

GRIT 'N' grace

You know Linsey Corbin from the cowboy hat she carries across the finish line. You know her as an Ironman champion. And you know she's "Montana made." But that's just scratching the surface, partner.



BY *julia beeson polloreno*
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At

the finish line of the 2010 Ironman Coeur d'Alene, a 13-year-old girl named Chloe

stood eagerly awaiting the women's leader, Linsey Corbin. In her hands she held a cowboy hat, and as Linsey made her way toward the break tape, high-fiving cheering spectators along the way, Chloe made the handoff. It's become a tradition: Linsey's "super-fan," a high school runner from Idaho to whom Linsey, 31, has offered both friendship and athletic inspiration, awaits her at many race finishes (Chloe and her mom have traveled as far as Kona) holding Linsey's ubiquitous finish line accessory—the cowboy hat. The hat pays homage to her roots in the sport as a member of the Montana-based Team Stampede, but it also reflects how closely she identifies with the cowboy ethos, marked by a steely, never-give-up resolve.

And a healthy appetite for adventure. "We were all just hootin', hollerin' people from Missoula who would drive through the night to get to a race," recounts Linsey of her days on the team that ignited her passion for the sport. "I met this group of people who were fun, and they were doing triathlon and were healthy, like-minded individuals who liked to work hard and have a good time and do crazy things." Like set out on 100-plus-mile bike rides on remote mountain roads where the sky could open up at any given moment to leave you at the mercy of the ferocious Montana weather. On one ride with a group that included former pro Matt Seeley, the originator of the Team Stampede cowboy hat tradition, Linsey pedaled around the Flathead Valley (not flat) for five hours in freezing hail and rain. She allowed herself to cry only because the beating rain masked the tears. "In that group, once you start a workout, you put on your poker face—you're committed to it. There is no 'Should we quit?'" says Linsey. "That's my attitude with every session with the people I train with in Montana. You get the work done and keep your mouth shut."

Linsey's thrill-seeking tendency revealed itself at a young age, when she first took to the ski slopes as a 2-year-old, introduced to the sport by her mother, an ace downhill skier. She grew up skiing the local mountain in her hometown of Bend, Ore., and during family trips to Lake Tahoe. As a kid she dreamed of skiing in the Olympics, but came to the realization that her body type wasn't suited to flying down a mountain at top speeds. "I loved the speed of downhill and Super G and going off jumps and through moguls, but, at 100 pounds I just didn't have the body mass to get down the hill fast enough," she recalls. She entered some Nordic

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skiing races and discovered her endurance strength, which she channeled into running on the Mountain View High School track and cross-country team.

She wasn't the fastest runner on the varsity squad, but she was consistently among the lead runners. Not that the results were top priority—Linsey was happy just to feed her competitive drive and social nature on a spirited team that coincidentally included current pro Jesse Thomas. She was a sophomore and he a senior when she was paired up with him as his secret "Cougar Pal," wherein teammates gave one another a gift at every race. "I always hooked him up with really good presents, so he owes me still," Linsey jokes.

After high school, Linsey landed at the University of Montana, where she studied nutrition and exercise physiology. But the real significance of her choice of UM for college lay outside the lecture halls. Enter Chris Corbin.

The day Linsey moved into her Missoula sorority house, Chris, who lived in a fraternity house down the street, rang the doorbell looking for a job. "He became our dish boy, and we started dating," says Linsey. It was Chris who first awakened Linsey, who had slipped into a college haze of aimless lounging and social drinking, to the possibility of being a competitive athlete again.

He encouraged her to do a local 5K, and he watched from the sidelines as she won it.

"Before Chris, I didn't have much self-belief or confidence," says Linsey, now his wife. "Chris has given me the belief that anything is possible. Every year I toe the line in Hawaii, Chris believes to his core that I'm going to win. He believes it more than I do."

Linsey hooked up with Team Stampede and soon started racking up race wins. In 2006, she went to Wildflower and set the amateur course record (4:43, third overall), which still stands. Over the next couple of years she garnered podium finishes at a few 70.3s and finished as the top American woman at the 2008 Ironman World Championship. But the volume of training was beginning to take its toll, and despite finishing second at Ironman Arizona in 2009, by the end of that year she had reached a breaking point.

"My immune system was basically shot," says Linsey. But more than just feeling worn down and unwell, she had lost her motivation and passion for training and racing. "It started to feel like being a triathlete was a job," says Linsey. "You know something's not right when all of a sudden you're dreading workouts, you're never making any of your times, it's not fun anymore and simple things feel like insurmountable tasks."

She approached coach Matt Dixon of San Francisco-based Purplepatch Fitness, who was working with her friend and fellow pro triathlete Chris Lieto with positive results, and he agreed to take her on. "Matt told me, 'We need to get you in for some blood work; something's not right,'" recalls Linsey. Tests revealed that she was on the verge of chronic fatigue syndrome. One of the

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first things Linsey, a vegetarian for the previous 20 years, did was reintroduce red meat into her diet. She ate 2 ounces of steak that night, then two days later ate 4 ounces and then a week later ate 6 ounces. Nowadays, she sits down to a ¾-pound steak dinner every Sunday night.

