

Ironman Champion to receive Honorary degree

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Triple Ironman World Champion and University of Birmingham Sport (UBSport) alumna Chrissie Wellington is set to receive an honorary degree tomorrow (Wednesday, December 15), as a tribute to her work in both her passions: sport and international development.



Chrissie Wellington

UBSport previously recognised her phenomenal achievements by awarding her the University of Birmingham's Sporting Achievement Award in 2007.

The 1998 graduate will now become a Doctor of the University, which will fit nicely alongside her first class honours degree in BSc Geography, a distinction from her 2001 Masters in Development Studies from the University of Manchester and the MBE she was awarded in this year's Queen's Birthday Honours list.

After working as a policy adviser to the UK Government agency DEFRA, specialising in International Development and Environmental Policy, Chrissie discovered her aptitude for triathlon whilst working in Nepal on a community led sanitation project.

Being in Nepal gave her a good basis for altitude fitness as she would run and cycle the many hills of Kathmandu Valley, near where she was based.

In February 2007 Chrissie decided to leave her role at DEFRA to concentrate on becoming a professional athlete. Within a year she became the first British athlete to win the World Ironman Championships in Kona, Hawaii – a feat she repeated in 2008 and 2009 – and is currently undefeated at Ironman distance.

A force to be reckoned with in Ironman competitions, in which athletes swim 2.4 miles, cycle 112 miles and run 26.2 miles, as she holds the records for both the Ironman World Championships and the World Record for ironman-distance triathlon races.

On receiving her honorary degree nomination Chrissie said: 'I am thrilled to be receiving this honour from the University of Birmingham. The years I spent as a student at Birmingham were some of the best of my life as I was able to fulfil my academic goals and just as importantly be an active member of a number of different clubs, including the swimming and water polo team.'

She added: 'These experiences I will treasure forever, and I know that they have helped to shape me into the athlete and person I am today. I am so proud to be an alumna of the University, and to have been awarded this honorary degree means an incredible amount to me.'

Zena Wooldridge, UBSport's Director of Sport, who nominated Chrissie for her honorary degree said: 'This exceptional woman is an inspiration to all those who appreciate the almost super-human scale of her achievements, and the level of dedication behind her success that also made her such an exceptional student.'

'When Chrissie returned to the University to receive the University's Sporting Achievement Award following the first of her three world ironman titles, Birmingham students were truly inspired by Chrissie and since then she has dominated world ironman triathlon.'

She added: 'It will be a real privilege to witness Chrissie back on campus to receive such a well deserved honour from her University, and sharing her experiences with students who are graduating alongside her.'

However, it is not just her sporting and academic achievements which have got Chrissie noticed, she is completely committed to and passionate about using sport to change the lives of those living in under-privileged and conflict-affected parts of the world.

After graduating from Birmingham Chrissie travelled the world for two years which opened her eyes to what she described as 'many problems in the world, but also the opportunity for positive change'.

Her victory speech from her first Ironman triumph referred to her experience teaching children at a school near Boston, Massachusetts. This is where she first noticed the difference sport can make to a child's life.

She also noted, from her experience in Nepal, how sport can bring conflict-affected communities together.

Writing in her blog soon after she explained: 'I ramble on about international development to anyone that will listen - it is my passion and has been for a long-time, we have the power to change things and sport is a vehicle for doing so.'

She continues: 'Sport has the power to build bridges, to empower, to teach, to heal – this is what triathlon and every other sport should be about and I hope that I, in some small way, can help inspire others to take up sport and realise their own dreams and their full potential.'