



MONTANA MADE OREGON CERTIFIED

By Susan Grant Legacki : Photography by Donald Miralle

With a new city, new coach and a fresh outlook on her career, 33-year-old Linsey Corbin has learned that the hardest decisions are often the most important.

There are really two types of “natural” athletes in this world: the genetic freaks and the genetic freaks with superior mental toughness. Some people are simply fast; or maybe they’re crazy strong. Be it because of an innate fast-twitch muscle fiber makeup, natural linebacker build, or an amazing VO2 max—they’re the kids you hated in P.E. class because the timed mile and the rope climb just seemed to come more easily to them.

But although they collect some high school track accolades or perhaps some college or age-group success, they probably aren’t the ones you’re going to see on the cover of this magazine. A recent study published in *Nature* showed that regular athletic training can actually change the neuroplasticity of the brain. Put simply, it showed that you could change your brain’s grey matter to become more athletically inclined simply by training. So there is some hope for us mortals after all, but, sadly, that isn’t enough to become a champion. The athletes who really make it, especially in Ironman racing, are just wired differently to begin with.

From a cardiovascular standpoint, 33-year-old Linsey Corbin is a genetic freak. While the average fit woman’s heart rate might drop to the mid-40s while sitting on the couch watching TV, Corbin’s hovers in the low 30s. Once off the couch and running at threshold pace in a half-marathon, most fit athletes will hold between 150 and 160 beats per minute, while Corbin can pound the pavement at closer to 175 bpm quite easily. Her husband, Chris, has lovingly referred to his wife as a “hummingbird,” and it’s an appropriate comparison.

Much like the hummingbird, Corbin’s somewhat delicate build belies an impressive aerobic engine. Corbin grew up in Bend, Oregon, and was athletic from day one. “Her first words were, ‘I do! I do!’” says her father, Tom Pickell, no doubt an early indication of the fortuitous mental wiring she was born with, along with the requisite hardheadedness that so often accompanies it. She was a talented downhill skier and cross-country and track runner, but according to her parents she was never the star of the team, and a career as a professional

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athlete was never something they saw coming. It wasn’t until early college when she joined them on a multi-day bike tour (her first time on a road bike) that they realized she might be a natural. “These Category 2 and 3 cyclists would come up to us and tell us she was just crushing these climbs all day long,” says her father.

Corbin won the first (and second) triathlons she ever entered, and became a standout on the University of Montana’s triathlon team. The formerly “Montana-made” branded athlete is known for her smiling, cowboy-hat-wearing finish line crosses and genuine belief that beer has a place in any training regimen (full disclosure: her husband does digital marketing for several breweries, most notably Big Sky Brewing). “She’s

probably the most talented athlete I’ve ever worked with,” says her current coach, Jesse Kropelnicki. “All pros are genetic anomalies to some extent, but of the 10 women pros I coach, she is a standout. Her heart rate reserve is just off the charts.”

However, much like the hummingbird, which because of its incredibly high metabolism spends its entire life just hours away from starvation, Corbin’s genetically superior engine hasn’t been able to make up for a lack of consistency in her training and racing throughout her eight-year professional career. She’s ridden some incredibly high waves of fantastic racing: a fifth-place finish in Kona, four Ironman titles, four Ironman 70.3 titles and six Ironman podium finishes. But there have been low points,

too. Most recently she’s had some chronic shin problems, which almost ended her season entirely just a few short months before the 2013 Ironman World Championship.

Dealing with the chronic injury proved to be a turning point in Corbin’s professional and personal life, setting the wheels in motion for a complete change in training philosophy, a big coaching change and eventually a move from her beloved home base of Missoula, Montana, back to her hometown of Bend. The change in location is symbolic for the Corbins, who function as a very well-oiled team. “I think together we made the decision that five years from now, we didn’t want to be sitting on our porch in Missoula saying, ‘What if?’” says Chris. “Linsey was finally ready





to make the really big changes she needed to; she's taken ownership of her career in a whole new way."

The butterfly effect in Corbin's career began as she was getting ready to enter the water at the 2013 Ironman 70.3 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She'd been having some nagging shin pain, nothing too terrible up to that point, but this felt different. This felt—bad. "I turned to Chris and said something like, 'Uh, I don't think this is going to go very well.'" She finished in 12th place and headed out to see a sports physician in Arizona where she was diagnosed with shin splints and told to change her running cadence and position to lessen the pain. She listened—sort of. "I was told I could continue to race and train through it if I was smart about it, and I just don't think I was smart about it."

A win at Ironman 70.3 Mont-Tremblant bolstered her competitive drive to keep going, and by the time she lined up to race at Ironman 70.3 Vineman in July, her pain had grown from intermittent to constant. She had pain in the morning, pain crossing the street, pain in the middle of the night—it was clear that the shin splints had grown to a stress reaction. Her coach at the time, Matt Dixon, encouraged her to take time off after the race, but her shins had plans slightly earlier than that. "I was out around mile 8 of the run, when you're all the way out by the winery and no one is going to come pick you up, when everything just unraveled and it was really bad," remembers Corbin. "I barely made it back, and then went directly in to get an MRI."

