

The Xterra world championship titles were hard fought in 2002, as American Candy Angle pulled off an upset victory and South African Conrad Stoltz repeated his world title with stiff competition on his heels.

by Jay Prasuhn & photos by Robert Oliver

The nonbelievers out-ranked the believers manifold. Race promoters didn't list her as a "one to watch" notable name. Even those in her corner, including boyfriend, coach and fellow pro Andrew Noble, were handing her the "just be realistic" release valve. After all, this was the Xterra World Championships, all her top competition was on the island, and she hadn't won an Xterra in her career.

Maybe Candy Angle has selective hearing.

"Sometimes being the underdog has its advantages," the 31-year-old from Weymouth, Mass., says. "It gives you more motivation to go out and show that you are worthy of being considered a contender. I truly believed I could win this race, and was the only one who did. Even Andy had his doubts; he thought I could get second—if I had a good race."

Unfazed, Angle made her first Xterra victory the most cherished, as she outran favorite Jamie Whitmore to take the title in 2:57:33.

Defending champion Conrad Stoltz's defense and ninth-straight Xterra win wasn't without a serious contention as he overcame a mountain biker's familiar foe—mechanical breakdown—and pressure from Spaniard Eneko Llanos to win by a minute for his second world title in 2:22:55.

Defending Xterra world champion Anke Erlank, a South African pro road cyclist with the Saturn Cycling Team, was battling mononucleosis but flew to Maui, holding out hope that it would fade enough for her to compete on race day and make a season wracked with illness right. It didn't fade, and she reluctantly stood on the sideline of the women's race.



Battling tire and gearing problems, Stoltz earned his lead and win with good downhill skills.

Aside from outstanding roadies, there's an increasing presence of stellar MTB racers at the top, including Melissa Thomas and Canadian Melanie McQuaid. But as Xterra phenom Jamie Whitmore, a pro mountain biker herself, has learned in her sophomore season, just having mountain bike skills won't get you the win, so she relegates her MTB career to second fiddle. "The competition has really stepped up," she said. "Xterra's no longer mountain bikers coming over and winning. You have to be an Xterra triathlete or you're not winning the races."

Second in Maui last year, American Cheri Touchette was making a push to the front. With two men in front of her on descent, she attempted to pass off the singletack. Hitting a rock, she was launched from her bike, landing on her back. After a trip to the medical tent, she was left with a broken rib in her back and a DNF.

Picking her way to the front, Whitmore passed Angle and swim winner Raleigh Tennant of Australia for second position early in the bike. "Then it all went south," Whitmore said. Instead of taping gels to her bike's top tube like she had all season, she opted to use a Velcro-retained gel flask affixed to the top tube. On the first descent, the flask and her only race carbs bounced away. "That was the dumbest decision I've made in my life," Whitmore said in retrospect. "Instantly I knew I had to change my strategy and not ride like a bat out of hell, or I wouldn't even finish the run."

So she went into cruise control, measuring her effort to the drop while hoping to snag a gel handoff at an aid station. The stations came and went, none offering the precious juice. "I went on racing saying 'I can still do this,'" she said, passing the fallen Touchette and taking the lead.

Behind, Angle was having one of her best bike days on the most daunting of courses. "I'm one of the stronger swimmers and runners in the Xterra series, Angle said, "[but] if I wanted to win this race, I had to come off the bike in the top three." She deftly picked her way over a deeply-rutted course after heavy rains had cut several small but deep water channels across the bike and run courses. "I could see Jamie off in the distance at times during the bike." Whitmore managed to head into T2 in the lead, losing precious seconds to a missing T2 bag. Angle came in 1:30 later and the gap quickly closed, until Angle was on the tiring Whitmore's heels by Makena Beach at mile two. "Candy put in a surge and I went with her," Whitmore said. "I wasn't going to give her the race."

Angle's confidence was brimming as the two traded the lead several times. "I felt as though I was the one in control, trying to strate-

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Angle proved the naysayers wrong by beating favorite Whitmore and taking the worlds win.

gize when to make a move," Angle said. "I played a little cat and mouse, letting her take the lead at times to get a sense of how she was feeling, and she hung on for a good three miles, so I was preparing myself for a sprint finish."

Whitmore's poker face masked her nutrient-depleted crumbling. "I do not know how I stayed with Candy as long as I did," she said. The final act played out in the final mile, and Angle made her push, taking the lead heading into Pebble Beach. "The rocks are slippery, so I wanted to be in front over that part," Angle said. Whitmore cracked. "She ran across the beach like it was pavement. For me, it was quicksand," Whitmore said. "I was done." Angle cast a final glance over her shoulder. "I knew Jamie had relented—I could see it in her eyes."

Whitmore focused on just finishing. "I was like 'where's third place? I needed fuel, and there's so much I don't even remember from finishing." Alas, third place, Shari Kain, was more than four minutes behind.

Angle relished a victory expected by nobody, save herself. "My goal all year was to win this race," she said, "and I got to enjoy the last mile to the finish. Andy put the icing on top of the cake in Hawaii after the race when he asked me to marry him!" And yes, despite the pre-race spousal skepticism, she shrugged it off and said "yes." "He's been coaching me the past two years and would beat his head against the wall because I was training well, but not getting the results. Toward the end of the year, it all came together."

