



Ruby gives dad Alex Brooks a few pointers

Family planning

Having a child changes everything. It can be hard to keep up with daily life, never mind triathlon. Hard, but by no means impossible

WORDS: AMY SWAN



Triathlon, even if you do it at a recreational level, is a time-consuming sport. Add children to the mix and you will find there are just not enough hours in the day.

Compromises must be made but with careful planning you can be a great parent and a great triathlete.

Alex Brooks had a very successful 2009: his first race was Ironman South Africa, where he came 17th, finishing in 9:31:01; at Ironman UK he finished 18th, in 9:40:54; and at the London Marathon he clocked 2:34, coming 91st out of more than 30,000 runners. He also raced in two Ironman World Championships: at the 70.3 championships in Clearwater, Florida, he was the first British age grouper to cross the line and in Hawaii he finished in an impressive 9:58:53.

And there was more to come: on the night he returned from Hawaii he found

out he was going to become a dad for the first time. His life was about to change completely and for good. I should know; I'm his wife. Ruby Brooks was born in June 2010 and we were thrilled when she arrived.

But, as every parent knows, babies are hard work. I don't think we appreciated the impact this little person would have on us. Our new life demanded adjustments in every area – work, rest and play.

A NEW LIFE

Before there was any talk of a baby, Alex was training 25 hours a week and working full-time as marketing controller at For Goodness Shakes. He'd planned a full season for 2010, aiming for a podium finish in his age group at the Ironman World Championships in Hawaii. This would have meant improving his time by at least 30 minutes. But the challenge of parenthood meant those plans had to go on the back burner.

"When I found out a baby was on the way, I hoped I'd still be able to make some of the races on my wish list," says Alex. He soon realised that was going to be unlikely. "The due date clashed with race dates and, in any case, my priorities changed. Looking after my wife and preparing for Ruby's arrival became more important than training."

Long-distance racing means time-consuming training sessions but it became increasingly difficult for Alex to find the hours or, to be honest, the inclination to complete them. "I'm an all-or-nothing sportsman," he says. "I didn't want to race if I couldn't perform at my absolute best. It was a nonstarter for me if I couldn't do the training required." His 2010 triathlon targets began to fade, but other goals came into focus: "All I had in my mind was the impending birth, how I was going to tackle parenthood and our future as a family." »

PHOTOS: JULIAN ANDREWS, GETTY

In retrospect, Alex didn't anticipate quite how much he'd have to alter the time and energy he put into triathlon once Ruby arrived, nor how much he would be distracted. This is a common experience for triathletes when they become parents for the first time; Johnny Smit, an age grouper who's been a triathlete for seven years, became a dad early last year.

REALITY CHECK

"My thinking before my daughter arrived was that I'd take a month's break to provide support and help where needed, then ease back into training," he explains. "The due date was February so I figured I'd be able to get in a couple of races before the end of the season. In reality I did very little in the first four weeks, then I realised two months had passed and I'd not booked in any races. Before I knew it, I was thinking that baby plus triathlon just wasn't going to work."

While new parents don't know what to expect, experienced coaches do. Geordie McConnell, head coach at Canada's Ottawa Triathlon Club, has worked with many recreational triathletes. He also has a seven-year-old daughter. "When a child is on the way, the first thing I do is send the athlete away to ponder these words regarding parenthood: 'You. Have. No. Idea.' By that I mean you have no idea of

the profound love you'll feel and how it changes your life."

When a child arrives, reorganisation is a necessity and this leaves triathlon further down the list of what's important. For McConnell that's a given. "Frankly, I wouldn't want to work with an athlete who puts triathlon before family," he says.

SUPPORT GROUP

Triathlete Paul Hawkins has three children under the age of three. His third child, Fraser, was born last summer, soon after he won the inaugural Outlaw Long Distance Triathlon in Nottingham. It's clear that the life balance Hawkins has struck is working well for all concerned – he has been a full-time triathlete since December – and he says it's all down to his supportive girlfriend. "To be honest, I wouldn't stand a chance without her. In this sport you need a very understanding partner and Kirsty has always fully supported me."

