

# RETOOLING LINSEY

*With more recovery and better strokes, the cowboy-hatted star aims to recapture her Kona glory*

**Suddenly, unexpectedly, Linsey Corbin was the triathlon It Girl. Today, a half-decade later, after a grab-bag of resounding successes, grating disappointments, and steady improvement, she's out to prove she's still got It.**

**The Missoula, MT-based pro triathlete, now 30, made heads turn when she burst on the scene, and it wasn't just because she'd don a cowboy hat whenever she crossed the finish line (more on this later). Corbin was a very good but unknown amateur who didn't know a power meter from a heart rate monitor in April 2006 when she and a bunch of her University of Montana tri buddies drove 24 hours straight to central California on no sleep. Their destination was Wildflower, the famed, hilly half-Ironman that has launched many a tri career. And it indeed launched hers.**

Words | Roy M. Wallack

Photos | John Segesta



**After finishing third-place overall with a new amateur course record of 4:43 (a record that still stands), she turned pro, won a half-Ironman, qualified for Kona with a 7th at Ironman Cour D' Alene, and then took 23rd in the lava fields, competing with a broken collarbone from a recent bike accident, no less. Yes, she was a comer. She got a coach, quit her job, and became a full-time athlete. And when she officially arrived two years later with a 5th place at the 2008 Hawaii Ironman in 9:28:51, which made her the top U.S. female, the buzz became a deafening roar. The next great American woman triathlete was here.**

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But Corbin herself doesn't seem quite comfortable with that description. "It was a great feeling to exceed expectations," she says about her breakout. "But you need to be a strong swimmer, and I wasn't. Without a 54-minute Ironman swim (her best to date is 57), you don't stand a chance against Chrissie (Wellington, the 2008 and now four-time winner) and Mirinda (Carfrae, the 2010 champ)." To Corbin, the fifth-place wasn't the time for over-the-top rejoicing. It meant she had to get to work.

Maybe she worked too hard, which wasn't hard for her to do. "I had a strong work ethic instilled in me by hard-working parents, and had been working hard since I was young," she says. Growing up in Bend, OR, as the daughter of an event-planner mother and an accountant/business consultant father, Corbin was on skis at age two and harbored dreams of becoming an Olympic downhiller. Success came frequently until her first years in high school, when it became clear that her thin, 100-pound, five-foot-six frame didn't provide enough mass to get her down the mountain quick enough. "I needed another 20 or 30 pounds," she says. "Some of those girls are over 150."

So she switched to something better suited to thinner bodies, running

cross-country and track, and was good right away. "I didn't win a ton of races, but I liked it," she says. She took a break from running while attending U.C. Davis, but put her training shoes back on after she transferred to the University of Montana and got encouragement from her boyfriend, now-husband Chris Corbin. "I missed running," she says. "I went to a local 5k—and the spark was there."

Soon, Corbin added biking and swimming when she discovered the local college-affiliated triathlon team, a ragtag group called Team Stampede. Honoring Montana's hootin' - hollerin' cowboy and ranching heritage, the team brought cowboys hats to their races, then handed them to team members as they'd approach the finish line.

"I got into this sport for fun, and the hat represents being happy and grateful no matter the result," she says. That's why a cowboy hat has remained a fixture of her finish line photos, typically handed to her by her husband at all her races, including 13 Ironmans to date.

Montana is not known as a triathlon hotbed, but the wide-open spaces were perfect for stoking her inborn endurance fire. "You leave our front door and go 130 miles with one stop sign," says Corbin. Combining

Big Sky mileage with a monster work ethic gave her the fearsome bike-run that swept her to amateur victories and into the pros.

But to move up from her fifth place in Ironman 2008, Corbin knew she'd have to push harder on all three disciplines. So, tapping her limitless work ethic, she started doing massive volume. And she got worse.

Granted, not in everything. In the last three years, Corbin has walked away with lots of goodies at her annual average of eight half- and full-Ironman events; highlights include three second-places at Ironman Arizona, a bundle of 70.3 second places and a win (in Pucon, Chile in 2011), and her crown jewel, a win at her "backyard" Ironman of Coeur d'Alene in 2010.

