

TRAIL SHOES & XTERRA GEAR

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WILD ON:
Wildflower

Adventures Off-Road

XTERRA's Dominant Force,
Jamie Whitmore

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If it hadn't been for a few humble words spoken by pro triathlete Barb Lindquist in a 1998 television interview, there would undoubtedly be a good number more crooks, cheats and computer hackers behind bars or getting their butts kicked in divorce court. This is because Jamie Whitmore, with a criminology degree in hand and soon to be pursuing a dream of becoming a private investigator, was watching a triathlon with her dad, Clyde, when Lindquist lamented that although she was strong with her swim, she lacked a threatening run leg. "I can run," thought Jamie, a former collegiate 5,000- and 10,000-meter specialist at Cal State Northridge. "How hard can it be to pick up swimming and biking?" She turned to her father and said, "That's it—that's what I want to do, Dad!"

The crooks should celebrate. If she had gone the way of crime stopper, she would have brought the brainpower of Columbo with the manic intent of Mel Gibson's character in *Lethal Weapon*. Since lightning struck her with the triathlon idea, Whitmore, now 26, has powered her way to the top of the XTERRA circuit through sheer force of will, barely pausing to consider she was afraid of swimming in the open water and had zero ability on the bike. Despite Whitmore's 5'5" frame and girlish laugh, she is not to be denied.

"She is driven, she is talented, and she is smart," says her coach, Rick Crawford. "In fact, she works too hard. I have the reigns on her so she doesn't kill herself."

In 10 races on the 2003 XTERRA circuit, Whitmore thrashed her way to eight victories, securing her dominance in the premier off-road triathlon series. The trademark of XTERRA racing is the combination of technically and aerobically challenging mountain bike legs, and it's within Whitmore's path to mountain bike excellence that we can see what makes her tick.

Don Fonseca is a longtime friend of Whitmore's, and the two have trained together since they both took up triathlon in 1999. He remembers how Whitmore's talent on the bike was not immediately apparent. "She could barely maintain 16 miles per hour," he recalls. "We'd have to keep stopping to wait for her." Yet Fonseca watched Whitmore's perseverance slowly grind the pace upward, to where she could hold 23 miles per hour after two years



NO Denial

Why XTERRA phenomenon Jamie Whitmore can't be stopped.

by T.J. Murphy

of hammering away at it.

And then there was the downhill. Fonseca explains: "She'd just started to ride mountain bikes, and her husband had Jamie

ride down this extremely technical downhill. Jamie was afraid of it, but she'd simply force herself to do it. Despite all the falling and crashing, she'd get down to the bottom,

turn her bike around and walk it back up the hill and do it again—over and over. She surpassed my skill level in no time.”

In fact, it seems fate played a hand in Whitmore's meeting Courtney Cardenas, the man she would marry in May of 2000. “It was right after I decided to become a triathlete,” says Whitmore. “My dad and I went out to buy a bike, and it was going to be either a Specialized or a Kestrel, because that's what I saw two champions riding in a triathlon magazine. We went to one shop, and I said, ‘This is what I want—one of these. What's the difference?’ He said, ‘About a thousand bucks.’ Well, that settled that. But they didn't have what I needed, so we went to American River Bicycles. There were a bunch of grease monkeys working there—long, dirty hair, chewing tobacco, unshaven.”

One of the grease monkeys was Cardenas, whom Whitmore met again months later on one of the first times she took the bike out on the roads (she'd been riding it exclusively on a wind trainer). The bike was shaking—she wasn't used to the pedals—and kept falling over. She flatted and went to another American River bike shop in distress. “Courtney was there, but he'd cleaned up his act. He was manager and had this Marine-like hair cut.” The two started riding together, and when Cardenas gave up tobacco and an illicit smoking product, the two were engaged.

In addition to a spiritual match-up between the two, Cardenas played a crucial role in harvesting Whitmore's abundant determination. On trail rides, he'd follow her and patiently give real-time feedback, constantly feeding her corrections on bike position, handling technique and pedal stroke. Whitmore absorbed it all. “Whatever she's going to do, she's going to do it well,” Cardenas says. “After she first took up triathlon, she had no experience on a road bike, yet she still made the national team for World's. She's just very easy to coach. When she first started working on the mountain bike, she hated it. She was scared. I had her wear pads and made her ride very hard trails. And right away after racing NORBA, she was at expert level.” So fast was Whitmore's ascent, she made the jump to the pros after only one year on the mountain-biking circuit.

