



HAMISH McLACHLAN

one on one with
**CRAIG
ALEXANDER**

The Ironman legend dubbed Alexander the great reveals the secrets to the mental strength needed to be at the top of the world

THE human body has the capacity to be pushed to extraordinary limits. Not many of us have driven ourselves to the very end of our physical capacities. We stay comfortable, pain free, and safe. But Craig Alexander often pushed himself to the extremes. To win an Ironman World Championship, you need to be genetically gifted and mentally impenetrable. You swim 3.86km, then cycle for 180km, before running a 42km marathon in up to 40C heat. It's tiring just typing it. Craig won three Hawaiian Ironman Triathlons, and five world championship titles in total.

HM: Craig, why would you choose a sport that I assume has you in agony even in training?

CA: It's not everyone's cup of tea! Sometimes you choose a sport, but often a sport chooses you. I think I had the right genetics for endurance events like triathlons, and definitely the right mindset for it. I was also passionate about the racing and training and just challenging myself.

HM: How did you fall in love with a sport that inflicts so much pain on you?

CA: I loved to watch the Ironman in Hawaii and The Coolangatta Gold once a year when they were on. I was intrigued by athletes who could really push themselves, try and find their limit. With that comes discomfort, but life isn't always comfortable – sometimes you need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

HM: You played cricket, water polo, golf, tennis. What inspired you to go from watching, to doing Ironman events?

CA: I was at university and just started running for fun and to get back in shape after I finished playing soccer. For a few months, I'd been doing these events we used to call biathlons, which are now called aquathons – swim and run races. My best mate at university was a very good cyclist who used to do triathlons for cross training in his off season. He knew I was interested, so he helped get me into the sport. When Greg Welch won the Hawaiian Ironman in '94, I was inspired. That was really the start for me.

HM: Where do you start?

CA: I had to crawl before I could walk. I started with a lot of events that were shorter – one and two-hour races. That was my intro. As a kid, I had a lot more natural speed than endurance, so training the endurance was much more of a challenge for me. The landscape in and around that sport was a lot different back then. Now, there are organised pathways for kids, for juniors, and a lot more coaching is available. I was just pulling training sessions out of triathlon magazines, speaking to other athletes, just trying to find out what they were doing. I must have had some decent genetics for the sport because I progressed rapidly and got to a point where I was training with some athletes who were

considered some of the best in the country. You mimic them, watch, and learn, you see what they do, then try and do it yourself.

HM: You raced your first professional triathlon at 20, then won a professional race later that year. The genetics must have been strong?

CA: They were. To end up winning world titles, you need a good platform there to start with. Like in all sports, to achieve a very high level you need that natural talent, but you also need to pair it with great work ethic, the right mindset, good experience and getting a lot of help from the right people.

HM: In an odd way, did you like the pain?

CA: I liked the idea of pushing myself to a new level, and that meant dealing with mental and physical pain. It's a race against others, but for me, it was also a personal challenge, to see how much I could tolerate, how far I could push it and how quickly I could go. Even down the track when you're racing for world championships, it was still a personal challenge to go further into the red, and faster than I had ever before.

HM: How many of the eight hours are you in agony?

CA: You're uncomfortable for most of it, and for me, the real pain came at the end. It was physical, but you develop different mental strategies, and I just didn't want to succumb. I didn't want to quit, I didn't want to get to a point and not be able to surpass what I'd done the year before, or in previous races. That's where the mental discomfort also comes in, and the internal battle that you're always fighting with yourself about wanting to go further and faster becomes harder and harder to win.

HM: What did you learn?

CA: I learnt to be OK with the physical discomfort. With experience, you learn that it's temporary, and you come up with different ways of dealing with it and quietening your mind wanting you to stop. I learnt that the mind-body connection is strong but the mind needs to take control, take over in certain moments.

HM: I'm fascinated that you can, four hours in, compartmentalise whatever it is that is hurting you pain wise, and drive yourself for another four hours. How do you do put the pain aside, mentally?

CA: Two things. First, it's what I call the logistics of racing. I think, "What can I do right now?" and avoid thinking, "Man, I've got another 60km to ride here and then I've got a marathon to run".

HM: Just saying that is insane.