But the Big Show—Hawaii—has been a bust. She finished 11<sup>th</sup> in 2009 in 9:44:27, missing a fast swim pack, penalized 4 minutes on the bike, and so wasted on the run that she walked for 5 minutes—her first-ever walk during an Ironman marathon. She would slip to 12<sup>th</sup> in 2010 in 9:29:13, just 22 seconds off her 2008 mark but far back due to the widespread improvement of the top women. She languished in 16<sup>th</sup> in 2011, her 9:39:01 last October was over 10 minutes slower than her time in 2008.





**AS THE 2012 SEASON BEGINS, CORBIN HAS COMPETED IN 13 IRONMANS, CROSSED EACH FINISH LINE IN A COWBOY HAT, AND HAS FINISHED IN THE TOP 10 ROUGHLY 92 PERCENT OF THE TIME.**



On the Big Island, she went backward, not forward. Was it the curse of Kona, or something else? Was it the self-induced pressure of trying to prove that 2008 wasn't a fluke? Or had the competition just gotten better and raised the bar? Whatever the reason, something had to change. After her struggle in 2009, she made a phone call.

### **Enter the recovery coach**

"Linsey had a problem common to many driven athletes: She was training too hard, without integrating enough recovery to allow adaptations to occur," says Matt Dixon. "She didn't know it. But my gut instinct after talking with

her that first time was pretty clear: She was always sick, tired and injured. And that means she was training too much for her body to handle."

Dixon is an endurance sports coach and former pro triathlete who runs San Francisco-based Purplepatch Fitness. He coaches a number of top pro triathletes, including the man who urged Corbin to call him, Chris Lieto, runner-up at the 2009 Hawaii Ironman and winner of three other Ironman races.

Corbin's first words to Dixon were, "I need help." A year after her fifth-place Hawaii finish, "she was banging her

head against the wall in frustration," says Dixon. "I understood, because I had been there. I'm a great example of how to do your pro career wrong."

A pro triathlete from 1999 to 2004, Dixon grew up as a swimmer in England, gaining a reputation for endless training that took him as far as the Olympic trials, where he failed. "I was the world's best trainer," he says sarcastically. "I trained myself into the ground. As a pro, I developed chronic fatigue syndrome."

Learning his lesson, Dixon hauled out his Masters in Exercise Physiology degree from the University of South

magazine's August issue as staying out of the "Black Hole") is not magic or revolutionary, as Dixon readily admits. The trouble, he says, is that Type A athletes with a monster work ethic, like Corbin, "get no validation from recovery while they are doing it." They equate taking it easy with being lazy or dropping behind the competition.

In 2010, Dixon's goal with Corbin was to get her healthy, structurally and metabolically, by changing her mindset and making her a smarter athlete. That meant taking her off the road to chronic fatigue by focusing on consistency, not volume. Knowing that her previous coach had built a strong base, Dixon trained her like a short-course athlete. She dropped from 40 hours a week of swim-bike-run training to 25, with three strength-stretching sessions per week in the gym.

Corbin's first major test went perfectly: her first-ever Ironman win, in Coeur d'Alene, on June 27, 2010. Coming from behind, as usual, 8 minutes out of the water slower than the swim leaders, she blasted the hills on the bike and run and set a new course record of 9:17:54, beating runner-up Meredith Kessler by 5 minutes. Victory was even sweeter because Coeur d'Alene was virtually her hometown race, the scene of the first Ironman she'd ever done, her Kona qualifier back in 2006. She shared the win with her husband Chris, her parents, and the Hutter family, long-time diehard fans she'd met years ago over the Internet who often go to her races, even Hawaii. At that moment, life couldn't be better.

And then, four months later, she finished in 12th place in Hawaii.

Another failure?

Dixon says not really. "She was perfectly fit, ready to go and have a great day and ... it's just one of those things," he shrugs. "It's Kona—the heat, the competition, the conditions. It was just a tough day for her. Probably 30-40

percent of people don't have great days there." Corbin's time was 22 seconds slower than her 2008 time.

