

An Unlikely Elite

by Vicki Thomas

Preface

I started this book last spring. I'm not really sure where the idea came from to write this book. It just really seemed to make sense to spend time writing something more than blog posts about my life as a cyclo-cross racer. In 2008 I set a big goal of racing at the elite World Cyclo-Cross Championships. This was really my "pie in the sky" goal. I really wanted to accomplish it but I wasn't sure I could do it. But with the amazing support from my husband Marc, my coach Steve Weller, my sponsors, and my training partners - I achieved my goal and raced at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic in January 2010.

This race truly was a dream race for me. Everything went right and I had one of those perfect days on the bike. A true culmination of the training, hard work and sacrifices made along the way.

It is now early February 2011 and I'm just about to return home to Ottawa after spending three months in Belgium. This past cyclo-cross season did not go as planned. In addition to racing my competitors, I unfortunately was battling my body and this time my body won out. My body and my ulcerative colitis forced me to stop racing and training and my 2010-2011 season ended with the Koksijde World Cup in late November. This definitely was not according to plan.

The experiences of this past season have made this book even more special to me. During the writing, editing and thinking about this book, I've had the chance to relive the highs and lows that got me to the big race in Tabor. There have been some tough moments this season but I always had this book to work on and it served as a reminder to me that anything truly is possible.

In the end, this book which I started as a way to tell my story so you could be inspired to achieve your goals, has helped me just as much. I hope you find some inspiration from my book and if anything realize that we are only limited by ourselves.

January 31, 2010 a date I had been thinking and dreaming of for more than a year. This date propelled me forward and kept me pushing down on the pedals day in and day out. And now it was here. Kind of surreal. Kind of awesome. Really when I think back to that day, it seems like a dream. Suppose this is because I wanted to be there in the World Cyclo-Cross Championships so badly that I didn't want to let myself believe it could or ever would happen. And now it was happening. Even now months later, my eyes start to water and my nose gets that funny tickle in it, when I start to think, write or talk about that day and that race. This is a sign that January 31, 2010 was a pretty big day in my life.

This day and the race in Tabor, Czech Republic were the highlights of cyclo-cross racing life. Everything went perfectly. My race went well. I was focused. I was pedaling hard. I was smiling. I was in the moment. Soaking it all in and revelling in the thrill of lining up at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Still, I really can't believe I raced in this race. Okay, now my eyes are really watery. Sorry for the emotion but this race and life experience has such a powerful effect on me.

Before I go any further and tell you all about the race that defined me and how I got to this incredible place, I think its best to tell you a bit about cyclo-cross. I often forget that not everyone eats, sleeps, and breathes cycling and cyclo-cross. So here is the quick and dirty low-down on cyclo-cross (warning after reading this, you'll be hooked as well and might find yourself dreaming of cyclo-cross racing...):

- Fastest growing cycling discipline in North America
- A fall/winter sport with the season running from September through February
- Elite women race for 40 minutes and elite men race for 60 minutes
- Races are on 1.5 to 2 kilometer long courses that can feature any and all of sand, mud, grass, stairs, pavement, and off-road riding
- The goal is to complete as many laps as possible in the either 40 or 60 minutes
- The hotbed of cyclo-cross is Belgium - drawing up to 30,000 people to the biggest races of the season and with all elite races televised every Saturday and Sunday
- Races are held in the snow, rain, hot September sun, whatever the weather we race
- The bikes look like road bikes with drop bars, but have slightly beefier tires and a braking system that can handle mud, snow and sand

Quite simply, cyclo-cross is the most dynamic and spectator friendly cycling discipline there is. Spectators can get close to the racers. Really close. So close that when I'm warming up for races on my bicycle trainer, I've had people come up and pinch my bum to see how much fat I have.... I've been asked for autographs and had my photo taken. The fans mill around rider vehicles before the race, checking out the bikes, tire selection, and giving us riders the once-

over. During the race, the fans are so close that they can reach out and touch us as we ride by. So close that once in a race in Middlekerke, I had a rather spectacular crash in the mud and two friendly Belgian men reached over the barricades, heaved me up, straightened out my handlebars and gave me a push to get going again. All of this results in a contagious atmosphere of fast racing, cheering, jeering, and a massive adrenaline high for the racers and the fans. Nothing compares to racing cyclo-cross - especially in Belgium.

Even after this description, you might still be scratching your head wondering why I would want to race my bike in the rain, snow, ice, mud and cold for the hardest 40 minutes of my life? Well, quite simply, I love it. A cyclo-cross race has everything - a fast start, tactics, tricky corners and descents, the fans, and the rush of pushing my body as hard as I can for 40 minutes. Really there is nothing else quite like it. Throw in the exuberant fans and you have an amazing spectacle of fast-paced racing, riders against the elements, whipping by the fans so close that we can reach out and touch each other.

See, I told you, you'd want to start racing after reading this description. The racing really is this exciting. Everything about cyclo-cross racing makes it for me, my number one sport and passion. All this helps to explain why the World Cyclo-Cross Championships was and is a big fixture in my life.

The World Cyclo-Cross Championships is the biggest race on the cyclo-cross racing calendar. Cyclo-cross is not an Olympic sport so the World Championships is the top level for us. In 2008, I set the goal of racing at the 2009 World Cyclo-Cross Championships. At the time, this goal seemed like a long-shot, I was a first year elite racer, coming from a season of racing in the Masters category. I was taking my cyclo-cross racing to a new level and shooting for racing in the ultimate race of the cyclo-cross season. Big goal. Excellent goal.

This 2008 goal got me here. To where I can tell you about my story and how I raced in the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships. This initial goal has shaped me in so many ways. It has made me a better athlete, a better person, really it has fulfilled a large void in my life. I truly am one of the lucky ones - I've discovered my passion and I have the freedom to let it guide my life. And that race in the snow and ice in the Czech Republic was a sign that I am on the right path.

The day after the race, sitting in a comfy chair in our hotel in Prague, Czech Republic, I wrote on my Ottawa Cross web site:

Where do I start? How do I start? I fear that this racing experience might just simply be too grand for me to capture with words. It was that amazing. That huge. Really there is no race quite like the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. I was pretty confident that I was ready for the spectacle - I've done a lot of World Cup this year (all of them except Roubaix) and I've raced in front of some big crowds in Belgium.

But, really, nothing compares to the frenzy, emotion, excitement, and noise of a World

Cyclo-Cross Championships. Take every racing experience you've ever had, multiply it by a billion, and then multiply that by a gazillion. You might come close to the experience I had yesterday.

Favorite moments of the day:

- *waking up and seeing the excitement and pride in Marc's face*
- *hearing Marc cheer me on every time I went by the pits*
- *seeing the Team Canada boys running all over the course and cheering me on*
- *hanging out with Luc before and after the race*
- *seeing my cyclo-cross racing friends*
- *hanging out in the staging area, looking at my racing idol Hanka Kupfernagel and knowing that anything is possible*
- *hearing my name announced over the loud speaker*
- *racing and seeing/hearing/feeling the fans*
- *hearing the bell lap - nothing quite like that for me*
- *crossing the finish line alone, sitting up, smoothing out my skinsuit, sitting up proud so everyone could see the red maple leaf and the words Team Canada*

Yikes, just re-reading this blog post overwhelmed me with emotion. I was back there - back in Tabor, sitting on the trainer and getting warmed up for the race. Everything that morning went so smoothly. I woke up well-rested and ready to race. Excellent pre-race breakfast of fine museli, tasty rye bread, a couple of hard-boiled eggs and then I was off. I like to arrive at the race course three hours before the race. A bit earlier than most, but I don't like to be rushed. You never know what could go wrong, so best to be there early. This also gives me time to chill out and talk to my racing pals. Marc, Alex and I loaded up the Team Canada van and drove on over to the race course. What a feeling to pull up and to see the other country's set-ups with big team buses and people milling around. Even at this hour there were already fans hanging around hoping to get a glimpse of the racers. Typically at a cyclo-cross race, we are very accessible to the fans, but at the World Championships, things were a bit different. Each country had its own heated container and area to use for warm-up and pre-race preparation. Since I was the only woman racing for Team Canada, I had the container all to myself.

After a bit of pre-race photo taking, I hopped on my bike to get in a couple of early race laps. I wanted to get out there before it became busy with the other athletes. This way I could go at my own pace and focus on choosing my lines and running through the race physically and mentally. It was a surreal experience. It was empowering to be out there all alone on the day of the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. I knew then it was going to be a good day. I did a couple

of laps that left me feeling pretty confident.

A lot of the racers were not happy with the weather and racing conditions. But it is cyclo-cross, we need to be prepared to race in any and all conditions. Besides it was the winter in the Czech Republic - it only makes sense that the course was pure snow and ice. I'm pretty comfortable racing on the snow and ice. A lot of my racing friends assume this is because I'm Canadian. But truthfully, I don't really race that much in similar conditions at home - I'm in Belgium by early November so I normally miss the winter racing conditions at home. To me the snow and ice is one of the easiest course conditions to read. The snow is typically rock hard. The ice is slippery. So this means the mantra of "go slow to go fast" really rings true. Too much speed into the corners and you'll be on the ground. Too much braking and your bike will slide. Yes the snow and ice are hard and it's not nice to crash on this cement-like surface - such is bike racing.

Luckily for us, it was slightly overcast on Sunday so the course would stay nice and firm all day. We didn't have to deal with the variable conditions that can happen when the snow and ice begin to soften and the mud and ruts begin to creep up. Fast. Smooth. Hard. Perfect.

By the time I got back to the container, Marc and Alex had my trainer set up for my warm-up and were busying themselves with setting tire pressure and last minute bike adjustments. The excitement and emotion in that container was incredible. I was a bit nervous but mostly excited. Marc was trying hard to stay relaxed but his emotions were pretty clear for all of us to see. He kept on double-checking my bikes, fiddling with this or that and asking me if I was okay.

I was more than okay. I was awesome. I was ready. We were ready.

This race marked the end of a long and successful season of racing in Europe, so I had my pre-race routine worked out. This most definitely helped me stay focused and calm on race day. I knew when I wanted to get on the trainer. I knew what type of pre-race ride I'd do before the race. I knew what I would eat. I knew when I would change into my skinsuit and make my way over to the race course. This routine really made the day so much easier. I was confident in my pre-race routine and was able to relax and soak in the World Cyclo-Cross Championships.

I hopped on the trainer and slowly warmed up my legs. Our pal Luc dropped in to see how I was doing and to hang out. We met Luc earlier in the season and ever since he has been at all of my races. Taking photos. Cheering me on. Encouraging me. Being a great friend. As I warmed up my legs on the trainer, I was able to look out the window of the container and see the race day starting to unfold. Other racers were out on the course checking it out, fans were scoping out the best spots, coaches and managers were milling around nervously. Then before I knew it, it was time to get out there. Amazing how quickly the time passes. I was ready. I drank a can of iced cappuccino, downed my last drop of energy drink, gave Marc a hug and kiss and pedaled over to the start/finish area.

What a feeling. I was doing it. I was racing in the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. The

realization of a dream. This moment was proof that dreams do come true. Hard work and focus can get you wherever you want. I did it. I put in the hard work. I made the sacrifices. I took the lumps and bumps. I had success. I did it. I was racing for Team Canada at the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships. The main emotion when I was riding over to the race start? Pride. Overwhelming feeling of pride to be wearing the red and white Team Canada clothing.

Before a cyclo-cross race it is normal for us racers to do our last set of sprints on the start/finish straight. The start area is typically a paved stretch of road with plenty of room for some sprints and recovery. So just like I did before every race, I got in a few sprints and chatted with my racing pals. The tension and stress on that short stretch of pavement was thick and heavy. I know I was smiling. But inside I was freaking out. I was trying so hard not to cry. The happiness and thrill of it all was just simply overwhelming. The fans were jammed along the course barriers, people were taking photos, cheering for us already, and equally excited for the racing to start. Before I knew it, Richard Fries (a fixture at cyclo-cross races in New England) was on the loud speaker calling the racers to the staging area.

Here we go. Race time.

Marc was there in the staging area to make sure I was okay and that my bike was alright. One last check of tire pressure. Some hugs and a few whispers of encouragement “I love you. I’m so proud of you. You did it”, and then I heard my name on the loud speaker. “Racing for Team Canada, Vicki Thomas, please come to the line.” Oh yeah, I was doing it. I was lined up in the fifth row. I could see my racing idol in the front row, Hanka Kupfernagel I was surrounded by friendly faces from a season of racing. We were all decked out in our respective country’s national skinsuits. My red and white skinsuit looked the best. My red leg warmers helped add some flash to the look!

Bang! The gun is fired. We’re off! The frantic pedaling and sprinting had started. All of us trying to get to the first set of hills and corners first. It felt like the race was in slow motion. I was floating along. Carried by the thrill and spectacle of a World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Now, I knew going into this race that I would have to have the race of my life to finish on the lead lap. During the season, there were a few races when I didn’t finish on the lead lap - I wanted today to be different. I so badly wanted the World Cyclo-Cross Championships to finish for me on the lead lap. To hear that bell and see the 1 to go sign would be the icing on the cake. To do this, I knew I had to minimize my mistakes. Mistakes could lead to crashes - I didn’t have enough time to crash, pick myself up and get going again. So I did ride some sections a bit more cautiously. I stuck to the plan.

Usually during a race, I see and hear and everything, I see the fans. I notice the new bumps and grooves in the course. I hear the announcer. My senses are full on and I can at times become distracted. But not this time. One of my race goals was to have an “experience of letting go”. I can happily say I achieved this race goal. I was so focused on getting to that bell lap that I was only thinking of pedaling and getting around the course. Thanks to some excellent

training during the week, I had clear picture of the course in my head, I looked ahead and focused on getting set up for the next turn, climb, or descent. I really didn't notice the fans or craziness going on. The only voice I was listening for was Marc's when I rode by the pit. With two laps to go, I did hear the excitement in the announcer's voice. I knew the race leader Marianne Vos was coming. I knew it was now or never. Time to really take some risks. If I made a mistake and crashed and got lapped, well at least I can say I laid it all on the line. But it all came together. I took the risks, kept my bike upright and made it through the start/finish before Vos was able to catch me.

The sound of that bell and seeing the number 1 on the placard was beautiful. I think I was grinning from ear-to-ear now. The last lap. I had made it. Not only did I earn the right to race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships, but I was going to finish on the lead lap. A true dream day. That last lap was pretty cool. I was the last rider on the course (the two women behind me were lapped and pulled). A Japanese rider was just ahead of me. It really felt like I was all alone out there. I became a little bit more aware of the fans. I could see more red and white of the Canadian fans. When I came through the pit the first time on that last lap, I gave Marc a little fist pump. We did it! The last time through the pit, I was giving it my all - Marc was cheering and bouncing around. I wish he could have been on that bike with me. Well, really he was. Without him, I couldn't have done it. When I turned the corner onto the finish straight it was totally amazing. It was me, the fans, and the photographers.

I sat up. I smoothed out my skinsuit. Wiped off the dirt. I wanted everyone to see the red maple leaf and to read the words Team Canada. I did it. I crossed the finish line. I raced at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. What was a dream and far off goal in 2008 had come to fruition.

I, Vicki Thomas, finished 41st at the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships.