Remarkably, this was even the case when Kirsty's waters broke the day before the Outlaw. "It probably helped in a strange way because my mind was taken away from the race," says Hawkins. "I was told to get my arse around the course as quickly as possible, which clearly did the trick." He won in 9:11:44, almost 10 minutes ahead of the next finisher.

Hawkins crossed the line with eldest daughter Bella in his arms. "I try to involve the family as much as possible, whether it's coming to races, crossing the line or even fixing and cleaning my bike. The kids love it."

Canadian Simon Whitfield has Olympic gold and silver medals in triathlon, is a seven-time national champion and father of two young daughters. He's a full-time pro and, without a 'regular job', was 100 per cent focused on triathlon training and racing before the children came along. He admits the move to putting family first was difficult at times and says a tight timetable is the key.

"I get up at 5.30am with our youngest and check my emails while she plays. My wife usually works out early. I swim, then meet my family for park time or a coffee or time at home. We schedule our week carefully so I can get some recovery from workouts, too, even if it's just 40 minutes to eat and wind down."

He has also learned to cope with a lot less sleep. "There are days when I think 'remember when', but you adapt and figure it out: the energy and perspective that children bring counteract the lack of sleep and the extra patience needed."

TIME TRIALS

Time becomes precious when you have children; if you use it wisely you can still accomplish a great deal. Be prepared to make adjustments. "This way you'll be a happier, healthier individual and better placed to meet the needs of those who depend on you," says McConnell.

If you can't or don't want to spend a lot of time training, one solution is to switch to shorter workouts and shorter races that allow you to focus on speed. After a season with this approach you can return to longer events, and you may even find that the physical and mental break is beneficial. Another possibility is dropping one discipline altogether and shifting to duathlon or aquathlon, or even dropping two to simply swim, bike or run.

"When your family is fulfilled, they will, in turn, support you," says McConnell. "If your family's needs are being taken care of and you see that a little more training time might now be possible, talk it over with them. They will want you to be happy as well."

For male triathletes the change is largely about time management, carefully carving out space for training and racing between commitments to work and a new family life, but female triathletes must also contend with the enormous physical stresses of pregnancy, birth

TOP TIPS FOR TRIATHLON PARENTS

➤ **Get your priorities right.** Avoid setting yourself triathlon commitments that pray on your mind and leave you unable to enjoy time with your family. The early days of parenthood are a challenge but they're also filled with unforgettable moments.

➤ **Communicate with your partner.** Work on a timetable for your training and racing together. Don't shut each other out.

➤ **Be flexible.** Triathletes are used to splitting their training time between three disciplines, so rearranging once you have kids should be easy. Well, possible.

➤ **Don't waste your time.** Make sure every training session counts. Plan well, make certain the benefits are clear and concentrate. Time is now precious.

➤ **Go for intensity.** When you have a good base of endurance and muscular strength, shorter high-intensity interval workouts will bring you huge results in a short time.

➤ **Go for speed.** Drop down to the shorter races and develop your aerobic capacity and neuromuscular system for speed. When you have the time to return to the longer distances, you'll be flying.

➤ **Squeeze in a session.** If you work away from home, train when your family doesn't need or expect you to be around. Get up a little earlier and train before work, or do a session at lunchtime.

➤ **Be a different kind of commuter.** If the distances make sense, use your journey to work as training. Run or cycle instead of taking the car, bus or train.

➤ **Involve your family.** Let them become your support team. Get them interested by taking them to races, talking them through your training and helping organise your kit.

➤ **If they can't beat you, let them join you.** When your kids are small, kit yourself out with a specialist running buggy and let them come along for the ride.



"I was told to get my arse around the course as quickly as possible, which clearly did the trick."

Paul Hawkins, with partner Kirsty and children Rhys, Bella and newcomer Fraser

and motherhood. Getting back to fitness and returning to triathlon after giving birth are major challenges.

There are many opinions regarding when it is safe to begin exercising after giving birth. The National Childbirth Trust advises that you wait six weeks before embarking on a strenuous exercise programme, whether or not you had a natural birth. However, light exercise is possible

before that – talk to your midwife or GP before you make any decisions. Joints are likely to be vulnerable for the first three months after birth, particularly if you're breastfeeding, so it is important to take it easy and not push yourself too far. Women who were fit going into pregnancy, are likely to be able to return to activity more quickly after birth.

