

# “FINISHING LAST HAS NEVER PUT ME OFF”

*An ileostomy didn't stop Caroline Bramwell, it was simply the start of her journey to becoming an Ironman*

I started swimming lessons six months before my first sprint triathlon in 2010 and I was terrified. I was one of the first waves to set off and I was eventually last overall, 20mins behind the last runner and the person collecting the arrows walked in with me. I hadn't trained for running; I thought I could run and I was wrong!

But it didn't put me off – the elation of finishing was the main part, and having the support of my family and tri club. Since then I've raced all distances up to Ironman.

Chrissie Wellington is my inspiration. After listening to a parkrun talk, I thought – that's a woman I want to be like. I may never be as elite with world titles, but if a woman can go from where she was to what she achieved, it inspires me to believe anything is possible, no matter what your background is.

I have inflammatory bowel disease. The symptoms started when I was pregnant in 2004, and a year later I was diagnosed. I was put on medication – predominantly steroids – but after four years it became uncontrollable and I was



*“Chrissie Wellington, now that's a woman I want to be like”*

housebound. I was hospitalised for a week with intravenous steroids and had two blood transfusions. I suddenly felt like I didn't have much of a life.

After trying different ways to control it with diet and changing my routine, I concluded that the disease wasn't going anywhere. I wanted to get my life back and an ileostomy [where the small intestine is diverted through an opening in the abdomen, leaving a stoma] was the only way.

In 2009, post-surgery, I was overweight and bloated on the steroids; it was saddening and I couldn't even look at myself.

Later that year, I decided to get fit.

I signed up to cycle London to Paris after seeking advice from my GP. She said: “Remember you've had an ileostomy, so I wouldn't hold out your hopes on how you get on”. All I heard was that she didn't say no... so I thought here's an opportunity to prove I can do it. [Caroline, above right, having completed the event.]

Since then, I've worked my way up to full Ironman, as well as 70.3 Staffs twice – after being incorrectly disqualified for missing the cut-off time! I was on the final lap of the run when one of the marshals took my number. I had plenty of time to finish but he wouldn't have it and stopped my race. It was gutting to DNF. They apologised eventually and gave me another place – and I made sure I finished it!

I still want to go out and achieve those full Ironmans, but my big task this year is going to be Weymouth – sea swimming makes me anxious so that's this year's battle. **220**

**CAROLINE BRAMWELL**

One of the only British ostomy triathletes, Caroline Bramwell is the author of *Loo Rolls to Lycra*, which charts her journey into endurance sport after having her large intestine removed.