

Q & A



FRESH MEAT: COLLINS WILL TEST HIS TRIATHLON MOJO AS A NEW PRO

With Ben Collins

Ben Collins has hopped the fast train to triathlon grandeur. In two-years time, the 24-year-old went from professional underwater robot engineer with a bike to professional triathlete with a whole bike box full of amateur race wins to his name. After claiming the USA Triathlon age-group national championship in June and taking the International Triathlon Union age-group Olympic-distance world title September 2—a feat that mirrors Marc Bonnet-Eymard's spectacular 2006 Nationals-to-Worlds tour de force—Collins officially traded his amateur status for the rough-and-tumble pro ranks. While the former collegiate swimmer has proven he's both a world-class athlete and amazingly quick study, does Collins have what it takes to do battle with the big boys?

1) YOU CLEARLY ROCK THE AMATEUR SCENE. WHY GO PRO? I want to see how far I can get with the sport, and to do that, I need to turn pro. I've conquered the age-group world; I've shown what I can do there. The elite field is where I need to go to find out what I'm actually capable of.

2) YOU TURNED PRO THE DAY AFTER WORLDS. DID THE IMPENDING JUMP AFFECT YOUR PERFORMANCE IN HAMBURG? No matter how I did at Worlds, I was turning pro the next day. But with that in mind, I knew that was my last chance to get a great result out there as an amateur.

3) WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR 2008? I want to try and do as many ITU draft-legal races as possible and some bigger non-drafting races like Wildflower, as well. I also really want to do Escape from Alcatraz. I think it would totally play to my strengths.

4) IT'S A PRETTY TOUGH ELITE ITU FIELD. CAN YOU CONTEND? I don't know. I'm not going into it with any sort of expectations. It's going to be a completely different race. But I think I can swim with pretty much anyone out there. I may need to work on my transitions, but I'm hoping that I'll be in the lead pack of the bike. We'll find out.

5) WHAT'S YOUR GREATEST WEAKNESS ENTERING THE PRO RANKS? My run definitely needs to be faster. Right now I'm running a 34 [-minute 10km] without a draft. The top guys are running 31, 30, some of them 29. But I haven't even been running for two years now, so I'm sure it will come. I have a lot of confidence in myself.

6) TO WHAT DO YOU ATTRIBUTE YOUR RECENT SUCCESS? A lot of hard work, probably some natural talents, but more than anything, it's a lot of really good friends. I definitely couldn't be here without all the support I've gotten. I've just had so many people go out of their way to give me advice, help me with travel and find me places to stay. Every little thing I've asked for, I've been able to find someone to help me out with.

7) DID YOU EVER THINK YOU'D BECOME A PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE? No! In swimming, I used to think 24 was over the hill, ancient. I thought my career would be over at 22. The fact that I'm 24, stronger than I was in college and feeling like a better athlete, I'm really happy about that. Looking at the other guys in triathlon, I'm actually about as green as they come. I'm still really young.

8) WILL A NEW CAREER IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS DERAIL YOUR MED SCHOOL ASPIRATIONS? I'm not sure what I'm doing as far as school goes. I definitely want to continue my education and I'll do as much as I can while pursuing triathlon. I just paid the tuition for Honors Organic Chemistry [at the University of Washington], so I'm bound to taking that. But obviously it's a once-in-a-lifetime chance to become a professional athlete, so I'm going to make that my main focus.

9) DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR AMATEURS AT THE TOP OF THEIR SPORT? You can stay at the top of the amateur field, the age-group scene, for years. That's OK for a while, but to me, the point of doing athletics is to see how far you can get and see what you're capable of. In order to do that, you have to go up against the best out there. Even if you're working a full-time job, I think it's worth it. I don't think it's an opportunity everyone gets. Of course, in a year from now, I might say, "Oh God, why did I do this?" —MELAINA JUNTTI