Australian Wendy Andrews is an endurance athlete with three Ironman finishes to her name. When pregnant with her son, Lachie, she cycled until month seven, at which point her bump began to get in the way. Following the birth, her first run was when Lachie was about eight weeks old, and her first triathlon – 1.5K/30K/8K – came after 12 weeks.

The first big one was Trailwalker, a 100K run/walk that she completed when Lachie was seven months old. It was her

seventh Trailwalker, but this time Lachie was still breastfeeding. Andrews was able to feed him during the race because her husband drove the baby to meet her at each rest point. "It was a very big goal," she recalls. "The journey to it involved plenty of tough physical sessions to increase my capabilities and some tough mental sessions to overcome the little voice in my head occasionally saying, 'Who do you think you are? New mums don't run 100K.'"

Interestingly, Andrews feels she is now mentally stronger and better equipped to deal with physical pain but, having been at her fittest when she became pregnant, she does not think she has fully regained her physical form.

DIFFERENT STROKES

Andrews has found that she has to approach training differently, making the most of whatever sessions she can fit in. "I can no longer train in the morning because my husband starts work at 5.45am and I look after Lachie," she explains. "Now there is simply less time available for training, but I have the attitude that it's about quality rather than quantity. If you're doing the best you can, you need to be able to turn up on the start line of a race and honestly say 'Sure, I missed a few sessions but I trained every single time I could and did my best, and that is good enough.'"

It's a view shared by German professional triathlete Sandra Wallenhorst, who has a four-year-old son, Philipp. "No mum likes to leave her baby at home. When you're separated from your child every day to go out training you want to make sure it's worth it," she says.

In 2008, 18 months after giving birth, Wallenhorst won her first Ironman, breaking the world record set by Paula Newby-Fraser in 1994. In the same year she finished third at the Ironman World Championships in Hawaii and won the Ironman European Championship title, which she retained in 2009.

It took her about six months to regain her fitness after giving birth. "It was hard work – you really need to want it – but if you want it enough, you'll get over the pain and you'll ultimately have a lot to be proud of," she says.

To begin with, Wallenhorst just wanted to get back in shape and re-establish her triathlon career. "I was determined to find a way back but always wanted to make sure that my baby was OK with that," says. "I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't sure everything with Philipp would be fine."



Bella Bayliss

...AND BABY MAKES THREE

Professional triathletes Bella and Stephen Bayliss are counting down to the arrival of their first child, due on August 1. Having been at the top of the sport and members of Team TBB for the last four years, becoming parents will change their lives more than most.

How do you think having a baby will affect your lives as triathletes?

Bella: We realise that it's going to change things a lot. Once we are parents, we hope to continue our triathlon careers. I would like to come back to race for a few more years but appreciate that it will not be easy. Stephen is more motivated than ever. In fact, we hope having a baby will improve our performances in triathlon.

Will you continue training and racing while pregnant?

I plan to exercise but not to train and I won't be racing at all. I'll continue swimming but running will be minimal and biking will be just for fun. Last year was very difficult for me; I had some awful injuries in both hamstrings. I've done a lot to my body over the years, so this year I plan to give it the time it needs to recover from triathlon. What is your plan for returning to fitness? After the baby has arrived, I want to build back up in the right way so will go

very steadily. I'll trust my coach and will also rely on Stephen's support. I believe that having a baby will make me stronger and I am up for the challenge of getting back to the top of the sport. How will life as an iron couple + 1 pan out? We'll see how things go. I'm sure the baby will come with us to races and we'll take it turns to compete and spectate. We have a lot to learn about babies.

"There is less time available for training, but I have the attitude that it's about quality rather than quantity." Wendy Andrews (left, with Lachie)



She has the support of her partner, parents and friends and also employs a nanny. When she's away from home for longer than two weeks, her son travels with her. "The most important thing is that you feel confident in the people around you. And to be a good mum you have to feel good about yourself, which is

why it's beneficial for everyone that you keep up with training and racing."

Finding a life balance that suits you, your partner and your children may take a while but it is possible. You don't want to look back on your life and wonder why you spent so much time training and racing and so little with your children.