From my 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships race report:

Wow! I did it! I raced at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. And I finished on the lead lap. Massive. What a great day. What a fantastic race. I had so much fun out there.

From waking up in the morning until I hit the pillow early this evening it has just been a fantastic experience.

One of my favorite moments of the race was when I came onto the start/finish straight the last time. I knew I was the last rider to finish. So I sat up, smoothed out my skinsuit, wiped the dirt off, and rolled across the line sitting up so everyone could see the red maple leaf. I really wanted to raise my hands above my head but was worried that would be disrespectful to the winner Marianne Vos. But let me tell you, I felt like the winner at that moment.

I set a goal. I worked towards it. I accomplished it. Can't ask for much more than that.

This entire experience truly would not have been possible without Marc. Marc and I have been together for 16 years and married for six. We've been through a lot together. Always coming out stronger, smarter, and more confident in our relationship. I often think about role models, and do I really have a role model? Well, yes, yes I do.

Marc is my role model. This guy just has the ability to be the best he can each day. He is driven by a focus to be a good person. This means he is patient. He is understanding. He is responsive. He is passionate. He is driven. Marc expects the best from himself. This is not to say that Marc has everything go his way. Rather the contrary. Marc is a smart and talented guy who has had to dig deep and fight for the life he has made for himself.

Many people who know me as a cyclo-cross racer don't know that Marc is also an extremely skilled and talented bike racer. When I first met Marc in 1994 (he at the tender age of 24 and me at 22), he was racing for a local cycling team and working at Corel Corporation. Fresh out of university and doing his best to make the most of everyday. At the age of 24 Marc exuded passion - he worked hard, he trained hard, he raced hard, he lived life each and everyday. I was just getting into bike racing and cycling in general so Marc and his teammates on the Sportable team were pretty impressive to me. They looked super cool in their red and black cycling jerseys and shorts, they raced all over Ontario, Quebec and the United States, and they just seemed to be having fun.

Something I wanted to be part of. From the get go Marc encouraged me to get out and ride my bike. He would come to the women's time trials on Tuesday nights to cheer me on. We'd go for training rides together. Marc helped get used to my first set of clipless pedals. Marc convinced me to do my first cyclo-cross race...

1994. Conroy Pit in Ottawa. I showed up with my 1990 Specialized Rockhopper mountain bike frame, toe clips, running shoes, and some hand-me-down cycling clothing from Marc. I had no idea what to expect. I just knew that it sounded like fun. If Marc did it - it must be right? I don't remember much about that race. Except for one thing: Marc's smile. He was so proud that I was racing cyclo-cross and he was thrilled to see me take on a new challenge.

Amazing what encouragement and confidence from someone can do for you... And now here I sit writing about my journey to racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. This would never ever have been possible without Marc. He has been the one encouraging me all along. Planting the seeds in my brain that anything is possible. He is the perfect example of dreaming big and going for it. Marc was and is an excellent bike racer. But he has put a lot of this on hold for me, making my cyclo-cross racing his priority. For this I'm truly overwhelmed and I owe Marc a massive debt of gratitude.

Most people who know Marc also don't know that he has a black belt in ITF Taekwon-do. Marc has won more Taekwon-do competitions than I can remember. He has competed at two World Taekwon-do Championships, placing fifth in Australia in 2005. It was Marc's focus and drive that earned him his fifth place. He spent countless hours training alone in the basement,

refining his technique, videotaping himself, fixing his mistakes, and continually pushing for more. Definitely leading by example.

It was this example of never quitting and continuing to strive for more that trickled over to me. It was this attitude that sparked the idea for me to move to Belgium for two months in 2007 to race my road bike. It was this drive and determination that saw us returning to Belgium that winter to race cyclo-cross and focus on the World Master's Cyclo-Cross Championships in Mol, Belgium. This passion and excitement was what led to me floating the goal of aiming for the 2009 World Cyclo-Cross Championships. It was Marc's immediate acceptance that this goal was a possibility and doable that has led to everything else.

There is no can't for Marc. There is simply do. Keep on doing it until it feels right and you're happy with it. So when I would waver on this goal of transitioning from a Masters level athlete to an elite racer and qualifying for the World Cyclo-Cross Championships, Marc was right there to give a subtle push and remind me about my hopes, dreams, and goals.

Sure, I'm driven and want to succeed at everything I do. But what comes with this need for success is a knack for giving up when things aren't going the way I want. If something is "too hard" or I simply "can't get it", I'm quick to move onto something else. But Marc won't let me do this. Particularly with cyclo-cross racing. He sees in me those things I can't and he reminds me that I can improve, that no goal is too big, that I can push my body and brain to take my life and cycling to the next level. Quite simply, he won't let me settle for mediocrity.

He knows that deep down I won't ever be satisfied with being middle-of-the-road so he doesn't let me give in. More times than I like to remember, Marc has brought me back from the edge. He has cajoled, convinced, begged, shouted - done whatever it takes to make me wake up and see that I haven't reached my limits yet.

Marc has done so much for me and continues to do so. Even now, I'm working part-time and focusing on my training while Marc goes to work each day and squeezes in rides at the end of the day. To top it off he is out racing pretty much every weekend, mentoring a team of young 20 year olds, who have the same passion, hopes and dreams that he had when I met him.

Racing at the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic, this was for Marc.

It was a culmination of two years of focused training, racing, traveling, and sacrifice. Being an elite athlete is a selfish endeavour. Sure I make a lot of sacrifices but in truth, Marc is the one who is making the most sacrifices. During the cyclo-cross season, Marc is there for me whenever and wherever I need him. Driving me to races. Working on and cleaning my bikes. Sacrificing his training to go out and ride with me. Helping me to learn the skills I need to race with the world's best. When I'm having a rough day, Marc is there to talk things out with me and to remind me of my dreams and goals. He believes in me.

I'm often asked why I race my bike. Why make the sacrifices? Why put myself through the

physical pain? Why do it? Well, how can I not do this when I have a guy like Marc in my corner. I want to get better, to race my best, to be the bike racer and person I can for Marc.

There really was nothing better than riding through the pits the last time at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships and seeing the enormous grin on Marc's face and the tears in his eyes. We did it and it was an amazing experience. That day was the culmination of two years of focused training on my part but without Marc's devotion and belief in me, it wouldn't have been possible.

The goal itself wouldn't even have been a possibility without Marc.

An amazing person. Incredible role model. He is my rock. I call Marc my "favorite guy" and I mean it. When Marc is around I feel more confident, I feel better about myself and I want to be a better person. Can't really ask for much more out of a husband, best friend, and lover.

There is so much I could write about how much Marc supports me and really makes it possible to live this rich and full life. But really, sometimes the best things are left unsaid. Suffice it to say, thanks to Marc I am doing this and I'm loving every minute of it. I do this because of Marc and in turn, I do it for Marc. He is my guiding light and keeps me on the path.

We've all read articles and books about successful people and how they got to their level of success. For some it starts at a young age with a singular devotion to music, math, or sports. For others it is a growing passion for something, maybe a discovery of books, history, art, or nature. And still for others it seems to happen overnight, going about the day, then it seems to the observer, this person has become an "overnight success". (When truthfully, this overnight success has probably been working hard with a focused and dogged-determination quietly and steadily for years.)

What about me? How did I get to this place of success? Funny, I find it hard to even write the word success and have it be associated with me. I really still don't see myself as being a success. Suppose this is because I still have a lot more that I want to see and do. So rather than the word success, I'll just use the word "place". Yes, I know, I need to work on this....

Anyway, how did I get where I am. How did I get myself to an athletic level that earned me the right to represent my country at the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships? At the age of 37 no less? Funny, I initially thought I was one of those "overnight success" people, quietly working away under the covers focused on my goal, plugging away, and finally breaking through to get to this place. But, really I don't think this is the case. Nope, for me it was a growing passion for the bike and cyclo-cross. When I discovered the bike and what it gives me, I become pretty darn dedicated and then I started plugging away day-in and day-out pushing on the pedals. I told myself I could do it. I told you what I was going to do. And I went out and did it. Gee, that kind of makes it sound pretty easy. It was and it wasn't. It is and it isn't.

As a kid, I always loved sports. I tried and played everything. Some of my earliest memories involve playing tackle football and road hockey with my little brother and his friends. I wasn't one of those girls who sat and played with dolls or was interested in ballet. Nope, much to my parents chagrin I wanted the action. The rough and the tumble please. Summers were spent racing around the block on my bike, building makeshift jumps out of wooden toboggans, playing football, playing baseball, and flopping around in the community swimming pool. Really just being outside all day everyday moving my body and having fun playing. Sure I did spend a lot of time with my books. But what really got me going was sports. I remember so badly wanting to play hockey like my brother. I did do some figure skating, but it really wasn't for me. I never really did any organized sports, a bit of karate in grade five and then I played ringette for three years. That was it. Part of the problem was that in northern Saskatchewan in the 70's and 80's there really weren't many sports opportunities for girls. I never really fit into the school sports system - basketball, volleyball, badminton weren't really my thing. I did do some track and field and play some soccer, but nothing really stuck.

Okay, well time for a confession moment here. I was on the soccer team in grade nine.... But one fateful day after a game, my pal and I decided to "moon" the school bus holding the White Fox soccer team. This did not go over very well. I ended up with eight hours of detention and was told I could no longer participate in school sports. Brutal. So that was it. As I understood it, no more school sports for me. Well, to this day, I really wish someone in charge

had clarified that one point with me. Turns out that it was no more school sports for the rest of grade nine... Not the rest of high school.... Yep, so this is why I didn't participate any further in track and field or soccer. Oh well, everything happens for a reason.

I did stay active though. I begged my parents for a new bike and my mom made me some biking shorts. Really tight red shorts. Through-out the spring and summer, I would hop on my bike and head out for a ride. No helmet. No gloves. Just my heavy hybrid bike and my red shorts. I'd ride along the shoulder of the highway between Nipawin and Codette, making the 20 kilometer round-trip journey as often as I could. I loved it. It was a chance for me to just really be "me". I wasn't a real popular kid. I was one of those kids who never had a best friend. Sure, I had friends but I was also quite content to hang out alone - reading, riding my bike, going for a run, or playing with my cat. Kind of a loner I guess. The bike probably back then, more than I realized it, filled a big void for me. I could get out and just be happy. Being a teenager is not an easy time. So I suppose rather than get into trouble or go wild, I rode my bike.

Now that I really think about it, a bike has always been present in my life. My birthday is in mid-April and I remember pleading with my parents to let me get my bike out of the garage for my birthday. Every year, my parents would say we'd have to wait and see, waiting to see if the roads would be clear of enough snow to ride. I'm sure I drove them crazy asking to get that darn bike out of the garage. One year, I got a new navy blue mountain bike for my birthday. I loved it. It had toe clips that I was super proud of. I became an expert at flipping those plastic cages over my toes and cinching down the toe straps. I cleaned that bike religiously. When other kids were walking to school, I was riding my bike. Walking was cool. Cycling wasn't. I didn't care. I loved riding my bike. Nothing quite like the freedom of being able to ride away. So, really the bike was always there. From a young age zipping around the block with my little brother to my high school years when I would hop on and ride to Codette while my peers were out at parties or hanging out.

What about school? Well, I was a good student but definitely not gifted or considered smart. I learned very quickly that if I was to achieve the marks that I believed I should, I had to work hard. I felt that I had to work hard to "achieve" just as my parents had done: my dad was an elementary school teacher and my mom was a nurse. And to top it off, my brother Gregory was one of the smartest kids in his class. So I felt like I should be the same... Problem was, I couldn't simply slide along by just going to class and doing the minimum (as is the norm for high school). I spent a lot of time in the library, studying, reading, and sweating over my marks. I was not very good at math, but I put my head down and reversed my failing grades and managed to get through three years of physics, chemistry, biology, and algebra. My favorite subjects were English and social studies. But even these did not come easy. I'm not sure if my parents ever pushed me academically. I know I was expected to do my best but I don't think they had high expectations for me. In my grade twelve year, I was all over the map - maybe I would go to college and study hotel administration, maybe I would join the Canadian Air Force, maybe I would go to university and study journalism. I really didn't know what was possible for me. But then one day after meeting with a recruiting officer from the Air Force, I realized quickly that I

didn't want a military life. I also didn't want to go to college in Saskatchewan. Nope, I wanted to be a journalist. Luckily for me, my parents did push me in one regard - I wasn't allowed to go to university in Saskatchewan. So Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario it was. Little did I know this was the top journalism program in the country. Whatever, this is where I wanted to go, so I put my head down and did the work so I could go. And I did.

Hmm, starting to see a pattern here already, focused and determined. An inner drive that propelled me forward to a goal. University was really a repeat of high school. I discovered quickly that I was surrounded by academic over-achievers. If I wanted to survive this competitive program, I would have to work hard. So I did. I actually spent my university years in the library. Even on Saturdays and Sundays, I would ride my bike to the campus and spend the entire day in the library studying. I really felt there was no other option for me. It worked. I learned a lot. I earned very good marks. I was focused. This success gave me feelings of confidence and success. Really, it seemed to me like this what I should be doing at university. The other thing that propelled me was that I had paid for my university education - tuition, books, air fare to and from Saskatchewan, I paid for all of this. My parents gave me \$350 a month - this was for rent and food. So I placed a high value on what I was doing, it was my hard-earned money from my high school years of working at Kentucky Fried Chicken and then working through-out university. I wasn't about to waste that time and money. It sounds kind of nerdy now, but in four years of university, I only ever missed one class, and that was so I could stay home and work on my thesis.

It's funny, I never ever questioned this hard work. It just made sense to me. I had to achieve a certain level of marks, so I just determined how to do this and got busy on doing it. The themes connecting my childhood, teenagehood, and early twenties are: focus, hard work, and determination. I didn't question this. This was the only way to get what I wanted. Really, the lessons I learned early on in high school and university, set me on the path to racing at the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic.

I set a goal. I worked out a plan. I stayed focused and determined, worked hard and kept on going. Guess high school was really good for something!

When I left for university in 1990, I did one major thing: I bought myself a new bike. All through high school, since the age of 16, I had worked at the Kentucky Fried Chicken. I worked a lot and I saved each and every pay cheque I received. Each time I had saved \$1,000 I would buy a \$1,000 GIC, this frugality allowed me to pay for university and have a little bit leftover after the four years. But I really wanted a new bike, so I made the big decision to withdraw some money and splurge. Off I went to Saskatoon with my parents and I bought a Specialized Rockhopper. I loved that bike. It was so smooth. The color was amazing - green with purple lettering. This bike was my prized possession. It got me to and from university for four years, got me around the city, to my various jobs, it let me explore the city of Ottawa. It was my ticket to freedom and independence.

The Specialized Rockhopper also became my first cyclo-cross bike.