This year's race in Maui was an unlikely refuge for Olympians. Stoltz, a member of the South African Olympic triathlon team, made a "two minutes of fame" effort late in the bike of the 2000 Sydney Olympics alongside France's Olivier Marceau. Ironically, Stoltz is extending his two minutes as Xterra's poster boy and 2002 Xterra series winner. And Marceau, the 2000 ITU World Champion and a notably strong cyclist, was the day's Maui

rookie x-factor after winning his first Xterra, in the Czech Republic early in the season. Another Olympian, Eneko Llanos of Spain, was back in his sophomore season.

Like they did in Sydney, Stoltz and Marceau together attacked a line of chasers on a mile of pavement, as France's Nicolas LeBrun and Llanos fell off pace. Then, a back-alley bike fix of a bent rear cog went awry.

"My friend from Rock Shox helped me straighten it out the evening before the race with a bottle opener and a large piece of lava rock," Stoltz said. His bid for Wrench of the Month went out the window, as the tooth bent again and the chain skipped across his lower range. He may as well have been riding a single speed. "I knew those noises were bad, and would eventually break the chain if I used it too much or under too much pressure," Stoltz said. He was forced to ride at a reserved 75 percent effort on the slopes of the Haleakala, dismounting and pushing up inclines he normally rode. To boot, he was battling a slow front tire leak. "I had latex tire sealant spraying from my front tire and had two red-hot Olympians breathing down my neck," Stoltz said. "It was quite a stressful climb."

Soon, the kiawe thorns and standard Maui MTB luck licked up at the boots of the others. Former champ Jimmy Riccitello

2002 XTERRA WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS				
Oct. 27, 2002, Maui, Hawaii				
1.5k swim, 30k bike, 11k run				
Men	Swim	Bike	Run	Total
1. Conrad Stoltz (RSA)	19:52	1:25:27	37:36	2:22:55
2. Eneko Llanos (SPA)	19:53	1:27:29	36:35	2:23:57
3. Nicolas LeBrun (FRA)	22:34	1:27:15	37:48	2:27:37
4. Mike Vine (CAN)	20:43	1:31:37	40:58	2:33:18
5. Olivier Marceau (FRA)	19:50	1:38:02	36:51	2:34:43
6. Justin Thomas (USA)	22:37	1:32:07	40:25	2:35:09
7. Allan Mansson (DEN)	19:48	1:36:09	39:37	2:35:34
8. Jason Chalker (AUS)	20:01	1:36:46	39:59	2:36:46
9. Pat Brown (USA)	20:05	1:35:47	41:29	2:37:21
10. Geoff Kabush (CAN)	26:40	1:28:10	44:18	2:39:08
Women				
1. Candy Angle (USA)	21:53	1:51:26	44:14	2:57:33
2. Jamie Whitmore (USA)	23:39	1:48:15	47:16	2:59:10
3. Shari Kain (USA)	25:55	1:50:44	46:41	3:03:20
4. Raeleigh Tennant (AUS)	21:41	1:56:45	47:37	3:06:03
5. Melissa Thomas (USA)	26:24	1:47:28	53:26	3:07:18
6. Erika Csomor (HUN)	25:31	2:00:11	43:39	3:09:21
7. Kerstin Weule (USA)	23:20	2:00:11	46:42	3:10:13
8. Erin McCarty (USA)	21:48	2:01:08	47:41	3:10:37
9. Melanie McQuaid (CAN)	22:42	1:59:46	48:33	3:11:01
10. Linda Gabor (USA)	26:46	1:54:34	51:45	3:13:05

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Llanos recorded the fastest run split (36:35) but was unable to close the gap to Stoltz.

snapped a chain. Then Marceau flatted, dropping him from the leaders.

Then, for the first time all season, Stoltz was passed on the bike, as Llanos moved ahead on an ascent. Stoltz then employed his strategy: his weight. "Eneko and I are equally strong on the run and I knew I could avoid an ugly duel on the run with a good, fast descent," he said. As soon as the trail tilted down on the return to T2, the stout 6'3" South African's practice runs with downhillers back home paid off. He pointed his Specialized FSR down, released the brakes and bombed like a runaway freight train past the lighter Llanos. "I took some crazy chances and was completely out of control twice," Stoltz said. In fact, the TV coverage crew, which included a downhill mountain biker with a helmet camera, motocross cameramen and a quad runner were all doped, left in Stoltz's dust. "Only the TV chopper kept up."

For the light Llanos, there was nothing he could do—especially within reason over the rutted course. "My major worry was to

not crash," Llanos said. "I was happy to stay with Conrad on the climbs but he was very fast on the downhill, and I didn't want to take any risks. It was impossible for me to follow him."

So the gap grew again, and Stoltz entered run transition with a comfortable two-minute lead. Comfortable, but not untouchable. With the next racer, LeBrun, three minutes back, Llanos knew his only competition was up the trail and whether or not in vain, he charged. "Although I knew that two minutes was too much time, I tried to run as fast as I could," Llanos said. The Spaniard closed to 45 seconds, and with two miles to go, suddenly had Stoltz's attention. "I got a big fright, picked up the pace and opened the gap a little."

Llanos was able to record the fastest run (36:35) and take a minute out of Stoltz, but that was all, as he simply ran out of real estate. "I wasn't cutting the time quick enough," Llanos said. Stoltz's 1:02 win deficit certainly wasn't the eight-minute chasm he earned in Maui in his victory the year before. "The finish was much less casual," he said. ▲

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