

# Tri-athlete keeps hectic pace, but continues in competition

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Sheila Taormina pulled into Toronto last week when her chronic back flared up again. Not good news if you're competing just two days later in a big International Triathlon Union World Cup race.

So Taormina immediately got on the phone with a local Toronto chiropractor to make an appointment.

The tightly-wound Taormina has had problems with her back dating back to her days as an All-America swimmer at Georgia and through her 1996 Olympic gold-medal conquest in Atlanta when she swam a leg of the women's 800-meter free relay.

"I'm not in peak condition now; I'm going into races kind of exhausted, because I've kind of burnt the candle on both ends," she said. "But I'm looking forward to the next 2 1/2 months, because I'll be cutting back my schedule; so I can rest and train better."

"I had no expectations the first half of the season, but in the second half I hope things can start to kick in. Right now I'm hanging on by my fingernails and really don't have one ounce of energy left."

Balancing her hectic travel schedule and training since she finished sixth in the first women's triathlon — the inaugural event of the 2000 Sydney Olympics — has been a daunting and delicate challenge.

In June she competed in her first two races of the season, finishing fifth in Shreveport, La., and third in Victoria, British Columbia.

Her fifth place at Shreveport earned her a qualifying berth in the ITU World Championship Saturday, July 21, in Edmonton, Alberta.

"I kind of surprised myself; my muscles were in shock from the run, but I had a good swim and the bike went well."

In between, Taormina did numerous business and school talks, camps and clinics. Sometimes she travelled by air, other times by car, to Toronto, South Carolina, Connecticut, Boston and New York.

The day before the Shreveport race, Taormina handed out awards at the finish line of a kids triathlon in the morning, did a swim clinic in the afternoon and a motivational talk in the evening.

"I really wasn't ready to race, but I'm there and I have the feeling can't let down; so I'll try and figure out the rest," Taormina said.

Taormina loaded up on her work schedule because she was unable to run for almost eight months, plagued by an ilio tibia band (leg) problem which limited her training leading up to Sydney.

With the help of her coach Lew Kidder, she learned she was overstriding. Able to adjust and pretty much pain free, Taormina has gradually built her mileage back up so she can compete again in the 6.2-mile run, which complements the 1,500-meter swim and 24.8-mile bike in the Olympic distance triathlon.

"I'm still not prepared and haven't run enough and with my I.T. problem," Taormina said. "I didn't think I'd race this summer and I wasn't really gearing up for that."



Photo by Mary Fitzmaurice  
Tri-athlete: Sheila Taormina hopes to rebound after the Sydney Olympics.

"That's kind of the reason why I overbooked my schedule this year. Last summer I had more than a balance. This year I'm busier by far than I was the year after 1996."

But the Stevenson High School grad said she can't ignore the lasting relationships she has built with her young clientele during her travels.

"When you work with swim teams and schools I've kind of gotten attached with people all over the country," she said. "There are a few families you click with when you have talks."

"Sometimes my biggest challenge is just to crawl in bed and not talk to anybody, but you have to respond when they call or write you. Even if I have to stay up until 2 in the morning, I'll respond to a kid."

The 32-year-old Taormina decided she needed help in another direction.

"I have the best coaches around in Lew (Kidder) and Greg Phill (her club swimming coach), but if you stay in a sport you have to do it right," she said. "You have to eat right and do a lot of stretching. I'm 32 and I have to watch out. I'm not 18 or 22 anymore."

Taormina, who had trouble with her back even after a 1.5 swim workout, thumbed through the Yellow Pages late last year looking for somebody to guide her through her injury woes.

Less than a half-mile from her home she found Dr. Dave Ellis, a chiropractor, and Dr. Karen Sota, who specializes in his practice in nutrition.

"I needed a lot of care because I beat up my body," she said. "They put my body back together and put me back alignment. Before they did anything, we talked for almost two hours. They're former body builders and they knew what muscles needed to be addressed."

"They got me into taking sports seriously again like I did in 1994, 1995 and 1996. I said I would not let it rule my life, but with the stretching and nutrition, it definitely helps the bones and the joints if you do it right."

Taormina visits her chiropractor three times a week, but had to cut back the past month because of all her travel.

"I don't want to disappoint my coaches," she said.

"They're so thorough because they understand athletes as well. I'm more conscious now that I have to eat right, do my stretching and be concerned with my health if I'm going to seriously train every day. I wish I had known this in high school."

A helping hand also comes from her sponsors, while allowing her to travel to the ITU World Cup events.

Her three primary sponsors include Speedo, NYPPE (of Greenwich, Conn.) and Philadelphia attorney/triathlete Dan O'Brien of White & Williams.

She also receives equipment from Elite Bikes, Zipp Wheels, Rudy Project Sunglasses, Bike Sport of Dearborn and Aquaman (wet suits).

Another sponsor is Biotics, a nutritional product endorsed by Ellis and Sota.

"Sheila realizes what she eats makes her a more efficient athlete," Ellis said. "Once you hit 30, things start to catch up with you. You can't run on natural talent. You have to learn how to recover and regroup, when not to overdo things."

"We feel we've got her on the right track. She'll be able to train harder and be more consistent."

Ellis has worked with many pro athletes and believes proper biomechanics and biochemistry are the keys.

"I borrowed tapes from her races and I've analyzed them," he said. "We brought her bike in and had her ride on the spinner. We're looking at the athlete from top to bottom, not just the back and neck."

Ellis said Taormina considered retiring from the pro triathlon circuit but now plans to make another run at her third straight Olympics in 2004.

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