In the summer of 1994 with the advice of my good friend Ian Austen, I bought my first road bike. Ian and I both worked at Southam News, and I would see him come into the office clad in his bright cycling clothing. Ian noticed that I was riding my mountain bike everywhere, so he suggested I consider buying a road bike. Cool. I remember I told my parents that I wanted a bike for my university graduation gift. They outright refused. Said it was not an appropriate gift and I couldn't have one. So I withdrew the last of my savings, and bought my first road bike. It was a black Specialized. I don't remember anything else about it. I loved it. I rode it everywhere. I spent the summer exploring the Gatineau Park, riding to Navan, and I got my first taste of time trialing. Ian convinced me to go out to the Tuesday night women's time trial series. I would get so nervous on Tuesdays, asking Ian question after question about the time trial. I still had toe clips on my road bike and didn't own time trial bars. I stuffed tissue in my shorts above the knee so I could blow my nose while I was doing the 15 kilometer time trial (I didn't like my nose running and my mom always told me not to sniff). Lets just say that when Ian found out about the tissue, this quickly ended, he also convinced me to start doing the time trials in the big chain ring... I had also met Marc in the same summer. He was racing on a Ottawa road racing team full of young hotshots. Marc and I spent a lot of time going for road rides and hanging out - and somehow between Marc and Ian, I ended up racing cyclo-cross...

In 1994, Ottawa had a small but tight-knit cyclo-cross community. Ian and a crew of devoted volunteers ran this local cyclo-cross series which has become the launch pad for many national cyclo-cross champions and national team members. In the early days, I had a love hate relationship with cyclo-cross. It was darn hard. I was lugging my green Specialized Rockhopper around (still with the toe clips). The best moments of those Sunday morning races were the people. Everyone was so encouraging and friendly. Gord Fraser's mom and dad would come to do the timing and score keeping. Bill Hurley, Canadian mountain bike star was often out racing. Really it was so much fun. I think it was 1995 that Ottawa hosted the national championships at Carlington Ski Hill. What a fun time. There was only one women's category back then. I lined up with some major mountain biking stars and I had a blast. Back then when I was racing 'cross I had a bad habit of giving up. I was most often at the back. We all raced together so I was getting lapped by the fast guys. It was hard to take. But that first nationals was a great race for me, I kept on plugging away and had so much fun. By then I had upgraded to Marc's old Myata Alumni-Cross. Marc had bought this bike second-hand and then passed it on to me. What a difference that bike made. It had one downtube shifter and one barcon shifter. Rumor was that if you were really good, you could shift gears with your knee. (I never tried it). I only stuck with time trialing and cyclo-cross for a couple of years. I really wasn't mature enough to do the training required to be successful and I was easily distracted.

The winter of 1995, I started playing hockey. I had always wanted to play hockey. Now finally living in Ottawa, I had a chance. I had my old ringette equipment from my teen-age days of playing so I was set. I bought a hockey stick and off I went. I really had no idea how to play. I got my first taste of it while playing "bike racer" hockey. The Ottawa cycling community had a

Friday morning hockey game going at McNabb arena, I would lace up the skates and play with Canadian cycling legends: John Large, Craig Burge, Peter Meteuza, Bill Hurley, to name a few. I was terrible, but the guys didn't care. From there I moved on to playing women's hockey and I quickly became addicted: I took every hockey camp I could I practiced on outdoor rinks and I practiced stick handling in the basement. Marc got involved and started helping out with my team. After a year of playing, practising and then signing up for Acceleration Ottawa (indoor skating treadmill designed to improve skating speed and quickness) I decided to try out for the AA team in town. I so wanted to play with the National Capitals (the top AA team in the city). I wasn't sure if I would make it, my skating is not elegant, and I'm a bit of a clumsy hockey player, but I was committed. Lucky for me, the coaches took a chance on me and I made the team. Wow - what a feeling. I was so proud to be playing at such a high level. I still went to all of the hockey camps, did lots of running, and worked out in the gym to stay strong and fit for hockey. I was into it big time. Problem was, I was so committed to training and getting better that I would get frustrated with my team mates who weren't interested in this - they really just wanted to play the game. I was dedicated to improving my skills, building on my strength and fitness and really becoming the best hockey player I could. This was one of the first times I realized that my focus and drive was different from others. I stuck with hockey for another year, but ongoing back problems were starting to slow me down.

In an attempt to strengthen my back and core, Marc and I began researching martial arts. We knew that martial arts training was good for developing core strength and I was willing to do anything to put my back pain to rest. Enter Lu's Taekwon-do. The reason I was doing taekwon-do was that it was something that would help me get stronger for hockey. But gradually, taekwon-do began to take over. I really enjoyed the training, the discipline, the sense of achievement, and learning new skills. Eventually, Marc and I were both fully absorbed in taekwon-do. Soon enough it became taekwon-do all the time. I learned quickly that the harder I worked, the better I would get. Tournaments were a lot of fun, who doesn't like winning? In 2001, Marc and I went to Rimini, Italy to watch our friends and instructors compete at the ITF World Taekwon-Do Championships. I was hooked. A blue belt at the time, I decided I wanted to compete at the next World Championships in 2003 in Thessaloniki, Greece. Another long shot since only black belts can compete at the World Taekwon-Do Championships. I still had to earn my black belt, win a National Championship and train for a World Championship. But I was determined.

At the tournament in Rimini, I became captivated by the board breaking. There was an athlete from England who was amazing. She could break anything at will. I wanted to be her. I wanted to break boards like her. So powerful. So impressive. The seed was planted and I started training. I got better. I trained at the Peak Center to become fitter and more explosive. My days were spent lifting weights before work, running at lunch, training each night at the taekwon-do school plus doing extra practice in our basement. I was on track to earn my black belt and then I got sick. Really sick. I had a bout of terrible anemia. My red blood cell count dropped to below 80, my resting heart rate was 100 beats per minute. I was ill and I was

exhausted. I came very close to fainting and blacking out. I was told to stop all exercise. I literally napped on the couch for two months. I had every medical test there was - no doctor could determine the problem. Eventually with 900 milligrams of iron a day I got better. But I had missed the black belt test. My chances of competing at the World Championships were slipping away. Luckily, my instructor saw my passion and desire and arranged a special test for me. I had a mere two months to learn the new black belt patterns before the national championships. The Canadian Nationals in 2003 were my first black belt tournament. I had never competed at such a level before: I won a silver medal in the patterns, a silver in the heavyweight sparring, and a gold medal in board breaking. I was going to the World Championships!

At the World Championships, I competed in heavyweight sparring, power breaking and team competition. The training leading up to this tournament was gruelling. I was traveling to Toronto every other weekend to train with my team members. Two weeks before leaving for Greece, I broke my nose and cracked my orbital bone. This happened in a training session when my coach kicked me and then another girl punched me in the nose. My face hurt a lot. I knew my nose was broken (I heard it break). But I said nothing. The next day I showed up to the training with a badly swollen and bruised face. My coach was shocked that I hadn't said anything - I didn't want to appear soft or whiny. So I sucked up the pain. My coach was impressed. Unfortunately, this did not win me any favors with my team mates. This was the first time I experienced the animosity and jealousy that can happen in women's sports teams. This hurt me a lot but I kept on going, focused on the World Championships. I had a rough World Championships. My sparring was not great - my face was still bashed up so it was hard to take a punch. In the board breaking, I was hoping for a medal. Instead I let the pressure get to me and I cracked - didn't break a single thing. I was devastated. Destroyed mentally and physically. But I still had the team competition. We won a bronze medal in sparring. Awesome! A medal from the world championships. We still had the team power breaking event - we knew going in that we didn't have a chance of a medal. So there was no pressure on me. I was selected to do the turning kick and I had to break four boards. Never in training had I been able to break more than two boards. I was so relaxed going into this event because I knew we had no chance of winning a medal and there was absolutely no pressure on me. And guess what? I broke those boards effortlessly. My foot went through them like they were butter! What a feeling! Even better than winning the bronze medal. I had done it - I had broken the boards. I'll never forget that feeling. Elation. Relief. Excitement. Incredible.

Unfortunately, this was one of my last tournaments. The damage to my face was too great and each time I got in the ring, I would turn my head to protect my face. I could no longer spar. And since the only time I could compete in board breaking was at a nationals or worlds, I stopped competing. I kept on going to class and teaching but without the competition, taekwondo didn't have the same draw for me.

So now what? I like to run. I dabbled in it in high school. In university I got hooked on it, training for five kilometer and ten kilometer running races. I'm not a fast runner. Just a steady runner. I remember one day as a kid, we were living in Uranium City, Saskatchewan and I

proclaimed to my mom that one day I would run the Boston Marathon. I think I was all of seven years old at the time. My mom responded by saying “well, you better go run around the block then”. Funny what you remember from your childhood. I don’t know if I went out and ran around the block, probably not since I don’t think that at the age of seven I was allowed to play outside of our yard! But the seed was planted. Somehow at this young age, before the Internet and cable television, I had heard of the Boston Marathon. I knew it was a big deal. So why not go for it?

This is how I decided to run a marathon. During my taekwon-do training, I ran a lot. The running training was key to building the endurance I needed to last several rounds in the ring and to get through multiple sparring matches in one day. Thanks to the guidance of the physiologists at the Peak Centre, I had an excellent running base. I called up Ken at the Peak Center and told him I wanted to run a marathon. Slight pause on the phone. And then, “okay, we can do this”. Boy oh boy training for a marathon is hard work. Like I said, I’m a slow runner. So this requires a lot of long (very long) runs. By the end of my training cycle for the Toronto Marathon, I was regularly running for four hours. During the marathon training, really all I did was run. I was either running, recovering from a run, or getting ready to run. It took a great a deal of commitment. I could have backed out and changed my mind, but this is not how I operate. Besides, I had told a few friends that I was running a marathon - no going back. At least in my eyes.

The day of the marathon, it was grey, wet and bleak. I lined up behind the four hour pace bunny absolutely terrified. I suppose because I wanted to accomplish this so badly, I was really quite afraid. Imagine deciding at the age of seven that you were going to do something and now, 23 years later, you were doing it. My brother, his girlfriend Liz, and Marc were my support crew. During the marathon I saw them pretty much every five kilometers - they hopped on and off the subway, took cabs, and used shortcuts to get to see me out on the course. What a day! It was hard. A good hard. The last kilometer was the best kilometer of my life. Gregory jumped onto the course and ran with me for a bit, my favorite moment was hearing him yell at the other fans “cheer for her! My sister’s name is Vicki and she is finishing her first marathon!”. I think the spectators were a bit shocked with his emphatic urging, sure enough I had complete strangers cheering for me. It took me four hours and forty-one seconds to run 42.1 kilometers. Amazing. I did it.

It was that moment that sealed the deal for me. I discovered that hard work and dedication does make dreams come true. In a few months I took myself from an anaerobic explosive athlete to a long-distance runner. I didn’t really believe it was possible. But I stuck to the plan and made it. A seed planted at the age of seven in remote northern Saskatchewan came to fruition 23 years later in the big city of Toronto, Ontario.

Marathon done. Check. Now what? I did spend time recovering from an injury as a result of the marathon. I ended up with my first herniated disc. Not fun. Never before had I experienced such pain. I spent many long months rehabbing my back. There was no running for

me. I got into the pool and swam and did pool running. Boring. But if this is what I had to do, I did it. During this time, I was plotting my next running venture. To me the logical choice was an ultra-marathon. I'm not fast but I can go for a long time. So why not run super long? I read about ultrarunning, became addicted to the sub-culture, and was hooked. But I never did run an ultra-marathon. I spent the winter, spring, summer running and riding my bike (yep, the bike was slowly creeping back in), but I just couldn't get back to running long distances. My poor old back just wouldn't let me.

I was stuck for a bit. Kind of floundering. It was that spring when I bought a mountain bike. Thanks to running I was re-discovering my love of the outdoors and nature. I regular met up with a trail running group in the Gatineau Park, these jackrabbits would take off and I plodded along enjoying the birds, trees, dirt and fresh air. Enter the mountain bike. The mountain bike, I reasoned would let me get outside and be around nature and besides, I've always loved cycling. I had a fantastic spring and summer. I bought a Rocky Mountain Vertex 30 hardtail mountain bike and quickly immersed myself in the Ottawa mountain biking scene. I had a number of thrills and spills but eventually I was getting the hang of it.

A turning point in my mountain biking was thanks to a former professional mountain bike racer and a woman who I remembered watching rip up the cyclo-cross courses way back when. One weekend I drove out to Camp Fortune in the Gatineau Park to attend Dominique Larocque's Wild Women on Wheels mountain bike camp. I had a fabulous weekend. I lucked out and was in Dom's group. She pushed us hard. I did things on that bike that I never imagined possible. I was even more hooked on the mountain bike. I think that Dom's personality and zest for life played a big part in this. Dom is a super exuberant person, who I think like me, really just wants the best in each person to come out. An instant bond formed.

I didn't do any racing that summer. I just rode my bike for fun. At least four times a week I would ride at Ottawa's two key spots: Camp Fortune and Kanata Lakes. I loved it. Marc was still training for taekwon-do so I had the time and freedom to take off in the afternoons and evenings while he was training. The winter was spent skiing. Ottawa is a perfect city for cross-country skiing, each winter the Gatineau Park is groomed for classic and skate skiing. Marc and I spent our weeknights and weekends skiing. We did a couple of races and again, I just truly enjoyed being outside in the fresh air. There is nothing quite like skiing in the pitch black with only the light from the full moon to guide you along the ski trails.

Marc was still pretty focused on taekwon-do and in the summer of 2005 he competed at the ITF World Taekwon-Do Championships in Australia where he place fifth in the patterns competition. Cycling was back in my life full-time. I split my time between riding my mountain bike and riding my road bike. I had resurrected my old Trek and I had started participating in the Seenite training criteriums again. It was great to be back in the cycling community. I became reacquainted with many of my "old" friends and was having fun on my bike again. But my real focus on the bike that summer was mountain bike racing. I decided I wanted to take my mountain biking to the next level.

Suppose this isn't really surprising. If there is a next level, I want to be there or at least training to get there. I quickly discovered that mountain bike racing is so much more demanding than simply mountain biking. I'm not talking the physical exertion here. Rather I'm talking about the thought process and brain. When simply riding around at a comfortable pace, it is relatively easy to make clear decisions and to pick smart lines. Throw in an elevated heart rate, aching quads, heavy breathing, and many distractions, and things go rapidly downhill (well, at least for me). Courses that I rode regularly, such as the Camp Fortune Sunset Series, and was able to ride cleanly became my own personal nightmare during a race. I made bad decisions. I crashed a lot. I bashed up my bike and my body. I quit. I couldn't take it anymore. The racing had wiped the fun out of mountain biking for me. I'm not a fan of crashing and this was all I was doing. I decided to just ride. I loved riding, so there was no need to race. I had a few nasty rides that involved some tough crashes. One in particular where my entire left butt cheek turned black and to this day, I have residual swelling.

The mountain bike beat me up and I just couldn't do it anymore. Crashing and hurting myself really isn't fun. So into the garage went the mountain bike and out came the road bike. I had a loose training plan from the Peak Center and just enjoyed being out on my bike again. We were a full-on cycling household again. Marc arrived home from the ITF Taekwon-Do World Championships in Australia and the very next day, he did a bike race. No more taekwon-do it was back to cycling. A natural return for both of us.