One thing's for sure; my husband will return to triathlon. And I will make sure he does – there's nothing worse than a triathlete tortured by a lack of training and racing. He says that Ruby has superseded all his sporting goals but, once his fatherly duties are done, I will kick him out the door in his kit, ready to go.

HAVE STROLLER, WILL TRAIN

Becoming a parent needn't bring your training to a complete halt. With the right stroller you can be back running sooner than you think

Running with a buggy allows you to combine your training with childcare and, if you're a new mother, also gives you the chance to lose some of that baby weight. But if you want your baby to be comfortable and your running style uncompromised, you need the right stroller for the job. We've done the research for you.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT...

- 1 Comfort** Does your child seem comfortable, have a good view and enjoy the ride? Are the seats and straps adequately padded? Can he or she be protected from sun, wind and rain?
- 2 Safety** Is there a handlebar brake and wrist strap? Is the child's harness fully adjustable and secure? Does the frame feel strong and stable?
- 3 Ease of use** Does the design allow you to run upright, unhindered and with a full stride? Is it easy to push and steer one-handed while you're running at speed?
- 4 Practicality** Is it easy to assemble, fold, transport and store? It shouldn't be a two-man job.

5 Versatility Can the stroller also be used for different activities, or as your everyday buggy?

RUNNING-BUGGY CHECKLIST

- ➔ Don't be seduced by products with words like 'sport' or 'swift' in the name, and don't assume all three-wheelers are suitable for running – most won't be built for the job.
- ➔ In general, the more a buggy has been engineered for running, the less versatile it will be as an everyday pushchair. So, if you just want to do a spot of weekend jogging, look for a model you can use every day, too. But serious triathletes will want a specific stroller.
- ➔ You'll want large wheels (40cm or larger), pneumatic tyres and a fixed front wheel to cope with uneven ground. That way, off-road is a doddle.
- ➔ Look for a brake on the handlebar so you can control the stroller when you're going downhill, and a wrist strap in case you lose your grip or take a tumble. If a buggy doesn't have these

features, that's fine – just stick to running on flat ground and limit your speed.

- ➔ Even if a buggy can recline fully, it's not recommended you run with babies younger than three months old. Your passenger should at least be able to support his/her head.
- ➔ To make the ride comfortable for your child, check for rear-wheel suspension, an adequately padded seat and an adjustable five-point harness.
- ➔ Check the structural integrity – give it a shake and guard against loose joints or flimsy fixtures.
- ➔ Buggies are heavy, particularly when you add the weight of one or two children, so go for the lightest you can find.
- ➔ Will you want to load it into your car or do you have limited storage at home? If so, look for a model with a compact fold and quick-release wheels.
- ➔ Check for extras such as storage, drinks holders, rain and sun covers and foot muffs. If you need them and they're not included, the costs can mount up.

TWO OF THE BEST

BABY JOGGER PERFORMANCE, 25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
Price £379.99 WEIGHT 8.9kg

This is Paula Radcliffe's running buggy of choice, and with good reason. A one-piece frame means there are no joints or hinges to weaken. The precision engineering of the thin, 51cm wheels, effective rear shock absorbers and direct-pull handlebar

V-brake is impressive. There's ample room for a long stride, it glides along flat ground smoothly and manoeuvres easily over uneven terrain. The child sits high, which gives a good view and a smoother ride. The seat reclines and is well padded, as is the five-point secure harness. It's light, folds easily and has quick-release wheels for popping into your car boot without fuss. With its large wheels and its length this is not an all-purpose stroller, but as a piece of running kit it means business.

Info: babyjogger.com



CHARIOT CARRIERS CX 2
Price £910 (£850 for CX 1 single trailer)
plus £95 for stroller conversion kit
WEIGHT 13.5kg

This is no ordinary jogging stroller – it's a multi-purpose vehicle. It's primarily a bike trailer for two children, but the addition of a front spoke wheel turns it into a runner. We were impressed by the quality of the kit and its compact fold. A separate sling means it's suitable for babies aged from 20 weeks. There's a handlebar brake and long wrist strap, and it has adjustable handlebar height and a range of ergonomic grips – both neat features. But the extra storage facility adds to the weight and makes it feel quite back-heavy.

Info: chariotcarriers.com

