

TRAIN LIKE AN ELITE

VANESSA RAW

Five years ago, Vanessa Raw had the tri world at her feet. Then injuries mounted and confidence evaporated. **Andy Blow** hears how a focus on run and gym work is returning her to top form

There is a law in statistics know as 'regression to the mean'. It states that if an extreme event occurs, then subsequent events are more likely to end up closer to the average than this exceptional occurrence. The early triathlon career of Vanessa Raw feels a little like it was subject to these forces. She exploded onto the triathlon scene in 2006, giving Helen Jenkins a scare at Windsor, taking fourth at the Under 23 Worlds and 10th at the Beijing Olympics test event. It was an incredible debut season for the then Loughborough-based fine art student. As a result, all the talk was of the 2008 Olympics and probable world domination.

But, despite her obvious talent, work ethic and racing abilities, Vanessa's body had other ideas. A series of stress fractures, knee issues and niggles stopped her competitive progress during the subsequent seasons. By 2011, she was approaching her wits' end, a persistent foot problem causing her to all but throw in the towel. It was at this lowest of low points that Vanessa's manager, Luke Lloyd Davies, introduced her to fitness trainer Jon Roberts and a light appeared at the end of the tunnel.

"I had basically stopped trying," she explains. "In an odd sort of way, I think that mentally giving up and letting go enabled me to fully relax. One day, after I'd been in London at a party, I jumped on the treadmill, did a short jog and found my foot wasn't really hurting too much any more."

RETURN POLICY

Buoyed by this and encouraged by Roberts, Vanessa started training again in mid-2011 and started to see results almost straight away. "Big systems for training athletes, such as the programme at Loughborough, have some advantages," declares Roberts. "But they pour a lot of talent in the top and produce a few world-class athletes out of the bottom. There's a lot of wastage along the way. Vanessa was not getting the individualised support

she needed in the programme, so she came out of it and we've built a team around her requirements."

Vanessa relocated from the Midlands halfway through last year and now lives and trains in Kingston, Surrey. At the end of the 2011 season, she grabbed 10th at the Mexican ITU World Cup race and won the Eilat Triathlon (a European Cup race). Jon now oversees her training on a day-to-day basis, with additional support from a chiropractor, a physio and ex-GB cyclist/massage therapist Chris Ball, all of whom see her each and every week.

She's currently putting in about 10hrs of swimming (5 x 2hr sessions with Kingston Royal swim club), 9-10hrs of cycling over four to five sessions and four run sets totalling 3-4hrs, plus gym work in a seven-day cycle. Training tends to be done early in the day (she starts swimming at 5am) and finishes around 3pm. "This allows me time to paint in the evenings, which is relaxing and energising," she says, and is currently working on a series of portraits of inspiring people such as Sir Ranulph Fiennes, David Millar and wise-cracking swimmer David Walliams.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

Due to her previous injury issues largely being run-related, it's the running programme that's taken much of Roberts' time and energy to put right. "When she first came here, we did a lot of work on alignment issues in the hips, as tight and weak muscles were causing Vanessa to favour her left leg while her right was over-striking. We use video feedback, unilateral exercises to make sure both the left and right sides are strong and flexible, and a host of gym exercises to keep her much more balanced now.

Running sessions are highly focused with technique work, fast-paced running and no junk miles."

The rationale for this, it seems, is to keep the amount of time Vanessa spends running to a minimum, while getting maximum results. "When she started here, running downhill was a nightmare, but we now include regular downhill and uphill running. Vanessa's style has improved. Her foot strike is →

VANESSA'S FACTFILE

Age 27
Lives Kingston, Surrey
Top three results
1st, Windsor Triathlon, 2010
4th, U23 Worlds, 2006
10th, Beijing Olympic test event, 2006



© PAUL WHITFIELD, WWW.SHOTS.CO.UK

TRAIN LIKE AN ELITE



OFF-SEASON TRAINING PLAN

Vanessa's schedule balances outdoor sessions with gym work to prevent injury and build strength



	5am	9am	1pm	3pm
Monday	Swim	2.5hr bike	Strength work in gym	Yoga
Tuesday	Swim	60min 'super set' runs on undulating ground	90min bike roller session, varied pace throughout	Massage
Wednesday	Swim	Running hill sets: 10min warm-up; 3 x 500m hills runs with 500m recovery; 3min recovery then repeat to complete four sets in total	Gym power and plyometric training	60min altitude roller training on bike
Thursday	Swim	2hr steady-pace bike ride	Running intervals: Warm-up run 10mins; 1,400m/1,200m/1,000m/800m runs with 60secs recovery between each run; 3min recovery after each set of four runs, and three sets in total	Massage
Friday	Morning off		Gym-based strength and power training	
Saturday	Swim	60min fun run	Yoga	
Sunday	2hr team ride alternating leader pushing pace, riding through the Surrey hills			

NOTE Training is based on a four-week cycle with similar sessions each week, but three weeks include more high-intensity work, with the fourth being a little easier for recovery.

JARGON BUSTER

DEADLIFT

An exercise where a barbell is lifted off the ground. The move starts with an athlete in a bent-over position and finishes with them standing straight.

SUPER SET

Comprises two sets of different exercises done back-to-back with no rest to make one large or 'super' set.