Despite being in a walking boot for the next six weeks, Corbin decided to stick to her normal routine of heading from Mis-

soula to Bend for the build-up to Kona. She'd read physical therapist Jay Dicharry's book *Anatomy For Runners*, and her good friends Matt Lieto and Jen Luebke encouraged her to visit him at his clinic in Bend. "I'd been working with Jay and I knew it would be a pretty big departure for Linsey to follow some of his techniques," says Lieto. "But she was kind of at that point when she really had no other choice."

Exactly six weeks before Kona, Corbin met Dicharry for the first time in his office. She still wasn't able to run and she laid everything out on the table: limited running since March, severe stress reactions in her shin, and the biggest race of her season less than two months away. Dicharry had little interest in her history, instead, he looked at the hand they would be dealt for the next six weeks. "I tend to look at a situation by deciding the desired outcome and then working backward," says Dicharry. "We had six weeks to get her body strong enough to run a marathon without actually getting the mileage in. We basically went into a pretty aggressive strength training protocol so that we could essentially flip on that muscle memory switch the first time she had to run a marathon, which would be in the actual race."

For the next six weeks, Corbin and Dicharry focused on getting her musculoskeletal system as healthy as it could be for the stress of Ironman. Long trail runs were replaced with deadlifts, push presses and heavy squats, while her swimming and biking mileage went up just as it normally would have. She didn't even begin to run until three weeks before the race. She made it 9 miles, which Dicharry



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quickly told her would be her limit until race day. Before Dicharry, Corbin's weight-training regimen was mostly bodyweight based and she said she had stayed away from heavy weights for fear of bulking up before a race. "This is a popular misconception among triathletes," says Dicharry. "They think strength training and endurance training are two different things when really they go hand in hand."

Corbin quickly placed a lot of trust in Dicharry's plan, and even paid for him to fly out to Kona so their work could continue the week before the race. Dicharry says he partly wanted to be there to make sure she stuck to the weight-training plan, but also because the truth was that she wasn't completely healed from her injury. "To say that she was completely fine heading into that race? No, she wasn't. We were doing very injury-specific rehab right up to the day before the race and she couldn't afford to miss any of it." While other athletes were getting rid of nervous energy by running up and down Ali'i Drive, Corbin was in the weight room doing chest presses and pull-ups. "I definitely gave him the stink eye a couple of times that week during those workouts," says Corbin. "I mean, I was so nervous and agitated and everyone else was running everywhere and here I was, having not even completed more than 9 miles at a stretch in months."

Dicharry, on the other hand, was as cool as a cucumber. "I felt she was exactly where she needed to be. She actually PR'd in three different types



of lifts the Monday before the race," he says. "That told me she was still getting stronger, she wasn't fatigued, she was still building her body for the Ironman."

On October 12, Corbin started the Ironman World Championship with a few certainties—her shin pain was gone, and her swimming and biking mileage were strong—and one big, looming uncertainty about what would happen after mile 9 of the marathon. After one of her better swims, Corbin fell flat on the bike, exiting T2 in 17th place. She was a little rattled that the bike hadn't gone better, since she'd put so much extra bike mileage on her legs. But on the bright side, she'd focused on her nutrition more than usual during those 112 miles, and she felt pretty good heading out of T2.

At mile 9 of the marathon, heading out toward the highway, Corbin took a moment to take it all in. "I kind of made a mental note that past the 9-mile mark, I would be going into the unknown," she says. Heading into the Energy Lab, Corbin had already jumped up to 13th place. Despite heightened secu-

rity measures at last year's race that closed several miles of the marathon to spectators, Dicharry had somehow managed to sneak out onto the lava fields to cheer her on. "I'd like to keep it a secret how I got out there," he jokes. Noticing immediately that Corbin was remaining just as strong—if not stronger—than she was back in town, Dicharry began screaming, shouting and doing jumping jacks for Corbin as she ran by. "It was so wonderful to see him out there going crazy," says Corbin. "I think I kind of knew then that those last 12 or so kilometers back into town were when some of the girls ahead of me were going to crack."

Back in the Ironman Live studio, Matt Lieto was busy announcing the race when Chris popped his head in the door and told Lieto that Corbin was having a good run. "Up until that point, during those last 10 or 20 kilometers, I don't think she was having a really great day," he says. "Her splits weren't coming up on our tracker, so I kind of just assumed she had fallen back."



While Lieto finished wrapping up the men's pro race and started on the first pro women to come through, Corbin was heading toward the turn at Palani, with American pro Amanda Stevens (and 10th place) within her sights. "Jay, Chris and my parents were kind of all magically there on the corner when I reached it, and I just knew I had to make a decision: Do I go for the pass and a payday or just pass out trying?" Corbin went for it, pumping up her speed noticeably in the last two miles of the marathon to pull off a 3:04 marathon and grab her third top-10 Kona finish. "I was finishing the Ironman post-race show and suddenly I see this American flag coming down the finish chute," says Lieto. "I was like, 'Are you serious?' And then I went nuts. She hadn't been on anyone's radar that whole day."

