



GETTING TO KNOW **T.O.**

He's won an ITU Long Distance World Championship, 2013's Ironman Brazil – and the hand of Australia's triathlon sweetheart. Meet Timothy "T.O." O'Donnell.

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We hate to break it to you Aussie blokes, but Mirinda "Rinny" Carfrae is spoken for. Last year the Ironman World Champion announced her engagement to fellow pro Timothy O'Donnell, known affectionately as "T.O." Like his bride-to-be, O'Donnell already holds an

impressive collection of triathlon accolades – including an ITU Long Distance World Champion title (2011), nine Ironman 70.3 victories and a win at 2013's Ironman Brazil. AT's Holly Bennett caught up with the former U.S. Navy officer to find out more about his win in Brazil and how he captured Carfrae's heart.



Q&A

With
Timothy O'Donnell

SWEET VICTORY:
T.O. laps up the attention from an enthusiastic Brazilian crowd after his first Ironman win

AT: First off, let's talk about your first Ironman victory in Brazil. How did it go down?

TO: My approach to this year was to try to win an Ironman and then be ready to be a threat in Vegas and Kona. The start of the year was pretty rocky – I crashed at San Juan 70.3 and flatted at St. Croix 70.3 – but I still felt like I was in a good spot for Brazil. Race morning came around and the weather was perfect – a high of 22 degrees and no wind. In the back of my head I thought about breaking eight hours, but the last time I tried that was at Ironman Arizona [2011] – I rode a 4:22 and then I ran a 3:44 and barely broke nine hours! So priority number one was to try to win.

From the start of the bike I was by myself. I wondered, 'Am I riding too hard? Is this going to be another Arizona?' But anyone who's going to be a Kona contender would have raced like that. So I told myself, 'This is what a Kona contender is doing right now.' That kept me confident. I had some dark patches about halfway through the run when I thought I wasn't going to finish, but like any Ironman you get through those. I didn't really start to think that the win was actually going to happen until the last kilometre, and then I started

AT: You finished in 8:01:32, winning by over an 18-minute margin. Were you aware you were that close to breaking the eight-hour mark?

TO: Yes. I was able to keep it out of my mind for most of the race. But on the last loop of the run – maybe 10.5k or so – I saw the finish line clock and was doing the math. I thought I could do it. I just needed to run 4:10 kilometres and I was running 4:05s, but I think the markers were a bit off because my calculations weren't right. But when I came down that last stretch and knew I wasn't going to be under eight, I just wanted to enjoy the moment.

AT: Where does this win and your eighth place finish in Kona last year put you heading toward Kona 2013?

TO: For me, nothing is an indicator for Kona other than Kona. I'm no better than my last race in Kona and that's eighth place and 8:33. In 2011 I came off a great Ironman Texas race, just 90 seconds behind Eneko Llanos who is one of the best Ironman racers in the world, so I thought that meant I was ready to crush it in Kona. That wasn't the case. I'm not going to make that mistake again. I'm going to train like I am where

“I had some dark patches about halfway through the run when I thought I wasn't going to finish, but like any Ironman you get through those.”

to really feel good. The crowd in Brazil is awesome! Being a foreigner at races, you never know how the crowd's going to respond to you, but I think because of my eyebrows they might have been wondering if I was half Brazilian!

AT: Was it hard not having Rinny there?

TO: It was. It hit me more after the race, not having her there to share that moment with. My parents always joke that I race better by myself – like at the ITU Long Distance World Championships in Perth [O'Donnell won in 2009], I was there alone. But I guess racing by myself overseas seems to work!

AT: The run is normally your strongest discipline and while you had a great run in Brazil, you also proved that 4:22 on the bike is something you can deliver more than once. Have you been working on your cycling in particular?

TO: When I rode that well in Arizona I obviously rode way too hard. The first 33 miles in Arizona I averaged 350 watts, and I'm only 70kg maybe, so that was way too much. I could tell in my body that I rode way too hard. But I've definitely been working on my strength endurance for riding, and I've got a really fast bike now, too!

I finished last year – and that's not where I want to be. So that fire is going strong!

AT: Let's talk about your life outside of the sport. First off, when you were but a wee little Timothy O'Donnell, what did you want to be when you grew up?

TO: I wanted to be an anesthesiologist. I don't know why. I think I wanted to be a doctor and I asked my parents what a good kind of doctor would be. So I wanted to go to Harvard and study medicine.

AT: Obviously you went the military route instead, attending the U.S. Naval Academy and becoming a special operations officer before being assigned to the Olympic Training Center to develop your triathlon talents. Can you tell me what you did in the service, or would you have to kill me?

TO: [laughs] Your tape recorder will self-destruct! I was in the explosive ordinance disposal [EOD] group. For some reason all the triathletes decided to become SEALs, I was the only senior in my class who didn't. I did the tryouts for SEALs, and I did very well, but it wasn't me. Plus I was too skinny! The EOD guys are pretty similar – they handle the dangerous

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stuff, and a lot of times they operate together with the SEALs and do a lot of the same things. With EOD there's also a level of problem solving with the intricacies of explosive devices and IEDs. It's still a very physically active community and a huge adventure, but that extra mental challenge kind of intrigued me.

AT: While we're on the topic of the military, tell me about your work with Team Red, White & Blue (teamrwb.org).

TO: Team RWB is a veteran's charity that helps reintegrate wounded veterans and those suffering from PTSD to help bring them back into society with a support system for growth outside the military. Mike Erwin, the founder of Team RWB, is a good friend of some of my SEAL buddies, and one of them lost both his legs from an IED. Mike told me about the work he was doing with Dan Crossen, who was the captain of the Navy tri team when I was there. So for me it was this huge connection. The Navy really gave me my triathlon career – the training I was able to do made me the athlete I am today. I saw this as an opportunity to use this gift of triathlon that was given to me to give back to those same people.

