



Raw power: Spencer Smith leads the field at the 2001 European Triathlon Championships in the Czech Republic

TRI LEGENDS

THE BRITISH BULLDOG

Launching our series profiling the stars of 220's lifetime is **Spencer Smith**, Britain's combative, charismatic and confident three-time ITU World Champion



Spencer Smith's maiden (and just one of many to come) 220 cover appearances in August 1992, off the back of registering a win at the European Triathlon Champs in Belgium

Back when the Brownlees were in short trousers and John Major was facing a weekly lampooning on *Spitting Image*, Spencer Smith was one part of a double act that dominated Olympic-distance triathlon. If Smith's British rival – the South African émigré Simon Lessing – had the edge in ITU world titles, then Smith – the son of a used-car salesman – was a cult hero who provoked more devotion; the Agassi to Lessing's Sampras.

The name Spencer Smith still conjures excitement in fans of tri (he's one of the few elites to have a biography published), hence being the undisputed choice to start our series.

Spencer Smith was born on 11 May 1973 in West Middlesex Hospital to Barbara and Bill Smith, a former footballer for QPR. Spencer started swimming competitively at four and by 15 had achieved national championship success. But he was already seeking a fresh challenge. Enter Thames Turbo Triathlon Club, the future home of Tim Don and Stu Hayes. Smith would win the National Junior Champs in 1989 – edging Iain Hamilton (now the Outlaw's

organiser) into second at Holme Pierrepont – and the National/Euro Junior double in 1990.

In autumn 1990, Bill Black became the man tasked with elevating Smith's bike and run to his swimming level. Combined with Smith's famous dedication, Black's magic soon reaped rewards. A win at the first Windsor Triathlon in June 1991 was followed by 13 more victories that season, including the National Champs at Wakefield, accompanied by a familiar soundtrack: dad Bill shouting "Go on my son!" His tri season finished as a spectator at Ironman Hawaii, with a picture in 220 showing Smith with victor Mark Allen.

NON-DRAFTING DOMINANCE

1992 started with wins at both the National and European Duathlon Champs, before taking silver behind Lessing at the 220 Series race in Swindon, which marked the start of Britain's most famous triathlon rivalry. After powering his way to the front on the swim, Smith would win the European Champs in Belgium in July before blitzing the ITU Junior Worlds in Canada.

Smith turned 20 as the Olympics-courting ITU were discussing dropping non-drafting, a move that would change the dynamic of racing.



Smith, aged just 18, wins the Portsmouth Tri in 1991, one of his 13 victories that season alone



Smith racing through Windsor's Great Park on one of his happy hunting grounds, the Windsor Triathlon course



The ever-popular Smith being interviewed pre-race at Windsor in 1999, a year after placing fifth at Ironman Hawaii



His greatest race? Obliterating a field containing Simon Lessing, Brad Beven and Hamish Carter at the 1993 ITU World Champs in Manchester

Ironically, Smith was disqualified for drafting at the 1993 Euros before the ITU Worlds headed to Manchester. Now a fearsome cyclist, Smith tore through the swim and the non-drafting bike live on the BBC, entering T2 a minute before Lessing. Those expecting Smith to be reeled in by Lessing's loping gait saw the Londoner extend his lead to batter the field by 2mins. "It was one of those days where you couldn't hurt yourself enough," was Smith's verdict.

Smith won his final ITU world title in New Zealand in 1994 before boycotting the 1995 Worlds due to the implementation of draft-legal racing. With tri making its Olympic debut in 2000, the ITU would feel vindicated but, for a flat-out swim/biker like Smith, it hastened a departure to going long. Third at the Middle Distance Worlds in 1996 came before another Euro champs Olympic-distance title in 1997.

Heartbreak followed in 1998 when Bill Smith died of cancer and tri lost a major character. Two months later on his debut at Ironman Hawaii, Smith came fifth to earn a Brit male record. He married his partner Melissa days later in Hawaii before testing positive for nandrolone (the test was overturned in 1999).

Smith quit tri for cycling in 1999 before returning to multisport to finish eighth at Kona in 2000 before victories at Ironmans Florida and Brazil in 2001 and 2002. Typical of his dogged determination, Smith would recover from a horrific training ride crash in 2005 to place second at Ironman Arizona in 2006. Smith's coaching career then took centre stage, his passion still inspiring triathletes 25 years after swinging open the doors of Thames Turbo.

EXCLUSIVE SMITH Q&A

The British great talks 25 years of tri, Mark Allen and selling himself

We caught up with Smith, now leading S2 Coaching in Palm Beach, Florida, to talk about triathlon's journey, the divisions in the sport and the tough job of selling himself in the early days...

220: What for you have been major changes in the sport since 1989?

Smith: The growth of the sport and being recognised and accepted into the Olympics. Rarely now do people ask 'what is a triathlon?'. The average person on the street may not know all the distances and all the races, but the fact that they recognise the sport is a very big deal. The cost is a negative thing. Triathlon has become very expensive and isn't always readily available to all who want to compete in it.

What is your greatest achievement?
My world championship titles and the fact that I made my mum and dad so proud.

Who would be your hero of 220's lifetime?
Mark Allen. He was my hero from the start and

still is to this day. A true living legend that could win at any distance.

What relationship have you had with 220?
You've played a huge part in my career. Without wanting to sound dated, in my early racing days the media coverage was very limited and to go out and acquire sponsors was challenging. The fact that I could show a potential sponsor a publication that was the quality of 220 from day one was massive. It made the already tough job of selling myself that bit easier.

What major change would you hope tri makes in its next 25 years?
I would actually love to see both long- and sprint-distance racing accepted into the Olympic programme. To me, they represent everything that the Games stand for. The sport today is far too divided and, with the inclusion of long-distance racing into the Games especially, I think the gap could close.