Soon enough after a summer of riding, doing a little bit of racing and just enjoying life, it was cyclo-cross season. That first season back racing cyclo-cross was rough. Really rough. That love/hate relationship I had with cyclo-cross back in 1994 and 1995 was back. I really wasn't that fit yet, so I struggled. I was either last or second last in every cyclo-cross race I did that season. I think I even dropped out of a few races. At times it just got too hard to be last all the time. I was embarrassed as well. But something was lit inside of me. I so badly wanted to be better. I so wanted to be closer to the front of the race. I knew I wouldn't win these local races, since it was an all-categories race. But I wanted to stop being last. I knew that I wouldn't keep racing cyclo-cross if I stayed at the back of the pack - this just wasn't fun for me.

Time to get down to work. I spent the winter riding the CompuTrainer (bicycle trainer) in the basement and skiing. I got stronger by the day. My motivation was high. I started to feel my groove. Racing as a master category cyclist, I did a few road races, local criteriums and spent a lot of time riding. Marc was back into cycling as well so once again we were doing the same sport and having a good time with it. I started with the local "B" criterium series and slowly but surely managed to gain the skills and fitness to race these Tuesday night races comfortably. Time to move up to the "A" race and see how I fared with the fast guys. In the beginning, I would last maybe 10 laps or so. But I kept on going out. I was determined to get better so I went out to both the "B" and "A" races. I knew I could do it, it was just a matter of when. There were definitely some tough times, when I didn't believe it was possible though. I remember my breakthrough night - I lasted the entire "A" criterium. I was on the ropes, and just barely hung on at times, but I did it. What a feeling! I finally saw the pay-off from the persistence and continuity of

my training and racing. I took this newfound confidence and fitness with me into the cyclo-cross season. I was racing better. Faster. My skills were better. But they still needed work.

One of the weakest aspects of my cyclo-cross skill set was my barrier technique. I decided it was time to fix this. Marc built me a barrier out of PVC tubing and I got busy practicing. At the time, I was working at Adobe Systems just down by Dow's Lake and the Queen Elizabeth Parkway. Along the Parkway was a wide grassy park, a perfect spot for daily lunchtime practice sessions.. I set up the barrier in this stretch of grass and I taught myself smooth barrier technique. I would do ten dismounts and mounts. Then ten dismounts and mounts while shouldering the bike. Then I would do five start sprints, using the passing cars as my start signal - when the blue car would pass me, I would take off. I would repeat this five times. Everyday. It didn't matter if it was raining, hot, cold, whatever - I was out there. I got better. I got faster. I could see my progress. It was an awesome experience. I felt more confident in the cyclo-cross races. No more stopping. Clipping out. Picking up the bike. Stepping over the barrier. Putting the bike down. Getting back on. Clip in. Start pedalling. Now I was doing it in one fluid motion. This was also the first time we traveled for a cyclo-cross race. Marc, myself, and Steve Proulx hopped a plane and flew out to BC for cyclo-cross nationals. I had no idea what to expect. I was freaked out. Nervous. And to top it off, I got food poisoning two days before the race. The course was challenging with a BMX pump track and some tricky descents. I had a blast. I placed fifth in the Master's women's race - I duked it out with another girl for the entire race. I was pumped up but disappointed. I wanted to do better. I felt like I needed to do better.

I had a turning point moment at this cyclo-cross nationals. It was watching the elite women race. So fast. So smooth. To see Lyne Bessette and Wendy Sims racing was inspiring. These two women are definite inspirations to me. They race hard. They have fun doing it. And they are so good. I stood there cheering and watching and wishing. Wishing I could be like them. How cool would it be to race with the elite women?

All too soon, cyclo-cross season was over. It had been an awesome fall and winter of bike racing, friendship, growth, struggle, and laughs. Can't really ask for much more. At the time, I was working at Adobe Systems as a technical writer. My two-year contract was ending in April. What to do? Somehow somewhere I got the idea to to take two months off from work and travel to Belgium to race my bike.

Working with my new coach Steve Weller, the intensity was upped, I really started paying attention to my diet, doing yoga, and just really focused myself on getting ready for two months of road racing in Belgium. I had no idea what to expect. I just knew it would be hard - harder than any other racing I'd ever done. This kept me motivated and riding my bike in the basement all winter. By the time April came around, I felt fit and ready to go. I really was walking into the unknown. Thanks to the power of the Internet, I found Joscelin Ryan and her husband Tim Harris. This British couple now live in Belgium and among other things, owns a couple of houses that they rent out to bike racers. After a few email exchanges, I was set up to live in Blauberg, Belgium for two months. I arranged for a short-term lease of a car, packed up my

bike, and Marc and I hopped a plane. Marc came over for the first two weeks to help me get settled. What a summer! I had a blast.

I was so nervous before my first Belgian road race. Never before had I lined up with 90 other racers. Never before had I raced on cobbles. Never before had I raced such a long race (90 kilometers). I survived that first race. The sudden braking before corners and crazy accelerations were a bit of a shock to the system, but once I got used to this I was fine. I loved the cobbles! I don't remember where I finished - comfortably in the pack - sprint finish. After the race, I decided to do a cool-down ride. Something I'd never done before. I crashed during my cool-down ride. Yep, made it through the race, zipping over cobbles, along narrow roads, and through traffic circles. And then during my cool-down I crashed. I have no idea what happened. One moment I was riding along the cobbles and I decided to get on the sidewalk, and then I was flat out on the pavement. My head hit first (put a solid dent in my helmet), ripped open my knee, bent my derailleur hangar, and bashed up my right shifter. Marc found me at the car bleeding and a bit stunned. Guess I was a bit tired after the race. I would learn later from Tim that I was a victim of "death valley" - this hidden but vicious gap between the road and the sidewalk. A big lesson learned at that first race. The two weeks with Marc passed all too quickly and before I knew it, I was driving to Blauberg from the Brussels airport alone. All in all my racing experience in Belgium was excellent. I didn't win any races. But I got better. Took more risks. Got smarter. Most importantly, I truly had a blast training everyday - discovering awesome riding routes along small Belgian country roads.

I came home from Belgium feeling strong and confident. Well, kind of confident. Funny, you'd think that after two months of hard racing and training, I would be feeling pretty sure of myself. Nope, not me. I was concerned about how I would ride at home. That I wouldn't ride as well as people "thought" I should ride. I became racked with self-doubt and was afraid of not being as good as people thought I would be after two months in Belgium. I know, not very smart. Pretty dumb actually.

I did have a small goal though. I wanted to win the time trial at the Canadian Road Championships. I was racing with a Masters license then and felt I could do it. But I didn't have a time trial bike. Luckily my friend Glen Rendall loaned me one of his time trial bikes, complete with some uber-light brand new carbon disc wheels. I rode the bike once before we drove to Beauce, Quebec for a week of racing. The day of the time trial was overcast and drizzly. The time trial course featured a long and stepped climb with some very rough pavement. An out and back course, it was going to be fast on the way back. I was so nervous before the time trial. But I knew I could make myself suffer. So that's what I did. The race is blur. I do remember the descent, the road was so bumpy, the bars were slippery from the moisture, but I just stayed in the aero position and hammered it down the hill. I didn't win. But I was third. I was so happy. I knew I couldn't have done anymore. What a great way to kick off a weekend of racing. Next up for me was the criterium. At the Nationals, there was only one criterium for all women. So I was lining up with some very fast and experienced criterium racers. This course featured a fast downhill and sweeping corner, flat stretch, a punchy little climb, and then a flatish run through

the start/finish. I was racing well and then I pushed the limits a bit too far. I really leaned into the downhill corner, trying to get maximum speed and I crashed hard. I ripped most of the skin off my right arm, right hip, melted my shoe, and slid along the hot dry pavement. I got up, collected myself and made my way to the mechanics at the top to take my free lap. As I rode by Marc (he was on the left side of the road), he yelled "there was a crash - take a free lap". I raised my bleeding right arm and said "I was the crash". My skinsuit literally melted off my body - my right but cheek, thigh, and shoulder were hanging out for all to see. When I got to the pit, the mechanics double-checked to make sure I wanted to get back in. No questions, I was getting back in. Adrenaline is a powerful drug. I got back in and was doing pretty well. I wasn't in the break but in the main pack. There were only a few of us left. I felt good riding with these elite women. But then the pain really set in. I started to notice that I was bleeding all over myself. The pain from the crash and the pain from the race became too much. I dropped out. To this day, I regret this decision. Maybe I could have made it? Off to the ambulance to get bandaged up. I had the road race the next day. I really didn't want to do the road race. My friend self-doubt had crept in. I had convinced myself that I wouldn't be able to "race" up the hill with the other women. Never mind the fact that I had won a medal in the time trial (on the same hill) and just raced a criterium with the elite women. Luckily Glen was there to talk to me about the race. I decided to do it. The next morning came all too fast and I hadn't slept much due to the road rash. I did the race, I was comfortable with the pace and at times I remember being bored. It came down to a bunch sprint and unfortunately I didn't position myself well. Ah well, the monkey was off my back at least. I did something I wasn't sure I could do. I proved myself wrong and everyone else right.

The rest of that season was spent racing and training. Nothing really stood out after nationals. I really just enjoyed racing my bike and hanging out with friends. I had started a telecommute job so I had the flexibility to train in the middle of the day. Life was pretty darn good.

Soon enough it was cyclo-cross season. This 2007 - 2008 season was a turning point year for me. Local store owner Vince Caceres, of The Cyclery, decided to put together a cyclo-cross racing team. Sponsored by Stevens Bikes we would race in Ontario, Quebec, and New England. A great way to get the Stevens brand out there and to bring some more exposure to the shop. We were a small team: Marc, Steve, myself, Osmond Bakker, and Natasha Elliot. We each had one bike and spare bikes to share. Our all black skinsuits were very eye-catching and stood out in the mud, dirt, sand, and grass. I was pretty excited about this new team but also a bit freaked out. I felt like I had to do "well" because I was on this new team.

Marc, Steve and I loaded into our rental van and drove down to Gloucester, Massachusetts for one of the biggest and most fun cyclo-cross races of the season. I was racing in the women's category 3 and 4 race. I had no idea what to expect. I had been training hard. I had started training with Marc and Steve in the morning, focusing on cyclo-cross skills. There were about 45 women lined up. The gun goes off and I missed my pedal. I was dead last. Hmm, okay, I put my head down and started pedalling and passing racers. Soon enough I'm in

contact with another woman who I duke it out with. I'm having fun. Racing hard. Marc and Steve are freaking out. I had no idea why. At one point, from the pits, Marc yells "I'm so proud of you". I didn't know what the big deal was. Then it was the bell lap. Still me and this other racer together. This is when I found out we were the leaders of the race! Wow. I ended up bobbling a bit and the other girl got away for the win (barely). I finished second. Amazing. I was pretty darn happy. I felt such a rush of emotion - all the hard work, training, etc was paying off. We raced again the next day at Gloucester. Now I wanted the win. I knew I could do it. I got out early with one other girl. We battled back and forth and then on the last lap, she made a mistake in the sand, I attacked her and won handily. What a feeling! The top step of the podium. Don't think I've ever smiled so much. Such an incredible feeling. Marc, Steve, my coach Steve, our cyclo-cross friends - everyone was super happy for me. Two races, two podiums. One very happy Vicki.

I had decided that if I was racing in the top five of the women's category 3 and 4 race then it would be time to move up to the elite women's category. This scared the crap out of me. I still saw this category of women as a huge leap and really it was more like a dream for me to race with them. But I stuck to my decision and moved up to the elite category. I was freaked out. The pace, the experience, everything was three notches higher. That season of racing with the elite women was one of learning, testing, and perseverance. I finally understood why people "sandbag". It is so much easier and more fun to race in a category where you know you can be at the front of the race. I was definitely at the back of the pack of the women's elite race. But I was doing it. A year ago, I had watched these elite women race and it was a far-off goal for me to be racing with them. Now I was doing it. I started to realize that anything was possible. During this season, we had decided to return to Belgium for two months of cyclo-cross racing.

Thanks to my telecommuting job, I was able to work anywhere. Marc took two months off from his contract job and in early December we were off to Belgium. We moved into the Blauberg house and were quickly surrounded with friendly faces and some new friends. What a season of racing it was. It was like nothing else. So much harder. So much faster. The race courses in Belgium and Holland are nothing like the cyclo-cross races in North America. In Belgium, cyclo-cross is like a religion. People are super fans and can't get enough of cyclo-cross racing. I raced every event I could. If there was a race, I did it. It was hard mentally. At times I was on top of the world, other times I was feeling pretty darn broken. I did a race at Scheldecross with the elite women - this is a pretty big race with all the big players coming out to it. I raced hard and managed to not get lapped. I finished on the lead lap in an elite women's race in Belgium! I was amped. But I inadvertently set myself up for massive disappointment. I believed that since I finished on the lead lap of this race, I should finish on the lead lap of every women's race. Not so. Not true. The lap at Scheldecross is a long so it is pretty hard to get lapped on this course. It took a bit for me to understand this. Luckily, Marc was there to be the voice of reason and to keep me going.

The main goal for this trip to Belgium was the Master's World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Mol, Belgium. This race was at the end of January and the date loomed large for all of us

staying in the house. The night before the race I was so nervous. Freaked out. I wrote this on my web site:

Time for a confession. I may have been exuding calmness and peace in my last post. But to tell you the truth - I'm stressed. Freaked out.

I've got the pre-race nerves. Haven't had them in a long time. Thought I'd banished them for good.

Nope. Back in full force. More powerful than ever.

Strange - I've been pretty chilled about this race since we've been here. I have no "expectations" - I don't know the competition. So I really have no idea what will happen.

I've been talking the talk - trying to be uber-chilled about the race. But now... Now it is not so simple.

Marc reminded me that it is "just a bike race". That I should go out and have fun. And that whatever happens - happens.

I know all of this. But for some reason I'm freaked.

I'm starting to feel a bit better. But I can tell I'm nervous I have a funny little nerve twitching in my chin and my vision in my left eye is blurring. For me these are signs of stress. Earlier in the year I would get a hive on my stomach and incredibly itchy legs. Now I have the twitchy nerve and blurry vision. Crazy.

Phew. I feel better writing this down. A week from now I can look back at this post and smile. Smile at my crazy freaked out self.

Yeesh. The Barenaked Ladies just started signing on my iTunes. How can I not smile listening to this music?

The day of the race I was pretty darn nervous. I wanted to win so badly. I didn't know if I could do it. But I wanted to win. The gun went off and I found myself in seventh. Time to put my head down and get pedaling. I started passing girls and digging deep. The course at Mol is very twisty and rooty with a lot of singletrack. Not a course that suits my skill set. I was tentative on letting the bike go in the corners. I finished fourth. I was happy but disappointed. I so wanted to be on that podium. I wanted to be at a higher level. I wanted more. It was that day that I made a big decision.

I set a big goal: to race at the elite World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Hoogerheide, Netherlands in 2009.

Yep, I wanted to go from racing Masters to racing elite and to race on the Canadian National Team as well. And to top it off, to race at the biggest race of the cyclo-cross racing season.

Crazy? Maybe. Impossible? Not in my mind. Really, given my history, this goal only made sense....

I came home from Belgium in the early winter of 2008 with mixed feelings and emotions. My season had been pretty good. I learned a lot. I raced harder than I'd ever raced and I met some amazing people. I realized that I truly do love cyclo-cross racing. But through all of this, I was still left with a funny taste in my mouth.