I've actually been talking with Mike about bringing some of the Australian veterans into the fold and maybe getting Rinny involved with the tri camp I do with Team RWB in Austin, Texas. We're going to do one this spring and we'd love to bring in some of the Aussie special forces guys. Maybe we could have some friendly competition throughout the camp!

AT: In the last year you've discovered you have gluten sensitivity and switched to a gluten free diet. What are your favourite post-workout snacks and post-race indulgences?

TO: I love a good milkshake post-race. Living in Boulder you can eat anything – I still love muffins and all that stuff, just gluten free. And when we train in Noosa the level of gluten awareness is awesome. It's easily on par with Boulder.

AT: What's your favourite way to spend a day off?

TO: Probably drive up into the mountains with Rinny and find a cool spot to have some drinks. Or come downtown, people watch and have some



VICTORIOUS: Brazil gave T.O his first Ironman win

drinks. Having some drinks is obviously the common theme! Usually it's red wine, or if it's a hot day then maybe mojitos.

AT: Speaking of wine, I know you're a real aficionado – have you found a favourite bottle from Australia?

TO: Amanda Balding introduced us to some really good Australian pinots. When I think of Australia I think of Shiraz or GSMs, but we loved the Bannockburn pinot.

AT: Although you're definitely an all-American guy, you've also spent a lot of time in Noosa. What are the coolest things about Oz, in your opinion?

TO: There's just a really nice laid-back culture. It's very casual. It reminds me a lot of Boulder in

that regard. I love that you can go anywhere in a pair of board shorts. I still haven't gotten completely comfortable with the tank tops for guys, though. Rinny's slowly getting me to wear them, but I don't know if I can rock that look around town yet. Also the coffee's awesome!

AT: How did you and Rinny meet?

TO: We met at St Croix, when I had just started doing half Ironmans. We actually met the night before the race when one of the homestays had a pasta party. I was at her table and I had this big fudge brownie and everybody kind of looked at me like, 'What's this guy doing?' I hadn't really done anything in long course yet. But I went out and I won the next day – my first win as a professional. Rinny had a couple minute lead and she bonked on the run and ended up getting



READY, STEADY: Staring into middle distance at the swim start in Florianopolis, Brazil

second. So at the post-race party I struck up a conversation with her and I said, 'If you had one of those brownies you wouldn't have bonked and you would have won!' So that was my pick up line, I guess. I joke with her that I had to win a race before she would talk to me. We both raced Buffalo Springs 70.3 before that and we were in the med tent getting IVs next to each other. I tried to strike up a conversation then, but there was nothing doing!

AT: What did you do for your first date?

TO: We went up to Red Rocks Amphitheatre to see The Princess Bride. So we went to Whole Foods and got take out dinner and when we got up to Red Rocks it was sold out. I thought: 'Awesome. Nice job TO. You get one shot with this girl and you blow it!' But Rinny, being the sweetheart she is, said, "We can just have a picnic on the side of the road." I was not going to have us pull over on the side of the highway to eat dinner, so we drove into this little town called Morrison outside of Red Rocks and found a little European restaurant and had an unbelievable dinner. We had a couple bottles of wine, shut the place down and I think it probably made the relationship. It was just a great night where we really connected.

AT: When did you know you were going to marry this girl?

“[Rinny and I] were in the med tent getting IVs next to each other. I tried to strike up a conversation then, but there was nothing doing!”

TO: I was very cautious moving through our whole relationship. I think I knew well before last year when we got engaged, but the last thing I wanted to make sure of was that I liked going to Australia, since I hadn't been there with her yet. So in the winter of 2012 we went over, and we had an awesome time. I figured if there were no other excuses I had better buy the ring! I went home in May and bought the ring and it sat in our closet for two months, eating at me. But I wanted to do it when she wasn't racing or training, so she could truly enjoy it. After Lake Stevens 70.3 we went to Big Sur for a nice romantic weekend and that's where I proposed.

AT: What are your favourite things about Rinny?

TO: My favourite thing has to be her smile! Also her love of life and her disposition. And we really love spending time together. We have a unique lifestyle – it's not like we're working nine-to-five and coming home from work and seeing each other for three hours before going to bed. We spend almost the whole day together. But it's great because I knew pretty early on that if I could spend this much time with someone, it's obviously a good thing. And there's such a good friendship there, which I think is so important for a strong relationship.

A quirky thing I love about her is she loves to make up little songs. We're always singing to each other. Behind the scenes we're ridiculous

really – we're like seven-year-olds when we're together. If people saw a video of us in the house they would think we're crazy!

AT: I'm sure as a world-class athlete you're used to assessing your strengths and weaknesses in sport. But what do you think will be your strengths and weaknesses as a husband?

TO: Strengths – just general awesomeness! Can I say that without sounding absurd? I think a strength is that I'm supportive of what she needs to do to succeed. I mean she's the best in the sport – she has a great career – and I think some guys couldn't handle such a successful and strong woman. I know there are times when she would rather be hanging out or just spending time with me, but it's like, 'No, you need to do this and I need to do that.' Like her not being able to come to Brazil – in those situations I think, 'What does Rinny need?' Also I'll keep us on track with long term goals – financially, building a house, things like that. In terms of weaknesses, she already knows this from living together but I can get a little high strung and tense about stuff. When I lock into something I can get pretty serious. It's the Navy guy in me. She definitely helps keep me even-keeled.

AT: Is there anything else you want to share with our readers, now that you're about to become a part of Australian sporting royalty?

TO: I love Bonds! Rinny's got me hooked on Bonds. **AT**

Photo: Jeff Clark



DYNAMIC DUO: T.O and Rinny are supportive of one another's careers and help keep each other on track