ECCENTRIC PHASE

When a muscle is contracting but lengthening at the same time. Generally when lowering a weight or your bodyweight under control.

CONCENTRIC PHASE

When a muscle is contracting and shortening. Generally when lifting a weight or creating explosive movement.

much quieter and we've had no real recurrences of the injuries."

The specific sessions the pair do together are based around the following exercises...

- 500m hill intervals (uphill and downhill) to work on pacing, strength and leg speed.
- Descending intervals of 1,400m, 1,200m, 1,000m and 800m with short recoveries.
- 'Super set' runs on undulating ground where they lift the pace for about 1km at the end of a 3km set to ensure Raw can accelerate at the end of races.

These are complemented by power, balance and strength sets in the gym using exercises like deadlifts, squats and split lunges to both aid balance and to control eccentric movements of the lower limbs while limiting rotation in the back.

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

It's clear that both athlete and trainer are incredibly focused and dedicated to getting the most minute details of training and lifestyle sorted out to facilitate success in 2012. "We've been through hundreds of pairs of running shoes to find the right ones," Vanessa explains, "and I've got access to simulated altitude training from altitudecentre.com. The team around me talk every week, if not several times a week, and it all seems to be working well. I actually feel in my element right

now and couldn't be happier." It's all a far cry from the bouts of depression she suffered in previous years when the injury crisis was at its worst.

"We parked the competitive work after Eilat to focus on hitting the start of 2012 in full fitness," Roberts concludes. "We're looking for consistency so decided that racing would only interrupt winter training. We are now working on a solid four-week cycle where three weeks

are hard and, to promote recovery, one week is a little easier."

When I mention the 'O' word, it's clear that getting a place on the start line at Hyde Park is not considered pie in the sky within the Raw camp. "I'll be the best I can be this year and whatever happens will happen," she says, philosophically. Based on past results, Vanessa Raw at her best should be a force to be reckoned with. Watch this space... **220**

TAKEAWAY TIPS

- **Don't give in!** All athletes suffer with setbacks and have times when packing it all in seems like an attractive option. Vanessa's determination to continue in the face of years of adversity shows what can be done with the right attitude.
- **Train in an environment that suits you** if you aren't thriving in a club, a team or with the coach, step back and ask yourself if they are the right people to be helping you achieve your aspirations.
- **Don't underestimate the value of gym work and conditioning in injury prevention** Time spent on strength, posture and alignment decreases injury risk and enables more consistent training.
- **Split hard and easy training sessions** Don't just train moderately all of the time. Hard sets should be really hard and recovery sets should be really easy. This stimulates improvement and promotes adaption to the stress of training.



GYM'LL FIX IT: VANESSA'S INDOOR TRAINING ROUTINE

WARM-UP

Vanessa's gym routines start with 15-20mins of mobility exercises designed to activate stabilising muscles. These help her to maintain good posture and execute the strength-building movements with good form.



1 LOOSENING MUSCLES
Mobilisation starts with exercises on a foam roller to loosen the fascia around the muscles, which, in turn, means the joints are more mobile and an enhanced range of movement is possible. Vanessa uses the roller on the ITB (iliotibial band), glutes, hamstrings, calves and lower back in particular.



2 HIP FLEXING
She then moves onto movements such as hip flexor mobilisations where putting her arms up in the air helps to stretch out the abs at the same time.



3 ACTIVATING HIP ABDUCTORS
Movements such as side strides and 'Monster Walks' (walking forwards) with a band around her legs are included to activate the hip abductors, which play a key role in stabilising the lower body when she moves onto more dynamic exercises.



4 CATERPILLAR WALKS
Finally, exercises such as caterpillar walks are used to ease out the calves, Achilles and lower back.

MAIN SETS

The main exercises Vanessa follows to build strength and muscular endurance are done as 'super sets' to complement each other. These emphasise slow, controlled movements in the eccentric phase and

faster, more powerful ones in the concentric to increase both stability and power. Often they are unilateral exercises (using one side of the body at a time) to create balance and even out discrepancies from side to side.



1 REVERSE LUNGE
Vanessa lowers down in reverse to a slow count of three, before pushing back up in a count of one. She does a low number of reps (three to six) per set for strength and power. This exercise is



'super-setted' with alternate sliding squat thrusts. These use opposing muscle groups and are designed to promote muscular endurance by completing 50 repetitions. This whole set is undertaken five times in total.



2 TRAP BAR DEADLIFT
Like the lunges, this movement is performed slowly when lowering the weight and quickly when lifting it up. Again, three to six reps are performed and it's super-setted with 'face pulls' that work the upper back and rotator cuff. Vanessa does a lot of



upper-back exercises to complement the fact that swimming tends to build the chest more and can lead to poor upper back posture, which then affects her running. Face pulls are done in sets of 12-15 reps and, as before, five sets in total are performed.



3 SINGLE DEADLIFT
This movement is performed relatively slowly and promotes balance and control. As it's more focused on muscular endurance, eight to 12 reps are performed and it's super-setted with a standing overhead dumbbell press. This works



the shoulders and relies on good stability in the abdominals, hips and lower body. Approximately eight repetitions per set are performed; Vanessa completes three sets in total. She then finishes her gym routine by stretching all of the major muscle groups.