CA: It is! When I first saw the race in Hawaii on television, I remember those iconic pictures of the trade winds blowing the palm trees sideways, with



(Clockwise from main) Craig Alexander this week; winning the 2009 Ironman World Championship in Hawaii; with wife Nerida, daughter Lucy and son Austin in 2012; winning his 12th Australian title at the 2019 Australian Long Course Championships, in Busselton, WA; during the marathon in the 2007 world championship in Hawaii. Main picture: Toby Zerna

the selfish athlete you needed to be?
CA: It helped me, as it gave me

the temperature monitor at 45C in the Energy Lab. I thought it was crazy. When I got there to race ...

HM: You realised it was ...

CA: ...you still think it's crazy, but you come up with ways to deal with it. It was crazy, completely crazy, but as humans we develop ways and means of getting through it. Again: "What do I need to do right now? What do I need to do right now to improve my situation?"

HM: What were they?

CA: That was often around things like my pacing, my technique, technical cues, nutrition, hydration. I was always in the moment. As funny as that may seem, the race went quickly. It's not like you're looking at your watch thinking, "I have another four hours to go here". You hear about people being in the zone, and a lot of successful athletes can clear away a lot of the white noise and focus on the one or two key things right now that you need to do to improve your situation.

HM: Your family travelled with you. Did that make it easy or harder to be

perspective on a few things. We picked up and travelled as a family and based ourselves in Colorado for four months of the year, and then Kona for a month. I was aware of what they'd sacrificed so that I could do it, so it was very easy for me to push myself when things got hard day to day in training, or in the race. I'd think to myself, "My wife has put her career on hold so we can do this, and my eldest daughter has left all her mates behind, do it for them so they don't resent what we are doing". We used to homeschool Lucy, and she struggled a bit with that. She was very social, like my wife, she liked being in the classroom, so homeschooling was hard for her, and I saw that every day. I had to honour their sacrifice – so motivation was easy.

HM: You were homeschooling before it became fashionable!

CA: (laughs) That's right mate. We had a lot of practice when the pandemic hit last year!

HM: You said that when you were going through those extraordinary moments of pain, you would think to yourself, "What do I need to do right

now to move forward?" I assume that has helped you in everyday life, particularly in the past 18 months where things have become less normal and more challenging.

CA: Day to day is hard for all of us. I was a professional athlete for a quarter of a century, and sport teaches you a lot that crosses over into real life. Big corporations often invite athletes in to share their experiences because they feel there are valuable lessons there. It's not about telling other people how to do their job, but there's certainly lessons that you learn. It's like being in the stock market. There's peaks and troughs, sometimes it's about riding the wave and other times riding out the storm. There's no question that sport has helped me with other areas of my life. I love that my kids are right into sport because there's a lot of lessons there. Winning, losing and effort.

HM: Leigh Matthews went to 12 grand finals and won eight of them, four as a player and four as a coach. He said, "Statistically I'm one of the most successful footballers and coaches that has ever played or coached, and I lost every third week. You've got to get used to it, you've got to respond to it, you've got to learn from it, and you've got to keep going forward."



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CA: He is so right. Being a professional athlete, you do lose a lot, and you need to. That helps you win. Life is about winning and losing, and responding.

HM: His mindset never allowed him to be satisfied. He said his hole he needed to fill was too big. You have five world championships. Do you sit here chatting to me in a different state to Leigh, or the same state?

CA: The same. I can completely relate to what Leigh is saying. Yes, the five world titles are great, but I also won three silver medals. I often think about those more than the wins. That's the way I'm wired. The greatest asset you can have in sport, and possibly in life, is a self-awareness. Understand who you are for better or worse, and the things that led to your successes, whatever they may be, are potentially also the things that make you a pain in the backside to live with.

HM: You talk about sport helping you with life. Do you reckon parenting helps you with the sporting career?

CA: No doubt. Patience – that's the biggest lesson, but also perspective. Becoming a parent changes everything because it gives you another perspective on the world. I remember winning a very big race eight weeks after Lucy was born. It was an invitation only; all the best short-course athletes in the world were there and it was the highest paying race in the history of our sport. After the race, one of the questions was, "You must have felt extra pressure now there's an extra mouth to feed?" But it was the opposite. I felt less pressure because I had someone there who didn't judge me on my performance! She just loved me for being me. Her eyes would light up when I would hold her. It took some pressure off me. I felt I had more purpose and more drive. Parenting is the best thing that has happened to me, and becoming a parent made me a better athlete because it made me a better person. Having kids changed everything.

