

Pregnancy Pause:

JODIE CUNNAMA PROFILES CERVÉLO'S 2017 KONA TRIATHLETES



With her first child due in November, the former Ironman 70.3 World Champion is taking a break from competition. As one of the most popular pros with fans and competitors, and with

husband and fellow Cervélo triathlete James Cunnama raring to rocket down the Queen K, who better than Jodie to profile the Cervélo pros headed to Kona?

TODAY: Ruedi Wild

I'm not sure I know anybody who doesn't like Ruedi Wild.

Elite athletes walk in tight circles. Specifically, there's a crop of triathlon professionals, myself included, who have travelled parallel roads in the sport for the last 20 or so years. When triathlon debuted at the 2000 Olympic Games, the sport took off. With that momentum, us eighties kids, juniors at the time, became the first generation of triathletes to be supported in our development by federations.

Opportunity is the foundation of success, and our longevity is a testament to that support. Having traversed the junior ranks, U23 development, elite introduction, federation centralisation, the growth of mass participation and the popularisation of the Ironman and Challenge brands, now, in our mid-thirties, we stand as veterans of the sport. We grew with the sport and as such the sport grew to know us, and we developed reputations, personas, brands.

Dare I say it — sporting success has the ability to excuse, even celebrate, a huge host of very abrasive character flaws: selfishness, arrogance, ignorance, ambition. When you come across someone whose reputation among his peers mirrors that of his public persona — of integral decency— it stands out.

Ruedi Wild is that person.

Ruedi's introduction to elite sport was in downhill skiing. Skiing initiated his love of adrenalin and speed, passions he later incorporated into his triathlon pursuits. He was still only 10 years old when he first became interested in triathlon. Gradually, his precocious talent for endurance sport began to show, and ultimately usurped his skiing prowess. (He still skis in the off-season for leisure and relaxation, but he's now he's a lifestyle skier. His two favourite sports have reversed roles.)

"I might hit the slopes 3-4 times per season, but after some intense downhills the challenge is missing," Ruedi says. "I might end up in a ski bar with a nice view over the mountains, enjoying a hot drink to warm up my cold feet and hands."

Lifelong athletes find it difficult to separate sport from life. That is not to say that there is obsession or dependence on sport. It's just that sport, and involvement in racing, becomes a way of life. It's easy to mistake this as a lifestyle choice — becoming an athlete for the life it permits; flexible hours; to travel; or as an alternative to a conventional job. In reality, top athletes create a life focused on being elite. Their hours are uncapped and strenuous, and far from flexible. It is very far from an easy career road.

Ruedi most certainly races to succeed, and makes big sacrifices to progress. Leisure and training sit at polar opposites for him. While he savours the beautiful training venues and privilege that the Swiss countryside gifts him, it is the thrill of the race that really motivates him to train. His drive is well-disguised by his laid-back demeanour.

“Nature and nice surroundings are certainly a good base for doing outdoor sports, but I am not sure if this alone helps developing talents. I would rather enjoy the nature in a more relaxed way than working out all day long.”

With the arrival of his first child in May, “Finn Wild” (what a name!) seems destined to similarly savour the epic outdoors of Switzerland. Parenthood has provided a new challenge to Ruedi’s schedule, but a revival of motivation, too. Ruedi won three of his first four Ironman 70.3 races of the season, and finished second at home in Ironman Zurich. These successes, in addition to a brilliant third place at the 2016 Ironman 70.3 World Championships, allow him the luxury of knuckling down fully for Kona preparation. Indeed, he has just begun a block of training in Lanzarote that should help cement his fitness for October.

2016 was Ruedi’s first start in Kona, and it was not an experience he savoured — if his “never again” declaration at the finish line is anything to go by. He wasn’t the first athlete to write off the race, and in 2017 the targets have been reassessed and preparation refined. Ruedi missed the 2017 Ironman 70.3 world champs, stayed in Europe longer, and has turned more training focus to the long distance, the only unfulfilled gap in a comprehensive resume.

“I want to be able to show and transform my potential from the shorter distances to Ironman. I will be happy if, at the end of the day, I can say I did everything I could and never gave up till the very end. And, of course, having different thoughts compared to last year when crossing the finish line.

“I think it is just natural over all this years to search for new challenges. Ironman and Kona, in particular, is the last chapter I have not really attended to yet. “On the other side, it was very practical this year to limit my travel, what with the birth of our little boy and just focusing on Kona instead of doing several other races.”

There is logic in Ruedi’s outlook. Years of training and racing against the very best in the sport lays good foundations for measured and calculated risk in target races. A lifetime in sport can’t be lived at perpetual full throttle, yet must avoid settling into a comfort zone where the sacrifice and focus needed to win races isn’t there. Ruedi seems to have that balance figured out.

“The most important thing, I would say, is that you enjoy what you do and therefore stay motivated for years. This is necessary to become the best, not only in the sport of triathlon.

Then there is the mindset of an athlete in general: Be relaxed and at the same time focused and tough when it counts — energy management! You need to have and develop a killer instinct, while not getting lost in single session but rather keeping the big picture in mind.”

When Ruedi ends his career, his “big picture” will highlight his class and longevity. There are a few years of racing left in his 35-year-old body and mind, and he needs a highlight Iron distance to complete the full journey.

I would not bet against a happy ending.