A Life Without Limits: A World Champion’s Journey.

By Chrissie Wellington. Copyright 2012 by Center Street (Hachette Book Group), 237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017 ($24.99, 274 pp.).

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“I think you have the physical attributes to make it as a pro, but I’m going to have to chop your head off.” —Coach Brett Sutton to Wellington upon beginning formal triathlon training.

The above statement, as heinous as it may sound to many readers, speaks volumes about the psychology of high-level endurance sports, in this instance, Ironman triathlon. At times, too much thought can be almost detrimental when undertaking a 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike ride, and 26.2 mile run, often in less-than-ideal conditions. Suffering is almost inevitable, the body will be asking loudly to stop, to slow down and the athlete is to remain focused and accept whatever comes her/his way—basically without question. Endurance sports demand mental toughness, and Chrissie Wellington appears to model it effortlessly. Or does she? Wellington’s compelling autobiography, “A Life Without Limits,” offers an unprecedented look into the psyche and experience of one of the planet’s most accomplished sportswomen.

Christine Wellington, age 36, began life as an ordinary woman with an ordinary background from Great Britain. Ms. Wellington’s current life path, mental toughness, and motivation are, however, quite extraordinary. “A Life Without Limits” takes the reader through a strikingly personal narrative of her first thirty-six years of life. The first half of Wellington’s autobiography details her early emotional and athletic development from her childhood in England to her work as an official for the UK government’s Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs division (Defra). Dabbling in swimming as a youngster and then taking up running for fitness, Wellington’s path looks dissimilar to many of the sport’s top competitors today. Her success seems to be a direct result of her life choices and her response to difficult periods in her life; notably overcoming an eating disorder.

Throughout the volume’s fifteen chapters, Chrissie’s choices, desires, thoughts, and struggles are evident, and the book is rich with psychological content. She writes in a degree of detail working through the challenges of career changes, injury, illness and a number of other setbacks. She admits to “always wanting control” at several junctures in the book. Perhaps the most poignant example is Chrissie’s candid account of her battle with body image and an eating disorder (a pervasive problem in women’s sports), garnering concerns of her friends and family. At its worst, she “couldn’t stop” and “each day would try and eat a little less than the last” (p. 37). The account of her progression from body image disturbance to anorexic and bulimic behaviors offers insights for professionals in the field of sport psychology.
According to the Wellington, the desire for control is a “fertile breeding ground” for an eating disorder (p. 17). What is it like to be one of the most accomplished athletes in the world yet still think you’re fat and unattractive? Chrissie Wellington courageously serves as a case study on this issue.

Also described at length are her experiences in dealing with training under the tutelage of controversial triathlon coach Brett Sutton and her doubts and isolation during her first training camps as a professional triathlete. Writing with an energy and relative openness, Wellington’s account of her experiences adds further evidence to the assertion that Ironman triathlon is one of the most difficult athletic challenges on the planet. The sport demands a high degree of self-control, self-discipline, and a willingness to experience suffering.

A powerful asset to Wellington’s success lies in the utilization of an internal locus of control, despite her early issues with eating disorders and body image. Further evidence of Wellington’s control orientation can be seen even as she writes about doubts concerning commitment to a career as a professional triathlete, adjusting to brutal training conditions, and conflicts with teammates (especially her initial rift with her female teammates). Another example of control orientation is her intense mental preparation for whatever setback she encounters on the race course. Wellington openly shares how she prepares for races, for meeting the intense fatigue and discomfort and making the decision to power through, even shutting her thought processes off at times as Coach Sutton commands her to do (see opening quote). In response to experiencing shingles just weeks prior to her world-record breaking performance at Challenge Roth, Wellington asserts “…if there is one talent I do have it is an ability to put such doubts aside on the big occasion” (p. 200). Wellington’s ability to look inward and focus on the task at hand seems to transcend the notion of pure talent, or in Ironman racing, sheer physiological endurance.

Remaining levelheaded is important in any sport, but especially in Ironman racing as remaining so conserves precious energy. Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘If’ is a cue Wellington uses to remain calm and in control of her emotions and effort; the stanzas are written on the water bottles she uses on race day. She also writes of dealing with several major injuries and the same concept applies. Going into the Ironman World Championships in Kona in 2011 Wellington was involved in a bike crash just prior to race day. By focusing on what she could control, she displayed intense focus on the task at hand despite residual injuries, including lacerations and a torn pectoral muscle. This book’s themes of overcoming challenges, “re-storying” a life narrative (i.e. her almost-unheard-of transition from British Civil Servant to World Champion), locus of control, and intensive mental preparation are valuable to sport psychology consultants and researchers alike and adds to further shaping the broad concept of what constitutes ‘mental toughness’.

This book covers a lot of Chrissie’s life in a relatively organized, easy-to-read manner. Chapters are organized in a fairly chronological manner and center on narratives describing turning points in her career. Chrissie Wellington models many aspects of mental toughness and describes how she applies mental skills in even the bleakest of situations.

Even those who do not participate in endurance sports can appreciate Chrissie Wellington’s story. Those studying gender in sport have a compelling case study in Wellington as she participates and succeeds in a historically male-dominated
sporting event, the Ironman World Championship. This set of traits and candid insight into Wellington’s mindset can be modeled and modified in designing mental toughness training programs. This book can also be used both in consultation and as a supplement in sport psychology courses.

One critique of “A Life Without Limits” is that I found myself wanting to learn more about her experience with her eating disorder, especially the timeline and methodology of her treatment. I found little information on how Wellington arrived at more healthful ideas about food and body image. More information could provide a potential model for athletes struggling with body image disturbance and disordered eating. Overall, however, Chrissie Wellington courageously describes her experiences as she sees them in an entertaining memoir.