



Britain's three-time ITU world champion Spencer Smith offers swim advice to tri newcomers in Ghana

TRI NEWS

GRASSROOTS IN GHANA

As eyes turn toward the elite action in Rio, Brit racing icon Spencer Smith went to West Africa in his new role as the head coach of the Ghana National Triathlon Team. Here's his account of the birth of a tri nation...

The final May bank holiday weekend saw the Brownlee brothers appearing on Top Gear, the GB age-group team collecting 73 medals at the European Championships and thousands of UK athletes racing at events like the Outlaw Half. So it's easy to forget that in the UK in the late 1980s triathlon was a fringe sport. The media coverage was limited to snippets and the general public were unsure about what disciplines made up our sport.

Fast forward two decades and our country has become one of the most successful triathlon nations in the world, with our formidable Olympic team preparing for Rio and

a seemingly infinite number of races to pick from every weekend. But rarely does success happen by chance: development and increased participation are down to commitment, belief and good old-fashioned hard work.

My recent trip to Accra, Ghana's capital, where I was visiting my friend and the CEO of the Ghana Triathlon Federation, Tarek Mouganie, and starting my new role as the head coach of the country's inaugural national triathlon team, reminded me of our sport's honest beginnings in the UK. Until the recent actions of Mouganie and his mentors Professor Francis Dadoo (President of the Ghana Olympic Committee)

and Bawah Fuseini (now President of the Ghana Triathlon Federation), this was a country with no triathlon teams, coaches or infrastructure. A stark contrast to the triathlon shops, weekly television coverage and open-water venues of the British triathlon scene.

FROM LITTLE ACORNS

The Ghana Triathlon Federation was set-up by Mouganie, Professor Dadoo and Fuseini in late 2013. With the ink on the contract barely dry, Mouganie clocked a sub-2hr finish in the Federation's colours to place fourth in his age-group at the ITU race in Cape Town, South Africa, in early 2014. Ghana had arrived on the world's

triathlon stage and this was something to be proud of.

The Federation organised Ghana's very first triathlon in 2015 with an out-of-pocket budget of \$900. Free access was granted to the local university campus, police were called to monitor roads, dozens of volunteers were approached, bike racks built, a finish line was constructed and mats were borrowed. It was a humble event: 13 athletes raced.

The athletes were from varying backgrounds: from experienced expats to local students who'd never heard of the sport. It was Zakaria Abdul-Rauf's debut triathlon; he borrowed a bike (having never ridden or swam

£3,936

Yearly budget of the Ghana Triathlon Federation

13

START

Number of athletes at Ghana's first race in 2015

2014



Year the first triathlon was held in Ghana

2

Number of unpaid volunteers who run the Ghana Tri Federation

16

Number of nationalities at the May event

1

Number of public pools and running tracks in Accra

\$9000

Budget of Ghana's debut triathlon

84

Number of athletes at Ghana's fourth race in 2016

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before), which applied to many Ghanaians on the start line. Another athlete, a local sprinter called Abdul-Rauf, went on to race at the ATU African Duathlon Championships in May that year and finished eighth.

After securing a modest amount of sponsorship from the luxury Kempinski Gold Coast Hotel in Accra, the Federation is committed to organising seven further races over three years.

Ghana was then officially inducted into the ITU family in September 2015 in Chicago. It was a day I was lucky to witness and the feeling of accomplishment and pride from Tarek was present for all to see. It showed that even with

relative few individuals, if you have the motivation and passion of Fuseini, Doodoo and, of course, Tarek, people can flourish.

In April, the International Triathlon Union (ITU) signed a Development Grant contract with the African Triathlon Union (ATU), which gives funds to organise races in Ghana, Tanzania, Sudan, Tunisia, Niger, Gambia, Chad, Ivory Coast and Algeria.

CAST ITS MAGIC

During my visit to Ghana in May, the ITU was also present to provide a four-day training course. The goal was to give local officials the basic understanding of tri to go into the community and cultivate

like-minded and motivated athletes. We had 16 Ghanaians at this voluntary course, showing the desire to learn is present.

I held a number of free swim and run clinics before the fourth Ghanaian event, which attracted 84 entrants. I was impressed. It's always difficult to give an assessment of any situation without having seen it first hand. Knowing that Ghana's first triathlon had only 13 athletes racing compared to a start list of 82 competitors in its fourth, it's hard not to believe that our beautiful sport has once again caught the attention of a nation.

As the newly appointed head coach of the Ghanaian Federation I

can say that the appetite is quite inspirational here. But we cannot survive on this alone. We need help from the private sector for basics such as equipment (bikes, turbo-trainers, swimming aids), and to find areas for clean open-water swimming.

It's my job to nurture these athletes and turn their untapped potential into results, and the sprint-distance races are a perfect place to start. I hope there'll be real progress in developing the sport in the region.

There's no reason that a sport that's caught the attention of so many in the UK can't again cast its magic here in Ghana. The talent is certainly present. ■ 220