I wanted more. I wanted to do better. I wasn't satisfied.

I'm not sure where the goal of racing at the elite World Cyclo-Cross Championships in 2009 came from. (I have an inkling that this new goal came from a conversation I had with Marc...) But I held on to it tightly. I started to think about this goal all the time. Really it captivated me and propelled me forward.

We returned home from Belgium on Jan. 31st and a few days later I began my preparations for the 2008 - 2009 season. I was pumped up and raring to go. I made lists. I thought. I stressed. I talked. I worried. I decided the smartest way to tackle this goal was to write out a plan. To this day, I have a file on my desktop called "World Champs Plan". Here is how it read in 2008:

What needs to be done:

1. lose 15 pounds
2. address muscular imbalances
3. enhance flexibility
4. increase power to weight ratio
5. increase threshold
6. build explosive power
7. improve technical descending skills
8. improve technical cornering skills - three areas - turning on grass/mud, turning in sand, turning in singletrack
9. improve sand riding skills
10. improve mud riding skills
11. improve singletrack riding skills
12. work on mental component of sport

How to get this done:

1. focus on clean eating and nutrient timing
2. set up an appointment with John Zahab at Ottawa High Performance Center

3. back to yoga 3 times a week, ensure i stretch after every work-out
4. need to increase v02max and lose weight
5. arrange a conversation with Steve outlining my goals
6. as above - stress that this has been one of my weaknesses this past season
7. ride the 'cross bike 2 - 3 times a week in the summer on whatever terrain i can find
8. take 'cross bike out 2 - 3 times a week and focus on maintaining speed in corners
9. ride sand
10. at the beginning of the mountain bike season, need to get out on 'cross bike and ride the mud
11. ride 'cross bike at trails off of Moodie drive and in the Gatineau park
12. set up a consult with Nick

So there you have it - my plan to get myself fitter, stronger, and better prepared to race cyclo-cross at the elite level. This file is highlighted in red on my desktop. A constant reminder of my goal and how I'm going to achieve it. I don't know if this was the best way to go about determining what I needed to do, but it was the only way I knew of tackling it.

Make a list. And start working through it. So I did. I started at the top. First off lose some weight. Now I wasn't a heavy person, just heavy for a bike racer. For bike racers, weight is an ever present barometer. You are assessed at the season opening race by how fat or thin you are. A thin bike racer is a signal of a fit bike racer. (Of course this is not an honest marker for one's fitness, but it is what is.) I knew that by losing some weight, not only would my strength-to-weight ratio improve but I would also be taken more seriously. What I didn't realize or anticipate was the affect my weight loss would have on my own self-image and confidence. With each lost kilogram, I became more confident and began to really believe that anything was possible. I found it almost effortless to loose that weight, I bought a book titled The Eat Clean Diet and started following the principles of clean eating. It was like magic. I was thrilled. Combine this with a new training plan with more time spent riding and focused training, I was feeling really good. And it was only March!

Not only did I want to race at the elite World Cyclo-Cross Championships in 2009, I also wanted to have a bigger and stronger road race season. My coach Steve Weller was completely onboard. Poor guy I can only imagine what was going through his mind when I talked to him and told him I wanted to race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships! But true to form, he never even blinked - he simply said, "okay - lets get this done. I'll figure out a plan."

The training started in earnest in February. I took only two weeks off from the end of cyclo-cross season before getting back to work on the bike. I was pretty excited and super motivated

to start training again. Funny it seems like the hard times and challenging times I faced racing in Belgium only make me want to train harder. I don't know if this is the same for all athletes. But I'm inspired by the tough times. Perhaps if things are easy, then what is the point?

So my early mornings from February to April were spent riding the trusty Computrainer in the basement. I watched a lot of Canada AM, Californication, Grey's Anatomy, and ER. Thanks to the trusty PVR, between Marc and I using it, pretty much everything on television was being recorded. One of the really great things about being back in Ottawa was the yoga. I love yoga. I started going about four years ago. I find it is an excellent way for me to strengthen my body without spending time in the gym. I love the heat. I love feeling the sweat. And for someone with a crazy brain like mine, it helps me to relax and de-stress. So I was back at Montaingoat Yoga as well, working on my warrior 1s and 2s and trying to take some deep centering breaths.

One of the things my yoga teacher often says at the end of class is this, "Have an attitude of gratitude." This phrase really rings true with me. I realize how fortunate I am to be able to work, train, set big goals and be supported in those goals. I was on a high - life was good. Training was coming along nicely. I was feeling more and more confident each day as I was losing weight and feeling good about the food I ate. Marc was doing well. Our cats were fat and happy. Really, life was spot on good.

Even more exciting was that I was going to be joining a new cycling team. I had always wanted to be on a cycling team - a real team with other female team mates, etc. I was pretty excited about this. But this came crashing down. After a conversation with one of the team sponsors about the team newsletter, where I was called a liar and the person suggested he "record the phone conversation so he could track what I said", an ultimatum was given to the team director. I was to be removed from the team or the money would be yanked. So the team director did what he had to - with a heavy heart. I was crushed. I felt terrible. But on the other hand, I have my principles and I won't be bullied or pushed around. Luckily this team director, also owns The Cyclery and he immediately offered me a spot riding for his team. I leapt at the chance. I was super proud to be wearing the blue and white Cyclery kit around town. In the end though, this unceremonious cutting from the team turned out to be the best thing that could happen to me.

It forced me to get proactive and to figure out how I was going to successfully race my bike in Belgium over the winter. What I needed was sponsorship - companies or people who were willing to help me out. I bought a copy of Adobe InDesign. I researched sponsorship proposals. I learned what worked and didn't. I stressed. I worried that no one would want to sponsor me. It took some time and a few stressful tears, but I finally created a sponsorship proposal. I was pretty darn proud when I picked up printed copies of my sponsorship proposal. It was me. I was able to put my personality, beliefs, and goals down in paper. Strangely, seeing it there in full color on card stock, made everything seem that much more real. And doable. I was psyched. That day in April when I had my stack of sponsorship proposals really felt like the start of something huge. Now that I had these proposals, it was time to get busy and get some

sponsors.

This was not easy. I for one am not someone who really likes to talk about myself. I kept on thinking, “who am I that I expect people to support me?” “do I deserve this?”. Throw in a lack of self-confidence and it was not easy for me to get up the nerve to call companies or talk to people in person. But I got better as time went on. Luckily for me, I have some very supportive friends who connected me with people and companies who might be interested. One of the best and most stressful days in this process was when I met with Skip Williams of KingsBridge Disaster Recovery. Skip is a very good friend with my sister-in-law Michele and brother-in-law Jim. They connected me with Skip. I met Skip in a Starbucks - I didn't know anything about him, but we hit it off instantly. I was super nervous. I had written a short budget to show how and where the money would be spent. I had an entire pitch planned. I didn't need it. Skip sat down and after a few pleasantries and telling me about KingsBridge, he said “we'll sponsor you - the question is how much?” I was floored. Overwhelmed. Stoked. Couldn't really believe it. I was being sponsored with cash. Cash is the hardest thing for anyone to raise. I left that Starbucks on cloud nine. I was so excited. Felt like I could take on the world. From this experience, my confidence grew and I approached a number of other companies. In the end I secured sponsorship for wheels, helmet, glasses, bikes, nutrition, shoes, components, bike mechanics. Pretty much everything was covered. I didn't have the same level of sponsorship of other “known” bike racers out there. But I was very happy with what I had. I felt honored to have such support.

The fun part started next. Keep in mind I was still training, the road race season was in full force. I was racing on the road as much as possible. I even racked up a couple of early season podiums. Wow - I felt good. Racing and riding was going well. I had secured sponsorship for the upcoming cyclo-cross season. Everything really was coming together. I even decided to start my own team - I had to in order to showcase my sponsors. Marc came up with the name: Ottawa Cross. Next steps were web site and clothing design. The web site creation caused a few stressful moments but it came together, in the late summer of 2008, <http://ottawa.cx> was born. Here is my first post:

Welcome to ottawa.cx. Welcome to Ottawa Cross. A new web site to kick off a new season.

What is Ottawa Cross? This web site is two-fold: it is a place for me to keep you up-to-date with what I'm doing this cyclo-cross season and my hope is that ottawa.cx will become a resource for you to keep tabs on what is going on in the 'cross world. Yes, this is ambitious. But hey, you know me - dream and plan for the big show and then go for it.

For the 2008-2009 season I am racing on a new cyclo-cross team: Ottawa Cross. So far I am the only person racing on this team. The goals of the team are pretty simple: race cyclo-cross - have fun doing it and finish each race with a smile and some lessons learned. Pretty simple.

A 'cross resource? Aren't there lots of other sites out there doing this? Yes and no. My plan is to be a bit different. I want this site to be the place you come to find out what is going on. Visit this site to find out what is going on - you'll find a post that points you to the action on WWW. From this site you'll be able to quickly scan the latest news, reports, gossip, etc. and then follow the links to the web sites to find out more. Think of this place as a jumping off point for 'cross.

This is a new site, so there will be hiccups. Please let me know if you find a problem or have a suggestion. Think I'm missing some news or web sites - let me know.

Thanks for visiting. I'm looking forward to fun season. If you see me out riding in my Ottawa Cross kit - stop me and say hi. Like the kit and want a jersey or to join the team - drop me an email.

This was a time of great excitement for me. I really felt like I had life under control. And I did. I was coming off an excellent road season with some great racing experience and moments. I had raced my first ever UCI-sanctioned stage race (Tour de PEI), I had stood on more podiums - life was good. The last step was getting the clothing sorted out for the cyclo-cross racing season. Thanks to my friend Steve Proulx, I have a fine set of racing clothing. I was so excited when my clothing order from Champion Systems arrived. I couldn't hardly wait to pull on that skinsuit and get racing.

Training was going well. I was spending time on my road bike. I was riding my cyclo-cross bike and focused on improving my technical skills. That world championships plan was ever present in my psyche. But as perfectly as everything was coming together, I still had doubts. Yep, that crazy brain was popping up and making a nuisance of itself. I've learned today that I bring this on myself. But at the time, I really didn't have an understanding of how to control the emotional and mental side of racing. I was worried about what people might think, that they would judge me, or that I wouldn't be as good as I should be. Ya, pretty dumb.

So what to do? Well, remember that world championships plan? The last item on that list reads: "work on mental component of sport" so I followed the plan and set up a consult with local sports psychologist, Nick Vipond. I was super nervous to talk with Nick. I know Nick as a friend and I wasn't sure what to expect with talking to a sports psychologist. There was no reason to be nervous. Nick knows his stuff and helped me develop plans to handle my self-imposed race stress. One critical thing I started doing was creating a race plan. This plan is used to keep me focused and on track during race day. From the moment I woke up to the cool-down after the race, I knew what would be happening and when. This way, if my brain got out of control or I began to feel overwhelmed with stress, I could look to the plan to keep me focused and centred. It also forced me to think about what I wanted from my races and how I was going to go about achieving this. It also gave me time to focus on myself. I didn't concern myself with what Marc, Steve, or anyone else was doing on race day. I kept my race plans in my pocket and used it as a touchstone leading up to and on race day.

Race plans mean racing. This means the start of the cyclo-cross season. Before I knew it, September 2008 was here and it was time to line up and see what I could do. Would the training have worked? Was I stronger? How were my technical skills? Where did I stack up against the elite women racing in New England?

The 2008 - 2009 cyclo-cross season started early with an opening weekend in Vermont. These races at the Catamount Outdoor Center were a great way to test out the legs and check out a new course.

We loaded up our trusty Matrix with four bikes, all the wheels we own, gear bags, food, and pretty much anything we could think of and did the short drive down to Burlington, Vermont. Burlington is one of my favorite towns in the U.S. Great vibe in this place. I think it is probably the scenery that does it. Extra bonus is the Barnes and Noble, EMS, Moe's, and Starbucks all in very close proximity to each other and with quick access to the highway. Throw in a weekend of cyclo-cross racing and I'm an extra happy bike racer.

Okay, so back to this opening weekend of racing. I was freaked out. Wasn't sure how I would do. This was my first season of racing with the elite women full-time - a big step up from the women's category three and four field. But through these nerves, I still felt confident and trusted the training I had done all summer. My power numbers were good. My bikes were awesome. I just had to get out there and do it.

I'd like to think that I was relaxed the night before Saturday's race... But I have a feeling I was wound pretty tight and that I was the opposite of relaxed! We were staying with Steve and Josee that weekend so this helped to keep things light and chilled out. We basically traveled to every race with Steve and Josee that season.

Saturday came quickly. We were up and out of the hotel and back at the Catamount Outdoor Center ready to race, cheer, and enjoy the beautiful day. The parking lot quickly filled up and we were reacquainted with many of our cyclo-cross friends. This is one of the best things about cyclo-cross - the people. Cyclo-cross is the fastest growing cycling discipline in North America but the community still remains fairly tight. Not sure what brings people closer together in cyclo-cross than in other cycling disciplines. Whatever it is, it works. There is a real sense of community out there at the cyclo-cross races.

I hit up the course with Marc and Steve to get in a few early laps. Definitely challenging but not ultra-technical and with just enough climbing and long grass to put the hurt into the legs and lungs. I had written my race plan the night before so I had a clear picture of how the day would unfold for me. I like to think this helped me to relax - but I'm pretty sure I wasn't really relaxed. Probably still wound as tight as a drum. The rain had stopped so it was a nice clear September day. Nothing better than being outside, racing bikes, hanging with friends, and enjoying nature.

Marc and Steve were up first, I was in the pits for this race. Yelling encouragement and at the ready in the event of a bike mechanical. My race was late that day - 4:00. Usually the elite women race at around 2:00, but because it was the first race weekend of the season and there was extra day light and expected warm temperatures, everything was pushed back a bit. I had time to relax after the guys' raced. Set up a lawn chair, pulled out my Oprah magazine and chilled out. Or tried to... Then before I knew it, it was time to get moving. There is nothing quite

like the opening weekend race jitters.

Here are my impressions of this first race of the season. It gives me goose bumps reading this:

The course was super dry. Wouldn't even had known it rained last night. I really liked the course. I managed to find a groove during the warm-up and figured out where my strong points would be. So - the race. Well, I wore number 1 today - this is because I was the first one to register... Still kinda cool to have the 1 on my back and shoulders.

I got called up to the first row - thanks to the UCI points from last year. I really didn't know what to expect going into this race. Not sure where my fitness and skills would take me. Well, it was a good one. My start was okay - better than in past races but still some room for improvement. We ended up in one snaking line going up the first climb. I just worked super hard to get around people and make my way to the front of the race.

Ended up in a group for a while. This disintegrated. Then it was a matter of just trying to catch the carrots in front of me. I managed to pick off a few more people. In this race I really wanted to leave it all out there. I did that for the most part - but still feel like I had something left at the end. So going into the last 1/3 of the last lap of the race I was sitting in 7th . I decided to really hit the tight corner after the tabletop fast. Well, I hit it fast but this forced me a bit wide into a really big rock...

I hit the ground hard. I popped up - now I was in 8th. Okay head down and get back to the 7th place girl. Caught her but Anna M. caught us in the chicane. Hit the barriers all together in a little group of three. Ended up finishing 9th. Cool. My best result in a Verge series race ever. For perspective - my best result ever in a Verge race last year was 17th.