Cardenas vividly recalls a day where Whitmore's inner mettle was revealed. “We were riding on New Year's Day, on a really

technical trail at Salmon Falls. We were halfway out on the ride. On a steep descent, she went over the bars and landed on a sharp rock—hard. I thought she might have broken her spleen.” Whitmore had punctured her hip. “There was no choice but to ride back to the truck. It took us four hours to ride 7 miles, and she was hurting the whole way. So we go right to the emergency room. And it's right after she's given a CAT scan, and Jamie's asking the doctor, ‘So when can I ride again?’ The doctor looks at her like she's nuts. The first thing we did when she could ride was go right back to the trail she fell on.” In an act of characteristic defiance, Whitmore took on the same descent that had previously tossed her and nailed it.

It was in 2001 that Whitmore raced her first XTERRA race, talking her way into the USA Nationals at Lake Tahoe. Her pro NORBA license would have allowed her to race pro at XTERRA, but was complicated by her amateur USAT license. Unaware that one had to qualify for the pro championship event (she was supposed to race in the all-comers event for amateurs), Whitmore started and raced in the pro championship. She finished second, wowing the crowd and eliciting a chorus of “Who are you?”

But because of her unofficial status, her results were wiped clean from the books, and she received no prize money. Yet it was clear she had found the sport she could be best in. Mountain biking and triathlon legend, Ned Overend, witness to the performance, concurred. He told Whitmore she was a natural, and encouraged her to focus on XTERRA rather than NORBA. At the time Whitmore didn't know who Overend was, but Cardenas, a bit star struck to be talking to Overend, later turned to his wife and emphatically remarked, “If Ned Overend says you should focus on XTERRA, you focus on XTERRA.”

It was Overend who recommended that the off-road prodigy should work with Crawford, and Team Whitmore had shaped up to be a force: Cardenas continues to advise his wife on bike skills and also travels to races as a mechanic and agent; her father continues to provide unconditional support; and Crawford lays down the training plans. The support network has allowed Whitmore to blossom. At XTERRA Saipan in 2002, she posted her first victory. “That was my first experience with learning about the necessary state of mind you need to win.

Saipan is pure XTERRA—the course has caves, ropes and trenches. Lots of World War II stuff. It was what I'd been looking for all along. I'd found my dream job.”

Confidence from the win emboldened Whitmore. “When I first met her, I could see immediately that there was something special about her, that quality you see in great athletes,” says Cardenas. It's a quality that was emboldened and set on fire by each successive XTERRA victory. “You definitely want to be on her friendly side,” adds Crawford. “She's a thoroughbred. Very spirited, but not always easy to work with.”

Crawford tried both to temper the spirit at times, but to also guide Whitmore into tapping it for races. “I've learned to keep her edgy,” he says. “She is vulnerable when she is too confident and becomes complacent.” The edginess was drawn upon last September during the showdown between Whitmore and Canadian Melanie McQuaid at the USA XTERRA Nationals at Lake Tahoe. Although she established a solid lead during the 10-kilometer run of several minutes, Whitmore thought she heard a spectator say she was leading by mere seconds. When she passed by the crowd after the first 5-kilometer lap, she looked as if she was fleeing from a charging grizzly bear. She beat McQuaid by more than three minutes.

Yet McQuaid fought back at the XTERRA World Championship in Maui and handed Whitmore a stunning defeat, both racing themselves to the medical tent in the thick heat. The two will be facing off again this fall in what looks to be a dramatic rivalry in XTERRA.

At Wildflower this year, Whitmore raced her first half-Ironman, finishing eighth among the elite after muscle cramps slowed her down from what looked to be a top-five finish. She'd neither trained for the event nor given it a focused taper. Yet she again raised eyebrows, and Whitmore's triathlon future looks to be wide open.

“She gives everything she has to it,” says Crawford. “The results show her commitment. She loves a race and a good reason to win it.”

There appears to be even more good reasons for Whitmore to continue pursuing her dream job. “She is an endless bundle of energy,” Crawford adds. “She is a spiritual person. She's definitely multi-dimensional, and she draws a lot of strength from her beliefs.” It will be fun to see how far it all will take her. ▲