"I made a lot of changes after 2009 so it's hard to tell which change made the biggest difference, but I know I'm a lot more energetic and my workouts are a lot more productive," says Linsey. "I'm a much stronger, more balanced athlete."

Among the other changes Linsey and her new coach made was cutting her training volume in half. It wasn't an easy move for the self-described "hard-headed" athlete who had only known one style of training since becoming a pro triathlete: high mileage, all the time, with minimal recovery.

"Just because somebody has raw talent and can swim, bike and run well doesn't mean they can necessarily train with the same capacity of somebody that's been doing the sport four or five years longer than them," says Dixon. "It was really clear to me that here was

this girl who had rapid success but was actually a very green athlete as far as her understanding of and wisdom in training. I almost had to reverse-engineer her—get her healthy again and that was what we did in the first year."

In addition to halving her previous training volume, Dixon increased

the number of high-intensity sessions, broadening Linsey's upper range and getting her to tap into her "Zone 5" power. And perhaps most importantly, he made recovery a central priority.

"As Matt says, 'You have to have the courage and confidence to recover,'" states Linsey. "I don't think I was a confident trainer before. Confident people believe in their plan and believe in themselves. They're OK with taking a step back."

Her first race after starting with Dixon was the 2010 Ironman 70.3 New Orleans. The day before the race, she started thinking about how much less training she'd been doing and set off on a downward spiral of self-doubt. "I was talking myself out of the race, thinking, 'This is crazy. Who is this guy? I've cut my training in half—how could this possibly work?'" Her husband and her coach sat in a New Orleans restaurant with her, trying to allay the suffocating anxiety.

The next day, Linsey raced great and finished second. "Matt said, 'You know, you would have won if you hadn't wasted all that energy at the restaurant,'" Linsey says with a trace of laughter in her voice.

Linsey's trajectory since that New Orleans race has been an upward arc, save for a couple of blips (read: Kona, where she was 12th in 2010 and 16th last year). In 2010 she finished atop the podium at three half-Ironman races, and won her first Ironman at Coeur d'Alene. Last year, she won Ironman 70.3 Pucon, was third at the Ironman World Championship 70.3, and was runner-up at Ironman Arizona with a sub-nine-hour finish after a disappointing race in Kona.

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the level of the world-class triathletes she wants to compete against and actually absorb the training,” says Dixon, who has reintroduced bigger volumes into Linsey’s program as she’s been able to positively adapt to the load. “The first couple of years she came out of the amateur ranks, went pro and—boom—was at 35 training hours per week. She hit herself around the head with a sledgehammer and it took a while to recuperate. This might sound funny because she’s a sub-nine girl, but Linsey is very much a developmental athlete. She has a long runway of progression and improvement ahead of her.”

The new season has gotten off to an auspicious start for Linsey, with a second place at Ironman 70.3 San Juan, where she led onto the run before being chased down by Kelly Williamson, and a fifth-place finish at Ironman 70.3 California, where she suffered a mechanical failure on the bike.

What was previously an Achilles heel for Linsey—the swim—has more recently become a game-changer. Since she began working with Dixon in late '09, she’s been dialing in on her swim, figuring out what pool training approach works best for her.

Initially, she went the route of heavy-volume training, logging 40,000–60,000 yards a week, but quickly realized that the “water flogging” was a recipe for personal burnout. “My swimming has been going a lot better because there’s more balance,” says Linsey. “Throwing me in the pool and saying, ‘You’re going to swim 6,000 to 10,000 every day’ is not fun for me, so all of a sudden the motivation was going down and I was too tired to swim properly when I was swimming that much.”

Instead, she’s found that frequency and consistency pay greater dividends. It’s what works for her.

And it is working. A year ago, Linsey would exit the swim so far behind the leaders and have to work twice as hard just to get to the front of the race. “You’re just playing catch-up all day long,” she says. “I knew that to stand a chance in Hawaii—which is the ultimate goal—I was going to have to work on my swim.” She and Chris (and their dog, Madison, who receives her own fan mail) spent the winter in Tucson, Ariz., where Linsey could swim with fast swimmers at organized workouts—a luxury she doesn’t have back

home in Montana. Since last year, she’s taken five seconds off her 100-yards base pace, moving up to the 1:10 lane.

But most significantly, the balance she’s found in the pool has spilled over into all areas of her life: her diet, her training, her approach to recovery, her holistic perspective. “I credit Matt for real change in Linsey, as she’s found balance in her triathlon career in a very positive way,” says Chris.

Amid the ups and downs of the past five years, the cowboy hat has remained a constant, offering up its symbolic power both in times of adversity and victory. “Whenever a cowboy gets bucked off a horse, he picks up his hat and dusts it off,” says Chris. “It hasn’t been all wins for Linsey, and she has had to dust off her cowboy hat a time or two and pick herself up and get back after it.”

That resilience and tenacity are two of Linsey’s defining traits—they’re what make her a dangerous opponent in a triathlon. And they’re what drive fans to cheer loudly for her at each finish line and believe in a future as big as the Montana sky.

Just ask Chloe. **1**

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