A few days after the race, lying on the beach drinking some beers with Chris, Corbin was in an understandably contemplative mood. "I kind of just turned to him and said, 'Maybe we should move.' And I was kind of surprised when he very calmly turned back to me and replied, 'Yeah.'"

Within minutes of meeting the Corbins it's obvious how important a role Chris has played in Corbin's career, and in her continual growth as an athlete and as a person. The two were college sweethearts who met long before Corbin even learned how to properly ride a road bike, and Chris spent the first couple of years of her pro career juggling his own work in digital marketing with helping her navigate the pro triathlon waters as "head cheerleader" and "overall supportive dude." An avid fly fisherman and successful businessman in his own right who also manages his wife's sponsorship deals and digital content, Chris' confidence and steadfast demeanor are easily as important to Corbin's success as her incredible lung capacity and never-quit attitude. "They are right hand and left hand," says Corbin's mother, Betty Pickell. "I think one of Chris' many gifts has been his astuteness that it was time for Linsey to step into herself a bit more, make more decisions for herself, and his authenticity has really shined through as they've made all of these changes."



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Corbin had some time to plan her next steps. While her strength had pulled her through the race, she was by no means healthy by the end of it. "I think we can safely warn people that the 9-mile plan is not the new recipe," laughs Chris. She took six weeks off running post-Kona, scrapped plans to race Ironman Ari-

zona, put their house in Missoula on the market, and made the difficult decision to part ways with her coach of four years, Matt Dixon. Dixon and Corbin still speak very highly of one another, but he admits that he wished she'd made the change of location sooner. "She should have left that place years ago," he says. While Corbin asked Dicharry to coach her, he politely declined, emphasizing that he was one part of a larger team that needed to be put in place around Corbin in order for her to finally achieve the consistency she's lacked in her career.

Corbin had met Kropelnicki a few times before and had read some of his articles on training and nutrition. She liked what she saw. "He's very into the details, and I think I needed that." An initial phone conversation between the two stretched on for more than two hours, and soon after she flew out to his home base of Boston to train with him for a week before deciding to sign on with him in December, shortly after moving into their new home in Bend. "At this point in her career, a coaching change was a really big risk," says Kropelnicki. "She's putting her prime years of racing in my hands, so I think we both really wanted to be sure, because it's a lot of pressure."



Six months in to their new lives in Bend, the Corbins have settled into a rhythm and a clearer purpose driven by Corbin's newfound confidence in her ability to take the reins. With a team of experts firmly set in place: Chris, Dicharry and Kropelnicki among others, Corbin has flourished. She won Ironman Los Cabos in March and finished second at Ironman 70.3 Raleigh in June. Kropelnicki and Dicharry coordinate their work with Corbin, and her continued health has bolstered their confidence that this might be her best professional year yet. "We can really think long-term now," says Dicharry. "And I think that's put her in a really great space mentally."

There is a bittersweet lining to their new lives; a realization on both of their parts that while Montana was romantic and made Corbin so much of who she is, staying there was holding her back. With extremely harsh, long winters, a nearly nonexistent swim training program, and subpar medical care, living in Missoula had become almost an emotional crutch that Corbin needed to break free of. "It's not like I moved from Montana to Europe or Los Angeles," says Corbin. "Bend and Missoula are pretty similar. But I'm ready to achieve all that I want to achieve, and it wouldn't be possible to do living there."

For Chris, the change has meant being able to play less "head cheerleader" and more "supportive dude." He can focus on her sponsorship deals and her website content, while letting Dicharry and Kropelnicki hash out her

training program and her mental fitness. "I used to be involved with that part way more, the role of side coach, and I think I like stepping away from that because she knows what's best for her."

Throughout Corbin's entire career, however, Chris has been adamant that he's no Sherpa. "He's never built a bike for me, don't let him fool you," laughs Corbin. Lieto recounts a story about offering to teach Chris some bike maintenance skills so if they were at a race he could help her out. "He had no interest at all. He was like, 'I don't do that stuff.'" laughs Lieto. "But I think it's perfect that way. You lose a part of yourself if you put it all into another person and he's been very good at remaining himself."

As Corbin sets out on the prime years of her career, she has found the confidence in herself and is capitalizing on the changes she was mature enough to make. Surrounded by a circle of influencers, each with their own role in Corbin's career, by all accounts the future looks bright. And one thing is certain: Chris will be right there by her side. "I don't think I've ever not seen him at a race with her," says Lieto. "And he brings his multi-piece fly rod and he's talking about all the good fishing there is to be had." **A**

For behind-the-scenes photos from our Corbin cover shoot, go to lavamagazine.com/corbin-gallery