So, I'm happy. It was a solid ride. My power is definitely there. I felt like I was riding the climbs well and was doing a decent job of choosing my lines. My cornering at speed could have been better. But all in all - I'm happy. I've got a little bit of road rash - but nothing that won't heal quickly.

I'd have to say this was a pretty darn good start to the season. Never before had I placed so high racing with the elite women. This race is part of the Verge New England Cyclo-Cross Series and runs through-out New England. This series has many of the top female cyclo-cross racers in North America racing in it. People who have been to the world championships, held national titles, etc. So to finish 9th was just an awesome feeling. I picked up some ever-elusive UCI points (UCI points are awarded to the top 10 women), made some money and most importantly - went to bed with a smile on my face.

Cyclo-cross racing typically involves a double-header. So Saturday night was kept pretty relaxed with some tasty food thanks to Steve and Josee, some computer surfing and preparation for day two of racing. I went to bed feeling pretty good, but as usual wanted to do better. As it always does on the second day of the race weekend, Sunday morning was on us all

too fast. This time we not only had to pack for the race but also pack up the hotel room as we were checking out and driving home after the race.

Pretty much a repeat of Saturday with the guys racing first and then myself later in the day. We did want to get to the course a bit earlier because often on the second day, we are racing on a brand-new course. I woke up feeling pretty good. Still pumped up from Saturday's race. My knee was a bit bloody and achey but nothing I would notice during the race. Amazing thing about adrenaline - it can help push you through anything.

We arrived a bit earlier to get a good look at the course changes. With the guys racing at 10 a.m., this meant an early start. Funny, it doesn't seem to matter how early the race or ride is, I have no issues getting up for them! The course today was quite different - with less climbing, a tricky u-bend, a run/ride in the woods, some fast swooping linked turns, a super fast chicane, a little stretch of mud, the infamous woods section, and another chicane, oh and two barriers. Lots to test the mind, legs, and spirit.

After supporting Marc during his race, it was time to relax and get ready for my race. I had another race plan to follow for Sunday. Pretty much this race plan was the same as Saturday's, main difference being that my race start time was moved up to 2:30. Marc and I did get out for some pre-race course analysis. It is amazing how supportive Marc is, he has raced and is tired but is always quick to come out for a few warm-up laps with me. This kind of support just makes me want to get faster and better. Before I knew it was time to line up.

Richard Fries was on the microphone calling the "elite women to staging". Hearing that still gives me goose bumps - I'm doing it - racing in the elite women's category. I had another good day on the bike. Day two was another excellent day:

Anyway, the course was challenging both physically and mentally. I found I had to stay uber-focused on what was coming up around the next corner. This helped me to break down the course into sections and manage my energy a bit. In all of the "hard slogging" sections I really tried to drill it. I worked on riding to my strengths today - so this meant really working hard after the run-up. I lost time in this section so I had to commit to really drilling it after the run-up and taking a few risks in the corners.

I had a first row call-up today but since I was the last one called to the front row, I elected to start in the middle of the second row. Primarily because of the start - I knew it would be a fight for the "brown line" and felt I had a better chance of getting the line by starting in the middle of the grid, rather than the edges. All in all, this tactic worked. The start was decent today. I felt it was a bit more aggressive than yesterday. But again, my start could have been a bit stronger.

I spent most of the first lap, getting around girls and trying to catch the group in front of me. The jostling continued and there was some ridiculous passing made on the bridge - not impressed by this move... Anyway, I dug in deep in the woods section - attacking the climb and managed to get around a bunch of girls and settled into 9th place. For most of the race, I had

Amy Wallace and a Putney rider in my sights.

I'd lose them on the run-up and then have to dig deep to bring them back. This put a little bit of fear into me. I realized that if I was losing them in the run-up, the girls behind would be gaining on me... Just what I needed to put myself in the red zone. I can safely say that I gave it my all today. The result was the same as yesterday but the body sensations were a little different. Partly due to the different course style, partly due to the fact that I rode most of today alone, and because I really wanted to bury myself.

I felt that I was cornering better today. I had the u-bend nailed. The woods became my favorite section. The chicane by the parking lot was wicked fast - I almost hit the fence once. I made a nice tripod save on the corner into the double barriers - pretty sure my bike was horizontal on that corner (nothing like the rear wheel slide!). All in all, I'm happy with the race. Couldn't have done anything more today.

The first weekend of the 2008-2009 cyclo-cross season was in the books. A successful one for me. I learned a lot. I grew a lot. The two top ten results really gave me a huge sense of accomplishment. I had improved over the summer. My hard work was paying off. Maybe, just maybe I would qualify for the Worlds. I believed I could do it. Why wouldn't I? I rode well. I felt I had improved "enough" to qualify. I was ready for the Canadian National Cyclo-Cross Championships. Ready to line up and do it. Prove to myself that I could do it.

Hard to believe that Canadian Cyclo-Cross Nationals are next Saturday. All the preparation and hard work is in the books and now it is time to just have fun.

I'm really looking forward to racing next weekend in Edmonton. Funny, I thought I'd be stressing about the race. But I can proudly say that I've come a long way this past racing season. I've gotten stronger. I've gotten smarter. I've become confident. I am ready.

I realized today while out on my road bike that I'm pretty lucky. I'm entering the elite nationals race with absolutely no pressure. No one really knows me (I spent the last few seasons racing masters) and no one expects anything from me. I recognized and admitted today that the only pressure "comes from me".

I want to do well. I know how I can race. I have a goal. But that is all about me. Not anyone else. I think this is key - worry about yourself - not anyone else. I can only control my race. Heck everyone in front of me could either fall down and/or get a flat tire - then who knows what could happen?

Suffice it to say, I'm good to go. My training has been going so well. My numbers are higher than predicted. My health is bang-on. No nagging injuries. Both bikes are running super smooth. My race clothing is slick. I've got top notch people helping me work on my technical skills. My head is on straight.

This all leads to one thing:

Confidence. Commitment.

The true test of an athlete. To be confident in the work put in and to be committed to the race.

I am so ready.

After the weekend of racing at Catamount, I was riding a high. I felt strong, powerful, prepared and ready to race. It is amazing what solid race results can do to my confidence. The more I ride, the stronger I feel, the more prepared I feel - simply put - I feel better. So I was feeling pretty darn good and happy leading into the Canadian National Cyclo-Cross Championships. It is not easy to prepare for nationals when the big race is in the third week of the cyclo-cross season. Not a lot of opportunities to race and get the early season bugs out of the system.

But it is the same for everyone. For me this meant I spent a large part of the late summer on my cyclo-cross bike. Getting my technical skills fine-tuned. To keep my energy systems firing and to hone my top end, I was still out riding my road bike everyday doing a variety of training rides including short intervals, sprint work-outs, long efforts, and recovery rides. I love to ride long and hard but somedays a recovery ride is just the ticket. But on the Wednesday before nationals, as I rolled out on my recovery ride, fate intervened...

I was a mere seven minutes from my house and I suddenly found myself on the ground. My bike was in the middle of the road. My tights were ripped. Blood pouring out of my right knee. This was not according to the training plan. I had a bit of a run in with an 18-wheeler. This rather large and fast moving vehicle ran the red light so as I turned right with the green light that I had, there were suddenly two objects trying to occupy the same space. And as usually happens, the smaller and lighter object lost. I had nowhere to go but to the right side of the road and straight into the massive curb (not one that I can bunny-hop) and I was forced to bail onto the sidewalk. Not cool. I picked myself up, rode home rather slowly and then decided to go to the local walk-in clinic to get my knee checked out. Normally for road rash I don't bother with doctors, but there was a lot of pavement in my knee. After pouring 250 ml of hydrogen peroxide on my knee and liberally bandaging me up, the doctor sent me on my way.

My head was swimming. The big race was on Saturday. I've just crashed and opened up my knee. Damn it. Oh well, it could have been worse. I didn't have any broken bones and skin heals. I was reluctant to write about this experience on my web site, in the event it would sound like an excuse.

I didn't let the knee bother me. Put it out of my head and focused on the upcoming travel to Edmonton, Alberta and the racing weekend. There was lots to do, more training to get in, packing, and recovering. We made it to Edmonton without incident and were quickly settled into our hotel. My dad made the eight hour drive from Nipawin, Saskatchewan to watch us race and hang out for the weekend. This was my dad's first experience with cyclo-cross racing - I'm not sure he knew what to expect... We had a couple of days before the race to get over the travel and check out the course. I was pretty excited. Okay, I was pretty nervous. To qualify for the World's team, I had to finish within 105% of the winners time. There were other qualification standards, but my best chance was to finish within the time cut of the race winner. I knew it wouldn't be easy. It is supposed to be hard. But I believed I could do it.

I was mindful of the advice my coach Steve had given me for the weekend. "Don't ride too much." "Don't get caught up in the analysis of the course." "Focus on your race and what you have to do." So this is what I did. Marc and Steve P. Were super helpful in riding and reviewing the course with me. Giving me advice on how to ride various sections, when to really open it up, where to recover, etc. Things were going well. The knee? Didn't even notice it. I felt good. Nervous but good.

The day before the race I had a bit of an epiphany.

Well, all the hard work is done. No additional fitness can be gained. No new technical skills can be learned. It is simply time to go out and race. Have fun. Race hard and enjoy the experience. After all, this is why we train so hard and stay focused - to get out there on race day and shine.

It's funny, I'm really struggling with writing this chapter. I suppose this is because this was an important race weekend for me. I'd been thinking about it and focusing on it for so long. I so

wanted to have the ride I knew I could and achieve the qualification standard. I wanted to do it for myself. I wanted to do it for Marc. I wanted to do it to show that goals and dreams are achievable.

Saturday, Oct. 11. Race Day. I felt good. Had a great morning watching Marc and Steve race. Their input on the course helped me a lot and kept me feeling relaxed. Time seemed to drag on and then all of a sudden it was race time. Time to line up and do it. There was no turning back. I was nervous. Very nervous. But I was ready. I knew deep down that I had worked hard, improved a lot, and just needed to go out there and have fun. Race my bike. To steal a slogan: Just Do It.

Well, my first elite cyclo-cross nationals has come and gone. What a day. What a race. Tough one today on the bike. But after taking a few minutes to think about the race and where I was last year, it was a good day on the bike in the end.

I had a front row call up so this was nice. Considering there were four rows of racers today. Pretty decent sized field. I didn't have a great start. But in the end I think this was okay as there was a big pile-up pretty early in the race with one rider rolling her tire and another flattening. I worked hard to claw my way through the group and pick off riders.

I really just tried to keep catching the next rider and to put distance between the rider I had just caught. Some sections of the course I rode really well - the technical stuff in the bowl went well for me. The long power sections were perfect for me. The tight twists and turns were pretty decent. Where I lost time was on the technical descent, the run up the long hill (most girls rode it - bunnyhopping the log and riding), on the short descent onto the pavement before the bridge - all these sections hurt me.

But this is okay. Now I know where I need to spend some extra time working on skills and fitness. I really fought my brain today. My head wanted me to quit so badly. I had a lot riding on this race. In order to qualify for the World Championships I needed to finish within 105% of the winner's time. So I needed to have a good one. In the end I did have a good ride. But I didn't make the time cut.

I crashed twice in the second last lap. This was not good. I recovered from these but still crashing doesn't help. I must admit I was pretty disappointed in myself after the race. But after talking it over with Marc and Steve, I'm feeling better about my ride. I just want to do well so badly. It is hard when I don't live up to my "own expectations". But I have to remind myself that last year I would have been lapped in this race.

I don't know how I finished. We think 8th. The results aren't posted yet. When they are, I'll let you know. So I've got another race tomorrow. Now I'm on the UCI points chase. Somehow I've got to get 125 UCI points by Dec. 9 or finish in the top 5 at New Jersey. So now the real work begins. I've got some lemons, but darn it - I'm going to make some damn fine lemonade!

Thanks for the cheering, the positive vibes, the emails - it helps so much. Massive thanks

to Marc and Steve for working the pits, for helping me with the pre-ride, for cheering me on and supporting me, for putting up with some race nerves, and for just being the best bike racing duo I know - having these guys in my corner is like having an extra 30 watts in my legs. Big shout out to my dad who basically got a big introduction to cyclo-cross racing today - he was there whenever one of us needed him - schlepping bikes around, picking up clothes at the start, bringing wheels to the pit, taking photos, cheering us on, being there right at the end with warm clothes and a kind word. Thanks Dad!

When I read this race report, my eyes are quick to fill up. The disappointment on that day was very heavy. I didn't do it. Sure, I had other ways of qualifying. But deep down I knew that 125 UCI points or a top five finish in a US Grand Prix race really were not possible. UCI points are given out to the top ten in UCI-sanctioned races. I typically finished anywhere from seventh to tenth in these races. So I was picking up one or two points a race. A long slow road to earning 125 UCI points. But I tried to stay focused. Keep pushing forward and maybe just maybe I could still do it.

I wish I could tell you I remained super-motivated and focused on my goal of racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. But frankly, I floundered. I knew that my only chance of qualifying was at Canadian Nationals - if I didn't make the finishing time of 105%, there was no other way. I knew I wasn't about to start winning races that would earn me the 125 UCI points or achieve a top five at a US Grand Prix race. So after three races, my season goal was unachievable. Only three weeks into the season and I had failed.

At least that is how it felt. I felt like I had let down everyone. And by everyone, I mean everyone. You, me, my coach, Marc, my parents, my brother, my friends, my blog readers, readers of Cyclocross Magazine. Pretty much everyone. My confidence took a nose dive. Really, I was a mess.

But I didn't recognize this. If you had asked me at that time how I was feeling. I would have told you I was feeling good, motivated to keep getting better, feeling strong and powerful. Liar. It is simply amazing how we can easily trick ourselves and tell ourselves what we want to hear. Deep down I was embarrassed. Embarrassed because I didn't do it. But I wouldn't own these feelings. Nope, I tried to keep up the facade.

I kept on racing. We traveled all over New England racing in the New England Verge Series. I had some good rides. I had some great rides. I had some terrible rides. I was cranky. I was stressed. I was nervous. I was wound up tight. I felt like my early season success at Catamount was a fluke. That I wasn't the racer I thought I was. Stupid thing is, with the way I was riding and racing, I was becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Perhaps if I'd just admitted then and there how I was feeling, I could have gotten over this hump and back on track? Beauty of 20/20 hindsight I suppose.

The trip to Belgium for two months of racing and training was still a go. There was no question in that. I was hoping and probably Marc as well (though he didn't tell me this) that I'd get a second wind and things would turn around in Belgium. For our second winter in a row, we packed up and moved to Belgium, this time we stayed with our friends Tim and Jos at their place in Westmeerbeek.

I forgot how hard racing in Belgium is. For some reason, I thought I'd still be pulling amazing results out of the races. Sure, I was better. I did finish higher in the results list. But I still wasn't where I wanted to be. My technical skills really put me behind. But I kept on plugging away. Did my training. Tried to push myself. But the imminent Belgian crack was on its way. I cracked twice while in Belgium. Not good. It was hard on me and everyone around me.