HM: Is that why the KIDS Foundation – which helps kids grow up safely or

rehabilitate when they otherwise mightn't – has a special interest for you?

CA: I met the founder, Susie, in 2007. At that stage, Lucy, our eldest, was two years old. It was one of those moments that just made sense. I was the reigning world champion at the time, and I was up at Ironman Australia in Port Macquarie as the event ambassador. I got to meet her after the race. At that time, the KIDS Foundation was the official charity of Ironman Australia, so that was their major fundraising event of the year. Susie told me about the things they were doing to raise money for children with life-changing injuries, like burns. I saw how it was a lifelong rehabilitation, and how bad the injuries were. I liked what Susie was doing in and around raising money to create programs for those children who had suffered those sorts of injuries and forming a support network for those children and their families.

HM: She is an incredible woman doing unbelievable work.

CA: Her work has had such a positive impact on so many lives, so many

children and their families. She also showed me how important it was to be proactive and get into the schools, to educate the children, parents, and teachers, on how to prevent everyday injuries. A lot of kids don't grow up in an environment where they are shown to live safely and can find themselves in dangerous situations and other times there are just horrible, unfortunate accidents.

HM: It's a great foundation. Back to you – how close do you think you've got to reaching the absolute end of your physical capacity?

CA: Funnily enough, I look back now and think how much I would love to test myself again, as I don't know if I ever really got close to the end ...

HM: Really?

CA: Whatever sport you're in, the mind is so important. We are seeing that more and more now with football teams. Athletes are using sport psychologists – the mind controls the body. The connection is so strong. I'd play a little game with myself during

races when I thought I was done – what would happen if someone opened a briefcase with \$5m of cash in it and said, "Can you take 20 more steps?" Or perhaps they say, "Where do you want to go on a holiday with your family after this race? If you take another 100 steps, you can go anywhere you like." You are always able to push on.

HM: Did you always find a way to keep going?

CA: That was the game I was playing and that was the goal. That last victory in Hawaii, I ended up having to walk at about 40km into the marathon because I cramped so badly. I couldn't push through it. Luckily, I had a bit of a buffer and I was able to win the race. Now, part of that was a nutritional error as I stopped taking my salt tablets when I shouldn't have – I relaxed a little bit. Any athlete that can truly look at themselves in the mirror and think, "I got 100 per cent of what I had", would be a very satisfied and content athlete. The effort and drive was always there but there were mistakes even in the good victories. So the pursuit would continue.

HM: You are a harsh marker.

CA: Maybe, but whatever those mind games were, and whatever the inducements I would offer myself, you could always push through and get there in the end. Which makes me think there might have been even more in there to give.

HM: Like in 2009 when you were trying to go back to back in the Hawaiian Ironman?

CA: 2009 in Hawaii was a very hot year. It was a painful year. I'd overtrained leading into that race, and for some reason, I just kept myself in the fight that year. I was trying to defend the title, and I was trying to be the first athlete in nearly a decade to do it, and only the fourth male athlete in the history of the race to defend it. I was very motivated to do it and part of that drive led me to over-train a little bit in the last month, so I didn't feel like I had fresh legs going in, but I was able to stay in the fight long enough.

HM: Staying in the fight is important.

CA: Yep. I remember Mark Allen, the great American who won Hawaii six times in the '90s, said to me, "When you win this race, your competitors see you differently. You have a mental currency over them, so just keep yourself in the fight and you'll break a lot of them". I was able to stay in touch long enough and got myself into second spot, and then late in the marathon, I caught the guy who'd been leading for six hours, with 7km to go. Suddenly, all the pain disappeared, and for the last 7km I felt like I was floating.

HM: The mind.

CA: When you have experiences like that, you realise how powerful the mind is. At that moment, you're not in a better state physically – you are in a worse state – but your mind tricks you. I was dehydrated, needing nearly four litres of intravenous fluid after the race, but felt on top of the world. Suddenly, I'm in the lead after chasing for six hours and feel amazing. Experiences like that, they are moments of learning. You learn about the power of the mind. The mind is such an important weapon in sport, and in life. I may have had heavy legs but I somehow managed to override that with a decent attitude.

HM: Attitude is everything. Thank you for talking with me, Craig. It's been extraordinary to listen to.

CA: I appreciate you taking the time.

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