FOCUS ON WINNERS: ULRIKE SCHWALBE

Our series giving the views of elite athletes on the clothing and equipment they wear continues with Ulrike Schwalbe, high-profile duathlon, triathlon and Ironman champion from Germany.

Fast changes are essential



Duathlon, triathlon and Ironman champion Ulrike Schwalbe.
Ulrike Schwalbe

Life is never dull for Ulrike Schwalbe; she spends her time alternating between sporting events, competing at the highest level in duathlon (running and cycling), triathlon (running, cycling and swimming) and Ironman (swimming, cycling and marathon running). However, she says that she enjoys the duathlon events she takes part in the best. "Cycling and running are my real passions," she explains, "plus, you don't get wet during a duathlon."

Ironman events have been running since 1978, but their popularity is growing fast and there are now events in Japan, China, Malaysia, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, and six European countries, as well as in the US. From Ms Schwalbe's point of view, there are several reasons why these extreme events are attracting big crowds, long lists of participants and sponsorship from big-name automotive and energy companies. She explains: "Initially, people cannot imagine doing an Ironman. Then they start to train and it acts like a virus. You become addicted. Ironman means lifestyle and that's why it is so popular. People feel like heroes when they have finished one, and they feel part of a big family."

The different events require different clothing and equipment and Ms Schwalbe explains that the distances each leg covers is key to this. Her chosen events are not always run in the same

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Ulrike Schwalbe has a soft spot for a new running shirt from German brand Thoni Mara, the first garment of its kind to incorporate coldblack technology, which helps keep athletes like her cool.

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sequence or over the same distances. For example, when she picked up third place in the 2009 German national duathlon championships in Backnang (some 30km north-east of Stuttgart) last April, the competitors took part in a 10-kilometre run, followed by a 40-kilometre cycle race and, finally, a further five kilometres on foot through the medieval streets of the town. However, when in May 2010, she defends the title she won in the duathlon event at Baunatal, near Kassel, the distances will be five, 30 and five kilometres instead.

"For shorter distances, it's quite important to have fast transitions," the athlete explains. "For the longer ones, your race clothes need places to put gels or bars and should fit like a second skin. In addition, your shoes should be more comfortable than for the shorter races."

Cool running shirt

She has a particular soft spot at the moment for a set of running shirts supplied to her from her apparel sponsor, Thoni Mara. Last year the German sports brand became the first company to incorporate coldblack technology in a running shirt. Coldblack is a development launched by Schoeller Technologies and Clariant that reduces the absorption of solar rays so that dark textiles, in particular, heat up significantly less when exposed to sunlight. It also helps protect the wearer from potentially damaging ultraviolet rays from the sun.

The idea of putting coldblack into a running shirt has earned Thoni Mara recognition as a finalist in the 2010 ispo Brand New Awards, and comments that sports enthusiasts made afterwards made it clear that Ulrike Schwalbe is far from the only fan. The shirts have no seams on the side or the waistband to reduce chafing and have an ergonomic fit. "I don't feel the shirts on my skin," she says. "And unlike other functional clothes I have worn, they stay fresh. They also look great."

She says that her experience so far of coldblack has been very good. She has worn coldblack-enhanced shirts both for training and in competitions and she confirms that the fabric's greater ability to withstand heat led her to sweat less and, as she puts it, "less sweat in the sun means a better training effect and optimised performance". The shoes she likes best are Fast Witch Racers, from US brand Saucony, because they are light and fast.

"I don't think there are a lot of things to improve in the clothes and equipment I wear," she explains. "For me it is important that tops, race clothes, swimsuits, and so on fit exactly. That is sometimes difficult, if you have very long arms and legs. For the shoes, I would like to have the choice of lighter ones with just a little support, because, in my opinion, a lot of supporting elements are not necessary for everybody. I don't really have an opinion about the recent changes to the FINA rules regarding swimsuits in official competitions [see separate article in this issue], but I think they may change again. For triathlon, I can say there is also a very big development regarding wetsuits. For races, everybody will have a special speedsuit and not to wear one will be a disadvantage."

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