

Challenges of the driven female athlete

SOME FEMALE ATHLETES ARE SO DRIVEN THAT THEY WILL TRAIN UNTIL THEY DROP. **Charlene Hutsebaut explores this topic through a successful Case Study.**

The very driven female athlete: they respond extremely well to goal setting and thrive on keeping track of workout statistics and achievements. These women not only commit to their workouts with an exercise professional, but also train in their own time and they genuinely enjoy being active. On paper, these women look ideal because they are so dedicated and usually are therefore enjoyable for a professional to work with. If you are reading this and thinking, yes but... “they are also head-strong, extremely driven, high achievers, who can push themselves to extremes of training”, then you would also be right. High achieving women can sometimes push too hard and either over-train, resulting in adrenal fatigue, suffer from an injury or under-achieve in their competitions: this is the tricky business of working with this type of woman. Here I will give an excellent and thankfully successful story of the journey of one of my clients over the last decade. My goal is to give you some tools and strategies to try and keep these women healthy and feeling positive about their training and competitions.

Introducing Catherine

As an exercise specialist, I work mostly with the general public in London. This means that the women I see who fall into this “very driven” category are usually also working full-time and more! My client who has agreed to be in this case study, is named Catherine and works in the City. She is at a high level of management in a small to medium sized company, is in her early forties, married with

no children and has what I would term a “small version” mesomorph (athletic and strong) body type. Her main competitions currently are cycling Time Trials throughout the year, starting in the Spring with the Irish Coast to Coast Multisport race and finishing in September with the France Duo Normond, 55km two-up Time Trial. Catherine used to focus on a yearly ½ Ironman triathlon in Ireland and I met her just after she had attempted her very first one. She knew during this first race that she needed some guidance regarding her training because her performance felt “laboured and heavy”. In preparation for the race, she “dabbled here and there” with the three disciplines but didn’t have an understanding of how to periodise a programme. I learned that in her teens she had swum at county level and very much enjoyed the structured and guided training approach. Her main goal in working with me was to feel better when completing her next year’s triathlon, with her secondary goal being the bonus of having a fit and healthy body. Over the years, these goals have remained similar, but have shifted and changed slightly. We’ll come to this later.

Over the decade in which I have been working with Cathy, editor Ian Craig has been a part of our strategic planning team. He writes her triathlon/cycling plans and counsels on nutrition when a follow-up is needed, while I build the weight training, core/Pilates and flexibility portions. She trains six to seven days a week (of course, with active rest days) unless work is particularly busy. I am her main point of contact, as I see her twice a week regularly through the year. As you would imagine, we



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know each other very well – as soon as she walks in the door, I know what type of day she’s had at work or how her training has gone the previous weekend. I therefore have an excellent understanding of what makes her tick, how she likes to work and what motivates her. The three of us working as a team enables us to structure her integrated programmes throughout the year so they run smoothly and she, in the end, performs well.

More is better

The first several years were an interesting challenge because Catherine had the common attitude that more training is better! We worked extremely hard at keeping track of how she felt throughout sessions and competitions and she slowly started to gain an understanding of why athletes should periodise their programmes and flow through different cycles at various times of year. I personally feel that this is even more important to get right when training someone who is also working full-time. This kind of individual will know through the year when their business is busier or quieter and you can even plan competitions around these varying periods. At times though, this will not be possible, so finding

Considerations for the driven female athlete

- They like goals!
- Setting up and following a periodised programme works well because they enjoy structure.
- It's important to bust some of the old myths about training such as "more is better" by explaining what periodisation is and why it works (these women are great at doing more because they are mentally strong)!
- A professional should be firm and calm: remember you are the authority on this subject – these clients are used to being in control!
- Driven female athletes should be monitored closely for stress with a weekly questionnaire or verbally. Also, empower them to understand the signs and symptoms so they can continue to make the best lifestyle choices for themselves.
- Explain how training is an ever-evolving process for everyone, our bodies change constantly as do our goals, so adjustments are important to make.
- Discuss what "stress beating" strategies they can use at work:
 - taking breaks or time-outs
 - not overloading the diary
 - slotting in workouts and protecting those time slots
- have certain days to leave work at a reasonable time either for workout or an evening of rest
- They should know when to say no at work or in private life, so they can focus on training – because these women are strong mentally, they will push and push until they hit their "end point" – they really do feel that they can do everything!
- Nutrition planning:
 - have healthy snacks on-hand for days filled with meetings to fuel for evening workouts
 - consume a nutrient-rich meal the night before a workout day so the body has something to recover and replenish energy stores with (I find some of these female clients still cut back on calories and then wonder why they can't perform well in the gym the next day)
 - make meals for several days and store in Tupperware in the fridge (this seems straightforward but people need to be reminded to do this)
 - discuss what their best options are for post-workout nutrition (some may say they don't want these calories for the above mentioned reasons)

ways to fine tune the training and to be flexible is important. This brings me to the psychology of the driven female client.