The first crack was after the Zolder World Cup. This race to put it simply, was horrible. The Zolder World Cup is held on Dec. 26, so Christmas Day is spent pre-riding the course. Marc, myself and fellow Canadian Ed Campbell made the short drive to Zolder to check out the course. This was my first World Cup so I was even nervous during the Christmas Day pre-ride. The World Cup circuit of races is a series of cyclo-cross races through-out Europe that are basically the top level of racing in cyclo-cross. Racers are registered by their national cycling

federations and the races draw very large crowds of spectators. Many professional cyclo-cross racers build their race seasons around the World Cups. So with this in mind, I was feeling a bit of stress and pressure - never before had I raced in front of such a big crowd or with such a deep field of women.

During the pre-ride on Christmas Day, the Zolder World Cup was a very challenging but rideable course. A big soft sand descent. A steep sand descent. A steep run-up. More sandy and tricky corners. Some riding in the woods. The course really has everything. But when you put all these factors together, you get one hard and challenging race course. The pre-ride day went okay. I was feeling pretty beat up because I wasn't riding as smoothly as I should. But I could get down the descents and around the course. I was also fighting a cold which was causing some extra fatigue. I went to bed that night feeling a little freaked out but telling myself I could do it.

Just have to get my bag packed up and I'm good to go for tomorrow. I must admit I had a bit of panic attack/case of the nerves while pre-riding today. Part of this is caused by the cold I'm sure. The rest - well I'm not sure really. But I'm good now. It is a race. Yes, it is a World Cup - but I'm not expected to win the race so really the only pressure I have is the pressure I put on myself. I can ride the course. Some sections really well. Other sections fairly okay. I know part of my struggle is with just letting the bike do its thing in the sand...

I went to this race without Marc - he raced in Holland and would be arriving in time to watch the race. So Tim and I piled into the car and got to Zolder. We snagged a prime parking spot and I got myself sorted. I was freaking out. The temperature had dropped 15 degrees overnight - the soft sand had frozen. So now the steep sand descent was a frozen sand skating rink with massive ruts in it. It was super scary. I didn't know what to do. I tried to ride it but I couldn't - I was all over my brakes, making the descent worse than it was. The same was true for the second sandy descent, this one exited onto pavement and I was all over my brakes on this. I was a mess. Even worse, was I didn't have Marc there to help me stay calm and put me back on a rational track. I lined up. Tried to get a ball of courage and raced. I was tentative. I had to run the descents. I got lapped. I felt like crap. I was super disappointed. But through all of this, I kept on "pretending" that I was okay.

Here is part of my race report:

So, all this to say - I'm pseudo-content with my result. I know I've got more in me - I can improve my technical skills and get a handle on learning how to accelerate. The way I look at it is this - I can only go forward. I've done one World Cup - the experience will pay off in spades. If I don't learn from this and improve - really I only have myself to blame. This race was a gift - I need to take the hard lessons and do something with them.

It would be easy to quit. To say - it is too hard, I'll never be good enough to race at the Worlds and leave it at that. This is what I would have done last year. But I'm not that bike racer or athlete anymore. I've learned that the successes worth earning are the ones I have to work

damn hard for - this is the only thing that will bring me satisfaction. So there you have it. Tough day on the results sheet. Tough day on the brain. Tough day on the soul. But most excellent day for my bike racing career and future.

Little did I know what was around the corner....

When I re-read these words, I feel sad. Sad because I duped myself. The thing is, I cracked after this race. I moped around the house. I didn't want to race. I decided that cyclo-cross racing was no longer fun. That it was too hard. That I couldn't do it. You can imagine that things were a bit tense between Marc and myself. He was sorely disappointed in me and this was the hardest to take of all. I didn't know what to do. I hid from my web site and my readers. I didn't post for three days. I just couldn't face my supporters and tell it like it really was. I was afraid. Really afraid. Afraid of racing. Afraid of crashing. Afraid of embarrassing myself. Afraid of realizing that I really did want it, but just couldn't do it. Hiding. Afraid. Not a happy bike racer. Not even feeling like a bike racer. A very low moment for me.

Marc was getting desperate to get me out and riding again. Luckily for me, he still believed in me and knew that deep deep down the fire to race was still burning in me. So we worked out a bargain. I didn't want to race at Azencross. So the deal was, we'd go and if there was anything during the warm-up that scared me or I didn't like, I could stop. So we went. I'm pretty sure I sulked all the way to the race. Now, this is a race I did okay in the year before - I did get lapped, but the course is flat, fast, and fun. Still, I wasn't convinced. I didn't believe in myself. Well, guess what - I loved it? The course was frozen solid. It was fast, I was hooking up in the corners. I was smiling. I was having fun! Guess that guy Marc does know a thing or two....

I suppose I should flash back two days ago. Two days ago, I quit racing cyclo-cross. Yep, I quit. I had a rough time at the World Cup. The course scared me. I didn't ride well. I finished second last. I really had decided that was it. I was done.

I had a couple of mopey days around the house here. Marc did his most to convince me to keep racing 'cross. We made a deal - I would go out and pre-ride the Azencross course today - if I wasn't comfortable or not having fun - that was it - I could leave. But wouldn't you know it - Marc was right. I had fun on the pre-ride. The course was perfect for my "comeback" ride. Rock hard. Frozen ground. Lots of long stretches. Technical but not uber-technical.

I have to tell you that I was really ripped up inside about deciding to stop racing 'cross. I felt guilty. But relieved. I felt guilty about all the people I was letting down. But I felt relieved to not have to put myself out there and risk being afraid on the bike. I realized though after listening to Marc that it was one race and one race course that had made me feel this way. I couldn't let one experience erase everything I've worked for. So a big thanks to Marc for making me "get back on the horse".

I'm back on the horse. And ready to go.

Fascinating isn't it how one race can send me off the deep end and another can bring me

back. It was a rough time. But in the end, it was a very valuable experience. I really learned that nothing worth doing comes easy. Sorry to sound cliché, but it really is true. That race in Zolder was damn hard. I let it beat me down. I lacked the experience and confidence to suck it up and get over it. I wallowed in self-pity and expected those around me to support me in this downward trajectory. Luckily Marc, Tim, and Jos were there to give me some tough-love and force me to keep going. I did have one more rough experience when I drove to Luxembourg to race and promptly turned around and came home. The course was way beyond my technical skills. I just simply couldn't do it. I got back in the car and drove the two hours home... Not a good day - but a wise decision. There is a difference between being afraid to race and being afraid of the course.

The season was really another series of ups and downs. This I suppose is normal. I was still struggling with motivation and really wanting to race. I felt like I owed my web site and magazine readers. I received some overwhelming feedback when I posted about quitting 'cross. I realized that I was part of something bigger. That I was inspiring others. Cool. And not so cool. But I was trying really hard to stay positive: *I'm looking at today - Jan. 5, 2009 as the start to my new year. All the bad stuff for the year is now behind me and things can only get better now.*

It would be nice to be able to finish off this chapter with a story about how my next few races were awesome and I how I was finally starting to get some real confidence and mental game into my riding. But unfortunately I can't. Sorry to be such a downer in this chapter but I truly believe the best thing is to really tell it like it is.

With a little less than a month left in Belgium, my race season was still on a teeter-totter like balance. Marc was still uber-focused as he had the Masters World Cyclo-Cross Championships coming up on Jan. 31. To this end, I really tried to stay motivated, focused, and just enjoy racing my bike. I knew that this was important for my own mental sanity but most importantly to take some pressure and stress off of Marc. It was hard enough for him to focus on with his racing and training when he had to manage my basket-case state...

I had originally planned to race the World Cup in Roubaix, France, but I really didn't want to do it. I had zero confidence. I didn't want to travel to Roubaix alone. I plain old, didn't want to do it. So I didn't. Tough decision, but I just really wasn't feeling like lining up with the best in the world when my heart wasn't in it. Yes, you can be guaranteed that I beat myself up over this. Sigh. On a pretty bad cycle here.

Marc and I were talking about the snowball effect over supper. The snowball effect is essentially the idea of letting things build and build until ostensibly you have a snowball. To use this as a verb: one is snowballing. Now this is not a good thing. This is a negative thing, this snowball effect. It is dangerous and if one is not careful, it can drag you down.

I struggle with avoiding the snowballs. Generally I'm fairly optimistic. But in times of stress and uncertainty, I can definitely let things build and turn into a massive snowball. This is one of my goals for 2009 - to put the snowball effect to rest. No more for me. It won't be easy, but I

think really keeping things in perspective and remembering to be appreciate what I have and have done will go far in preventing the abominable snowball.

I had one race that I was looking forward to, Surhuisterveen. This is a fun downtown course with lots of grass, some mud, sand pit, barriers - typically flat and fast. I was pumped to be doing this race. Plus it is a fun little trip since we splurge and stay in a nice hotel and treat ourselves to the fantastic Dutch buffet breakfast. But this race didn't turn out as I had planned. Simplest is to let you read my race report:

Yesterday in Surhuisterveen - I did all three: swimming, biking, and running... Perhaps I have triathlons in my future? Yes, I went to a 'cross race and ended up swimming.

To be quite blunt about it - I fell in the river. One moment I was riding along on the nice firm green grass and the next moment I was in the river. Completely submerged. My bike made the trip into the river with me. It was so sudden. I must have hit a root or some mud and my bike just took off to the right. Right into the river.

I couldn't believe it. The river was deep. I couldn't touch bottom. It was also extremely cold (particularly since I was wearing my skinsuit (with lots of white on it) and only a sleeveless (white) undershirt). I dragged myself up the river bank. This was not easy - the bank was pure mud and thorns. Hauled my bike out.

I wasn't far from the pit so I walked to the pit. No way I was going to get back on my bike and risk falling into the river again! What a sight I must have been. Marc knew something was up and was at the edge of the pit. Apparently all I said was "I fell in the river!". Marc tried to give me his coat but I didn't want to get it all wet and for him to get cold. (Later he told me he wanted me to take the coat because the white on my skinsuit and undershirt - were now see-through... Luckily I was wearing a black bra...)

I walked back to the car. I got a lot of stares and comments from spectators. Not only was I soaked but I was bleeding a lot. I scraped up both my legs quite badly on the thorns and whatever else what was in that darn river. Crazy Canadian - goes to a 'cross race in Holland and falls in the river.

I don't want to mislead you and make you think that the course was unsafe. It was completely safe. I made a poor decision. There were two options for the section where I crashed - ride in the greasy mud along a thorny bush or ride on the firmer green grass kind of closer to the edge of the river bank. I chose the green grass because I knew it would be faster - not once did I think there was potential for a swim!

So this was the end of my 2008 - 2009 cyclo-cross racing season. Lots of ups. Lots of downs. But in the end, I came out okay. I did wallow in self-pity and did a good job of making myself miserable at times. But I still had so many high moments. Racing in Belgium is such an amazing experience. I had excellent races, I had mediocre races, I had bad races. But through it all, I was living the dream - racing and training in Belgium. The season started out really well,

and in the end, finished off okay. I didn't achieve my goal but I came close and I learned so much about myself and what it really does take to be an elite athlete.

Happy to be here in Belgium. Happy to be riding my bike outside. Just generally happy. I've managed over the last little bit to have some time to think about my season. You know - it was pretty darn good. I improved so much over last year. I went from finishing in the 20s in the New England Verge Series to consistently finishing in the top 12. I was 8th at elite nationals (I was 3rd in the masters category the year before). I won the Ontario Provincial cyclo-cross elite women's race. And here in Belgium - I have continued to improve. Last year I was getting lapped in races - so typically I was over 8 minutes off the pace of the winner. This year I got lapped only once (a poor ride at Zolder with a cold and some serious nerves). The rest of the time I finished with no danger of being lapped - beating girls by over two minutes who the previous year were beating me by two minutes.

I'm not trying to brag - but I just need to see this in black and white to remind myself how far I've come. It also helps to remind me how much farther I want to go.

A few people have been asking around, wondering why I'm not racing anymore. Well, as I've written here before, I've hit my limit with 'cross racing for this season. I struggled with motivation in Surhuisterveen so I didn't go to Roubaix. I missed a few races due to my flu experience. But really, I only did not complete one race on my schedule - Roubaix. There is no big mystery here.

This season I did much more racing and training than ever. I came here - had some good races, got sick, had some more good races, had a tough race, got sick again, raced well again, and then the wheels finally fell off. This is not failure. This is a learning experience.

Don't worry, I'm not quitting. I'm simply done for the season. I finished a few days earlier than planned. But I'm already working on a plan for next year. Slowly ticking things off in my brain. I'll do more when I get home during my rest week. I'll have a chance to talk to my coach and with my sports psychologist.

This has been a great season. I had a tremendous road season. Transitioned nicely to the cyclo-cross season. Raced a long season and best of all I get to finish it off in the mecca of cyclo-cross. Doesn't get much better.

Sitting here watching the Boston Marathon live on television. Now, I've run one marathon in my life. It was hard. Really hard. But so very rewarding. I did the training. Read everything I could about training for and running a marathon. And then I did it. Amazing. I remember my brother asking me "did you ever think you couldn't do it?". Funny, nope I knew I could do it. From the day I decided to run the marathon and told people I was going to do it, I knew I would do it. Never any doubt in my mind. I would simply just run the marathon.

Pretty much a moment in my life where I was on my mental game. I knew it would be hard. I knew it would take me a long time (4:41). I knew I wouldn't win. I knew I would do it. No doubt whatsoever.

So why can't I transfer this to my cyclo-cross racing? Why can't I bring this mental confidence and strength to the sport that I love? It just doesn't make sense. I am clearly a much better cyclist than runner. So it would only make sense that I'd be as confident as a cyclist as I am a runner. Nope. Unfortunately not.

In my chosen sport, I don't feel like the supercharged and extremely confident athlete that I should. I've spent a lot of time pretending to be confident. Yes, pretending. I've read the books about developing mental confidence. I've listened to the podcasts. I've talked with different sports psychologists/mental coaches. I've written the words and posted them on my web sites. But really through all this, I was merely going through the motions. I wasn't truly invested in the mental part of my game.

I really thought that I could fake my way through it and that I could surmount my lack of confidence with more training, harder racing, better nutrition, more recovery, etc. Yes, basically hide from doing the hard mental work I needed to do. During the 2008 - 2009 cyclo-cross season, I did meet with a local sports psychologist, and it was helpful. With Nick's help I worked on developing a race plan that helped me relax better on race days. So this was good. Mentally I was great until something went wrong. A mistake in a race. Or a poor result. And it all went downhill from there.

This snowball effect plagued my 2008 - 2009 cyclo-cross season. I'd be on an emotional high, then something would happen. Next thing I knew, I was in the gutter. Decided I wanted to quit. That I no longer wanted to race my bike. Those negative thoughts and whispers going on in my brain that I was hiding from, came front and center pretty darn quickly when I hit a rough patch. Before I knew it, everything would come spilling out. My fears. My anxiety. My self-imposed performance expectations.

So for the 2009 - 2010 season, I knew I had to get over this. I had to build my mental game to the same level as my physical and technical strengths. There really was no other option. I read a bunch of books. I listened to more podcasts. I worked on positive self-talk. I posted notes on my mirror and computer monitor so I would be surrounded with positive messages. If a negative thought began to creep in, I'd stamp it out. It seemed as though things were working. The negative thoughts were not coming as frequently as they had. I was feeling

better. I was talking positively. Giving a strong and powerful image.