Corbin and Dixon thus set their sights on Arizona—and it turned out to be a race to behold. That's the race where Chrissie Wellington, supercharged after sitting out Hawaii due to illness, set a new world of 8:36:13. And it's where Corbin, back there with the merely great mortals and 8 minutes back after the swim, motored to an impressive runner-up spot in 9:05:33, her best time ever and tantalizingly close to her long-dreamed-of sub-9.

"It was the icing on the cake to a great year," she said. "What a great journey 2010 was." She had evolved as an athlete. She and Matt Dixon had overhauled her training to a safer, saner, more productive regimen. She wasn't getting sick. She wasn't getting injured. Her training was consistent. Her volume was down, intensity and recovery up. Each run workout had a purpose: endurance, strength, speed, form, or transition off the bike. For core stability, she began doing regular TRX suspension training. The bottom line: she was improving. Now she could spend the next few years focusing on her Achilles heel: the swim.

### Searching for 5 minutes

"With the amazing influence of Chrissie, and the improvement of the overall level of women pros, it will be close to impossible for a slower swimmer to win Hawaii anymore. It is very tough to lose 8-12 minutes in the swim and come back to win," says Dixon. Despite Wellington's just-announced plans to sit out the 2012 season, she's left the bar set much higher and many responded.

Corbin knows it. "I need to be swimming 52-55 minutes," she says. "To do this, I've had to change my entire swim approach." It started in 2011, when she raised her swimming volume to 40k a week and worked on stroke mechanics.

## MORE ABOUT LINSEY



Carolina and started coaching. He preached warnings against obsessive training so much that he says he became known as the "Recovery Coach," recovery being the key ingredient that facilitates adaptation from the incredibly hard training that endurance athletes must do to achieve greatness.

"So many athletes out there are very fit, but very tired—metabolically tired," he says. "They don't rest enough. Often fitness is not the limiter; it's a lack of recovery to maximize fitness."

The simple formula of "work hard, then recover" (known in many quarters and to readers of this

For 2012, she's building up from a still-heavy 25k a week toward a consistent 40k-plus weeks.

"Getting better in swimming is a monumental challenge that most triathletes are not willing to make," says Dixon. "Most keep working on the fun stuff and their strengths— bike and run—but never improve on the swim."

That's because swimming is far and away the most technical aspect of the sport, with very specific muscular endurance requirements and motor-recruitment patterns. "It's like learning to walk again," says Dixon. "It needs lots of time."

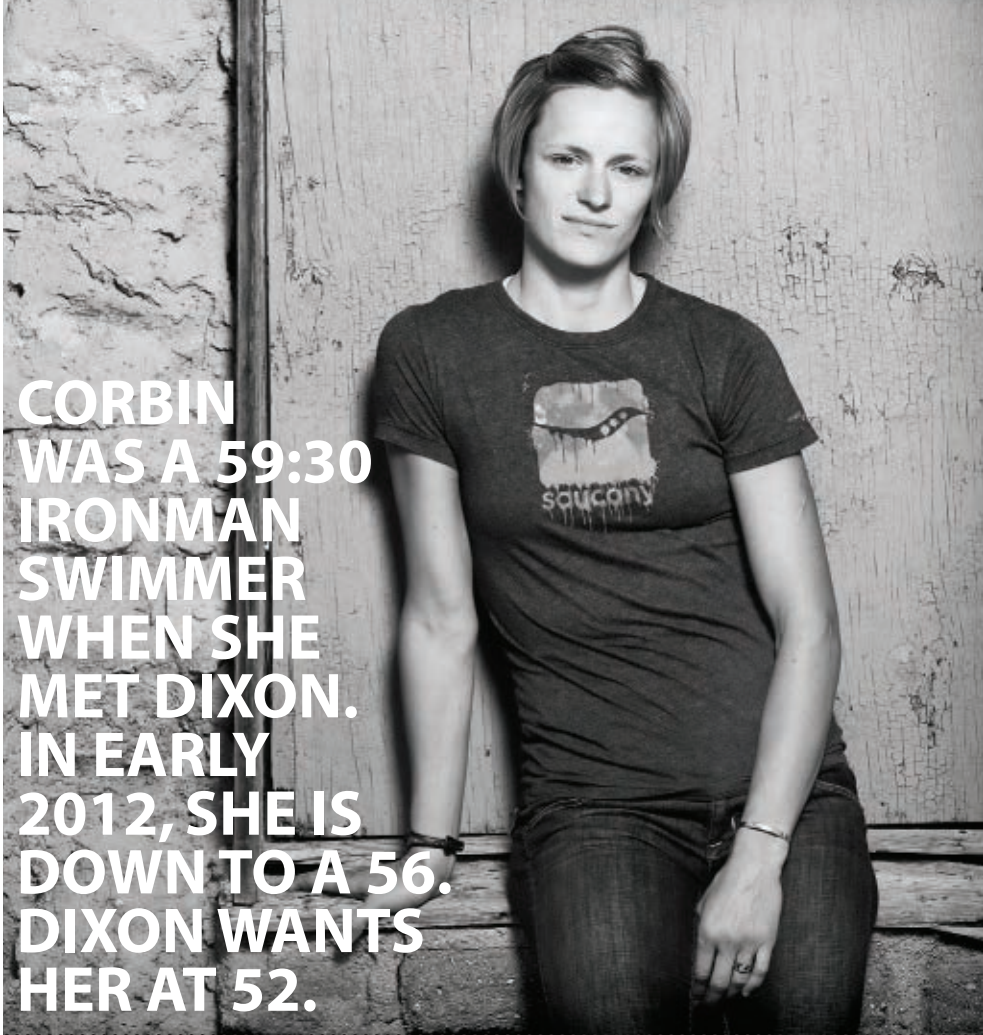
Corbin was a 59:30 Ironman swimmer when she met Dixon. In early 2012, she is down to a 56. Dixon wants her at 52. "If she wants to go to the front of the Ironman pack, this is her biggest challenge," he says.