Catherine is of course unique in many ways, but in terms of mental strength, she sits firmly in the category of the group that we are discussing. It has taken many years for us to get to a place where she is comfortable following the ebb and flow of her periodised programme or admitting that she needs a break or a shift in the training if she feels fatigued. In the past she would push herself to her limits and well beyond and we would then need to pull back and allow recovery time. She was still holding onto some of the old beliefs of: "more is better" and "if I miss the workout written on the sheet, the whole process will break down". As an example, there were weeks when she would miss a Tuesday

workout due to work commitments and then try to fit it in at the end of the week while still performing all other workouts. She also didn't like it when I suggested that we have a Pilates and flexibility day rather than hard weight training because I knew she needed active rest. Her work life still dictates that a day at the office may be longer and therefore a workout is missed, but she now understands that getting home for a healthy meal and a good sleep is more important than forcing a workout. Admittedly though, she still finds getting the work and training balance difficult, although I see her dealing with it much better than she used to. She still admits that she will feel "grumpy and physically feel it" if she misses a session: if this happens, we talk through the realities of the long hours at work and the physical and mental stresses resulting. We've spent many hours discussing signs and symptoms of overtraining and the quick decline in performance (in training and/or competition) which can result. This truly is a fine balance to discover with a client, but if you're lucky enough to see them at least twice a week, you can constantly monitor them, teaching what stressors to look for and how to think more positively when training days are shifted or changed because of work.

Food priorities

Catherine's lifestyle choices have changed significantly since our first year together. Before her first triathlon, she wasn't one for the gym, but now admits that she wishes she'd started 20 years ago. Solid sport nutrition has improved for her over the years as well. In the beginning, she wasn't sure about her best fuel on given days. Ian guided her on the best choices and I monitored her each week, asking how certain foods and variations worked for her. She still

enjoys socialising, but training and performance are priorities to her, so she'd rather not drink alcohol and get home early and sometimes miss an evening out entirely. For her, the next day of training is more important. Through her education on food, she "knows what she should have" and I see her making these positive choices most days. The problem creeps in when long days at work happen: sleep then suffers, she feels stressed and during the following days, she makes poor food choices. This mostly happens if there are cakes or treats in the office! She confesses that she isn't perfect when it comes to food, but she understands what fuels her well and when her mind is focused on her next physical goal, her meals and snacks fall into place. She says, "training allows me to make good decisions." A bonus for Catherine is that her husband also enjoys being active and takes a hand in cooking. Either one of them will cook enough food in an evening meal so there are leftovers for both of their lunches the next day. This saves money, time and ensures proper nutrition.

Thankfully today, Catherine understands that being active is an ever evolving process. The goals shift slightly for her each year as she becomes interested in new challenges. Therefore, the periodised training programme also shifts and changes. She says that she's found a balance in her life, which I agree with. She shows self awareness of when she is close to doing too much and pulls back either at work or in her training. Her nutrition is educated and for the most part well-planned. She allows herself to be a bit looser with her eating in the off-season from about September to November, but once the first competition is in sight in May, she's back on track and allowing everything to flow. **FSN**



About the author

Charlene Hutsebaut BPE, B.Ed., CSCS has 20 years' experience in the fitness industry. Her background lies in Sports Science and Athletic Therapy with her strengths being biomechanics and anatomy. She runs her own personal training consultancy in London www.charlenehutsebaut.com, is founder of online health and fitness membership site www.positivelyslim.ning.com and is the contributing Exercise Specialist for the new book "The De-Stress Diet" www.de-stressyourlife.com, Huggies Diapers – Little Swimmers Campaign and for UK online food company www.healthysupplies.co.uk. Charlene has written for *UK Fit Pro*, *Can Fit Pro*, *Fitness Life New Zealand* and has been featured in *London*, *Fabric*, *Grove* and *Natural Health* magazines, as well as *The Daily Mail*.