that their sport does not take over their family life.

Chris has a strong fan club in his family. His sister Kerry, who lives in northern NSW, has watched him compete in Port Macquarie in 2010 and 2011, and travelled to Ironman Melbourne in 2012. His mother is also a passionate supporter and “she’s made signs and posters” and it’s this family support that really helps him get to the end of the line when he competes.

His parents have also travelled widely to watch him compete, catching glimpses of him as he exits the water, or quickly passes them on his bike. They are always stationed at key places to watch him race. The family support particularly picks him up in the run, and “I run a little bit faster and I always try to overtake the person in front of me when I’m around family watching me.” Such is Chris’ competitive nature and enthusiasm for sport.

Chris’ enthusiasm is “somewhat contagious.” He’s found that many people around him have managed to get involved in triathlon or even just in any of the legs separately. Kerry has watched him grow as an athlete and as she was just starting to run 5km herself, she’s been inspired by him. She wasn’t a runner but has continued to run and increase her distance, recently competing in a half marathon. She says “both of us were no good at sport” such as running races and if he could do it, then she could too. It’s something that is a driver in Chris. He believes he can help anyone get started, no matter what their current activity levels are.

His brother, who now lives in Melbourne has also been under Chris’ influence. Chris saw that his brother was starting to put on weight as he wasn’t very active, so he built him a bike so he could ride to work. His generosity goes further as he constantly talks to people he comes into contact with, engaging them in his passion for swimming, or cycling or running. He’s recently helped another work colleague with bike equipment by getting her get a bike, lights and a backpack and now she too rides to work.





But it's not only equipment he provides advice on. He helps others with nutritional advice, training tips and has been known to get out and just run with a colleague at lunch to help them build up to running longer distances.

Asked what he thinks he gives to others who he inspires, he responds that it's "a little hope". That if "he can do all these big distances they think that maybe I can do a short one". He has an attitude that anyone is capable of it and he himself realises he is a good example of this as he started out struggling and now with the right coach, training and nutritional plan he has worked hard to improve himself to grow and to improve as a triathlete. It's these strategies that he uses when he helps others.

Some others he has helped are his children. Again this has been contagious. All his children, the eldest being 13, have all competed in triathlons. With Cooper competing in 12 races, Lucy in 10 races and the youngest Emma having just competed her first triathlon event, and keen to do more, it's a family unit that is bonded by their dad's sport and accomplishments. It was definitely a moment to be proud of when he competed in a recent triathlon, and got to see Emma finish her first event a few minutes after he went down the finisher's chute.

Chris himself has seen the finisher's chute many times. He has competed in Shepparton (70.3) five times and done four full Ironman (140.6) events. There's also been the numerous seasons of Sprint and Olympic distance races over the last 13 years and the separate cycling and running events he participates in.

He enjoys triathlon as he says he doesn't get bored of it. When he races he says he just gets "into the zone" and finds "it a bit of an escape," and "that's what I like about it," he says. As he continues to enjoy the sport, and further challenge himself, he also continues to help and inspire others to join him in competing in the sport of triathlon.



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Kelly O'Donnell is a Melbourne based Freelance Writer and Researcher who also juggles a role as a Consultant. Her writing interests include health and fitness, parenting, step-families and work-life balance. She is a keen runner, and often can be found in the crowd at triathlon events cheering on her family.