It can be done. Dixon tells the story of his client Jesse Thomas, a Stanford steeplechase runner who came out of nowhere to win the 2011 Wildflower in 4 hours 3 minutes using a phenomenal 1:11 run to nullify a so-so swim. In an 18-month period starting August 2010, he dropped his half-Ironman swim time from 32 minutes to 24. "If he shaves one more minute, he'll be front of the pack," says Dixon.

Corbin is well aware of Thomas' success. They're friends. Dixon met Thomas through her.

"Linsey's still young in the sport," says Dixon. "Yes, she's already had great success in triathlon. But I see her as a developmental athlete. Sometimes, developmental athletes don't listen—but she does."

Corbin's 2011 season brought her closer to her potential. She started off with 1st, 8th, and 4th place finishes at 70.3s at Pucon (Chile), California, and New Orleans. Suffering acute quad and hamstring pain and tight hips and lower back in early summer, she visited



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John Ball, a Phoenix physical therapist known for his work with elite runners, and was fixed by mid-August. "She wasn't even thinking about Hawaii until that was cleared up," says Dixon. "Considering her low base, she did fine."

In fact, she finished as the first American and third overall at the 70.3 World Championships in Las Vegas in September. Then, her season ended in grand fashion with her first sub-9 Ironman at Ironman Arizona in November—an 8:54:33 that put her solidly in second place. She was thrilled with her new PRs—in both the overall race AND the swim, the latter a 57 flat. That was just under 5 minutes in back of Leanda Cave, who ended up winning the race by—you guessed it—about 5 minutes.

As for Hawaii? Well, she and her coach prefer to call her 16th place a learning experience that didn't necessarily reflect her fitness, but both understand

greatly the need to be better on the biggest stage. Caught behind slow swimmers at the start, she missed the faster swim draft and had her worst swim ever in Hawaii: 1:04. After a strong bike ride, she started the run in 15th place and planned on running into the top 10. Projectile vomiting at Mile 11 put an end to that and she turned her focus to Arizona.

As the 2012 season begins, Corbin has competed in 13 Ironmans, crossed each finish line in a cowboy hat, and has finished in the top 10 roughly 92 percent of the time. This year, her coach flat-out expects to see his smarter, retooled star winning Ironman races like Coeur d'Alene and Arizona. She has dreams of breaking 8:45. And they both think she can fight back into the top 5 in Hawaii this year, and even win it someday. **3/60**

*CLICK: [linseycorbin.com](http://linseycorbin.com)*