But through this all, I still had doubts. It was like I had a devil on one shoulder and a fairy on the other. One whispering negative thoughts and the other whispering positive thoughts. When I was out training, I'd repeat mantras such as:

"I am strong and powerful"

"I am powerful"

"I am explosive"

"I am a fast starter"

I would let these run through my brain as I pedaled along. I'd even say them out loud while pedaling. I'd repeat these mantras first thing in the morning and through-out the day. I tried really hard to believe in what I was saying and thinking. Guess what - I struggled.... It seemed like each time I'd think one of these mantras, that little devil on my shoulder would whisper a bit too loudly, "No you're not. Who are you kidding?" Yep, I was becoming my own worst enemy. Can't win for trying sometimes.

Flash forward to 2009 and Belgium. I was racing a lot. This I was prepared for. But I wasn't prepared for how hard it would be. I thought that I would be racing better than I was. (In truth I was racing better than I ever had, but the results weren't showing it.) I was starting to get a bit down. Starting to feel like I was a fraud and that perhaps I didn't deserve to race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Yes, crazy talk.

I was so tempted to put another title on this blog post. One that truly expresses how I'm feeling right now. But I'm working really hard right now in seeing the "positives" and the "small successes" - so I'm not going to be a downer from the get go.

Today was not my best day on the bike. And it has nothing to do with feeling sick yesterday. I woke up today feeling pretty good - a few pains but nothing I haven't trained or raced with before. Today I let my mental game get the better of me. I had a not very good pre-ride - skittish and tense. Which was frustrating since I really like this race course and I'm comfortable with mud (I'm not that fast in the mud - but I'm not afraid of it). It is thanks to Marc and his help that I toed the line today. I started the race with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and some smallish goals.

Things were going okay. Typical slowish start. But I'm good at recovering from this. Then I crashed and ended up twisting my saddle so it was pointing in the complete opposite (horizontal) direction. This cost me a lot of time and positions. I had to run things I normally ride. I had to stand on the side of the course and jam my saddle into a somewhat straight position - though it was still pointing up. I put my head down and tried to catch and pass. But I was so far out of the race it was futile. Rode to the pit - got a clean bike and rode to the car. Not good.

So now where do I go from here? Well, I can wallow in self-pity and self-induced misery. Or I can be realistic and take each race as it comes and with it each small improvement that I'm making. I think the problem is that I don't see my improvements. Others are seeing them. But I'm not seeing them. I look at the results sheet and I'm still where I was at the beginning of my Belgian season. Hard to convince myself that I'm improving. I think I'm actually taking the easier route - telling myself that I'm not very good - so that I have an "out".

But, I know deep down this is not the attitude that I want to portray. It is definitely not the attitude and perspective that got me where I am right now. But it is hard to remind myself of that when I'm not satisfied with where I am right now.

It is so darn hard. It is hard to want to be something and to not be there. It is so tempting to roll over and give in. But I'm a bigger person than this. I need to remember that the goal was to race at the World Championships - not to win it! I guess this is what makes me a "type a" person. Never satisfied and too critical of my own self.

I was writing and thinking this crazy talk after I'd accomplished my season goal! My season goal was to race at the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Well, I had accomplished this - I qualified, I was racing for the Canadian National Team. You'd think that I would have been on cloud nine. A goal I set two years earlier was coming true. On Jan. 31, 2010, I was going to put on my red and white skinsuit and race in the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. But no, I started beating myself up even more. I was feeling like a fraud, that I didn't deserve to race at the World Champs, that I was an embarrassment. Literally, if it was a negative thought, I thought it. I was getting close to cracking and I just couldn't drag myself out of it alone this time.

Luckily, thanks to the power of the Internet I was quite literally saved from my downward spiral. My coach (Steve Weller) and Marc's coach (John Verhuel) both read my blog. They both sent emails suggesting I speak to the same person. And you, my friends, supporters, and blog readers commented and emailed me with words of encouragement and in a few cases some strong words to remind me to take a good hard look at what I'd accomplished. Then thanks to the power of Skype, I was able to contact with the recommended mental coach and start getting myself healthy. Working with Marvin Zauderer was amazing. He really knows his stuff. Excellent listener and more importantly he can tell if I'm just "saying what I'm guessing he wants to hear". The conversations are not easy. But they're not supposed to be. Mental training and focus is just as challenging as the physical training.

Working with Marvin came at the perfect time in my season. I was ready for it. I knew I had to do something different. There was no more hiding and pretending. Marvin gave me some key insights and strategies to help me get my mental game better. We talked I think four times before the World Cyclo-Cross Championships and it really made a difference.

One of the most useful things he did was make me admit that I was and am an elite athlete. To take pride in this. To be proud of what I'd accomplished. To recognize that I was

about to do something that very few athletes can ever say they've done - to race in my sport's World Championships. I have this underlying fear of developing a big ego or swelled head, so I really shy away from talking about what I've done and how far I've come. But I've learned from working with Marvin that these verbal affirmations of my success are very important. So although I'm not shouting it from the rooftops, I'm now much more verbal about my accomplishments.

Before the World Cyclo-Cross Championships, Marvin and I worked out my race goals and a mechanism for me to deal with any stressors that might come up. I wrote these out on a small piece of paper - one side had my race goals and positive affirmations and on the other side I had my routine to keep me calm and focused. I kept this piece of paper with me at all times. I tucked it into my jersey pocket while training, carried it in my pants pocket so I would feel it when I put my hand in my pocket, put it on my bedside table so I'd see it first thing in the morning. It worked. It helped. It kept me focused, grounded and sane. Wondering what my piece of paper said? Here you go:

Goals:

Focus on pedaling constantly

Eyes up

No front brake

Swing on post

Accelerate out of corners

Experience letting go

(And on the other side)

I am an elite athlete

I am on Team Canada

I deserve this

Vicki Thomas=Elite Athlete

Focus on the breath

In and out

Relax the hands

Relax the shoulders

Smile

Through all of this, I've finally learned to appreciate what I'm doing and to take pride in it. If you see me out riding and I've got a big goofy grin on my face, most likely this is because I'm thinking "hey I raced in the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. I finished 41st. I finished on the lead lap. I did it" or I'm thinking "I'm an elite athlete. I am strong and confident." Might sound corny to you but it works for me. After watching the recent 2010 Olympics, I've become more in-tune with athletes and the mental game. If you listened closely to what the athletes were saying and watched their behaviour before their events - you would have caught subtle cues of how they keep the focus on themselves and remind themselves that they are confident.

Words about focusing on performance. Small rituals beforehand. Anything to keep them in a positive headspace. Some like to joke around. Others are super quiet and seem to go into themselves. I'm kind of a mix. I like routine - it helps me stay on track and from checking through items on my list, I can build confidence. When I look back at my training and review what I've done, I can draw confidence knowing that I'm strong and fit. I can look at my diet and know that I'm eating to fuel my body and get me to the next level. I know that I'm well-rested. This gives me confidence.

You might be thinking, well this is all well and good, but really what are you going to do the next time things don't come together the way you want? Well, this really is the true test of my character I suppose. All I can do is focus on each training day and on each race. Remembering that I'm not defined by what happens on the bike. Rather, I'm defined by the hard work and determination that took me to the top level of cyclo-cross racing in the world. I am Vicki Thomas - I am an elite athlete - and damn it - I'm proud of it!

By the way, I'm getting pretty excited for the 2009 - 2010 'cross season. My brain is refreshed and recharged and I'm really starting to want to get back training and really getting on track for my season goals. So much better to be in this present headspace than the one I was in a while ago.

The end of January and this is how I was feeling. I got through the tough times and had turned a corner. My head was back on straight and I was looking forward to the new season. Good things were happening. I talked a lot about this with Marc and pretty much anyone else who would listen.

Luckily I was able to see my two cracks for what they were and move on from them. In hindsight, these two low moments were probably good things, I was at the very least aware of the signs that could point to another crack. But believe me, there is no way that I ever want to go through that again.

I left Belgium feeling pretty good. My energies were focused on the new season and how I would achieve my goal of racing at the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic. Initially, I thought maybe I should set a smaller goal - one that was more attainable. But I just can't do that. I like to shoot for the highest goal I can. Besides, I'm not one to back down from a challenge. The other motivator in setting this goal are my supporters. You believe in me. So I believe in myself.

In the early weeks of February, my season goal was set. I was going for it. Time to figure out the strategy. I've written this before and it needs to be repeated again, I would be lost without my coach Steve Weller of Bell Lap Coaching. This guy has been with me since 2005 when I was getting back into cyclo-cross and had goals of hitting the podium in the masters women's category at Canadian 'cross nationals. Steve has brought me a long way. Whenever I suggest a new goal or idea, he is always ready to consider it, analyze it and determine the best way to achieve the goal. Steve is pretty much the reason why I've gotten where I am. His training programs and advice have helped me to stay on track and focused. The best thing is that Steve has been there - he is a very strong and talented bike racer but he is not a naturally gifted racer - so he knows how much hard work it takes to get to an elite level and to stay there.

I took a leisurely three week break at the end of the cyclo-cross season. This was the longest break I'd ever taken. As luck would have it, I was wiped out with a wicked cold, sore throat, and ear infection combination. But once I was over that, I was back at it. We were buried in snow here in Ottawa so it was down to the basement for some serious trainer time. This is probably the most challenging aspect to being a bike racer living in Ottawa - snow and cold. Ah well, suck it up and get the training done - real success only comes from hard work.

The 2008 summer I road raced a lot. I raced whenever and wherever I could. I had one of my best road racing seasons ever. But this I think took a lot out of me. Yes, I was fit and sharp for cyclo-cross season but I think this bigger road season slightly contributed to my struggles during the cyclo-cross season. So with Steve's advice, I decided to race less during the 2009

road season. The focus was on cyclo-cross and this is where I would be putting the bulk of my racing energies. We also added a new component to my training program - weight training. I know some of you cyclists are shuddering when you read those two words "weight training". The thinking used to be that weight training was detrimental to endurance sport, but this is no longer the case. The aim of my weight training program was to build more explosiveness and to address my muscular imbalances.

I sat down with John Zahab of the Ottawa High Performance Center and we worked out a plan. John is a former cyclist and now ultra-runner so he understands where I'm coming from and where I want to go. He and Steve worked together to make sure the plan would not exhaust me and that neither would negatively affect the other. I have to say, I love lifting weights. I find it very empowering to see how much I can lift and if I can increase the weight load. Soon enough I was at the gym three times a week and back on my bike seven days a week. The only drawback to this time spent in the gym was that yoga had to take a backseat - I simply didn't have the time to do everything.

Actually, to tell you the truth, I was starting to feel a bit overwhelmed. I had started a new job (my former company went bankrupt) and was juggling my new training program. My new job was not demanding but the hours were a challenge. Monday-Friday from 7-3:30. Now this doesn't seem like a big deal. But when I had two work-outs a day to do - it was hard to get everything in. On top of this, I was commuting to work by bike. After a mere three weeks on this merry-go-round, I was starting to crack. I was grinding my teeth. I had headaches. I was snapping at Marc. I was generally rather unhappy. Luckily, Marc stepped in. He told me in no uncertain terms that he was concerned about me. His biggest fear was that I was going to give up on my goal of racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. He saw that I was losing the joy in the training and was merely going through the motions. The job was taking over - a job that I didn't particularly enjoy and didn't give me much fulfillment. After a long hard talk about this, we agreed on a plan.

On Monday morning, I went into my boss's office and after a mere four weeks on the job I told her about my quest to race on the National team and how I was having trouble juggling training with the job. I pointed out that there really wasn't any work for me to do - this was true - I mostly surfed the Internet everyday. I said I'd either have to quit or go part-time. I was really worried about Deb's reaction. But she was amazing. A decision was made - I would be going part-time. I could set my own hours and so long as I was onsite for meetings, etc., I could come and go as I pleased. Honestly, I couldn't believe it. I felt as a massive weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

I'm sitting here at 8:30 in the morning at home. Totally relaxed. Totally recharged. Just got back from a weight work-out from the gym. Maybe it is the endorphins. Maybe it is the feeling of breathing room. Whatever it is - I'll take it.

Really this new feeling of lightness and freedom can be traced to one major change. I no

longer work full-time. That's right, I lasted four weeks at the new job. I still work there - but part-time. I really thought I could do it all. Hit the gym three times a week. Put in seven quality bike work-outs a week. Go to work for 7.5 hours. Commute for close to 90 minutes each day. Keep the house organized: cook good food, get decent amounts of sleep and find time to recharge.

Nope. Can't do it. I am not Wonder Woman. As much as I want to be. I'm not her. To be blunt: I cracked. I became a pretty rotten person to be around. So stressed that I barely cracked a smile. Everything literally became a chore - yes, including my cyclo-cross training.

Marc and I had a big talk on Friday night. Decisions were made. A few tears were shed (mine). And now I work part-time. Allowing me to focus on my training for cyclo-cross.

These past four weeks have really put things in perspective for me. I realized that I can't be ready to compete with the elite of cyclo-cross when I'm spending the bulk of my day at a job. They're out riding, resting, napping, getting a massage, etc. - and I'm sitting in a meeting... So now I've got the opportunity to really focus. To really commit myself to this goal of making the national team and racing at Tabor in 2010.

This is all thanks to Marc. He was the one who pointed out how rotten I'd become and how worried he was about me. His fear was that I would quit bike racing - all for a job... So now with Marc's support I can really do what I need to do. I'm so very lucky.

Talked to coach Steve yesterday - he is stoked about this. We've already made changes to my training now that I have more time to ride my bike. Got some cyclo-cross specific coaching lined up. All the little pieces are coming together.

In February when I got home from Belgium, I put together a list of things I needed to improve for the upcoming 'cross season. The list was a bit overwhelming. But now that I have the time and energy to fully devote to this, I'm slowly being able to make notes on how I'm actually going to get through the list. I really feel like things are coming together.

Definitely feeling an attitude of gratitude right now. So lucky to be able to truly focus on my bike. I'm so excited again to be a bike racer. I must admit I had lost some of the passion for the bike that I had this time last year. Amazing what stress can do to you....

I got in a few early season races. The form felt good. Stood on the podium a couple of times. Was loving riding my road bike, cyclo-cross bike and hitting up the gym. I felt like a new person. And most importantly, I really believed that I was on the right track. I felt confident in my ability to achieve my goal. I really felt like things were coming together. I was getting out on my 'cross bike riding singletrack trails, setting up my trusty flags and doing drills. I was just feeling like I was doing all I could. At night I could go to bed knowing that I did all I could that day to reach my goal.

It is so very true. It really is about your state of mind. I came to this nirvana-like breakthrough while ripping up some singletrack on my 'cross bike this afternoon. I was rolling

along, dodging trees and bunnyhopping big tree roots when it hit me.

A few months ago I wouldn't have been able to put such a ride together. In fact I can remember very clearly how I was riding such terrain this past January. To put it bluntly: badly. All over the brakes. Looking directly in front of the front wheel. Tense shoulders. Angry brain. Generally a very ugly bike racer.

But now things have changed. I'm re-ignited. Re-focused. Jazzed for the upcoming cyclo-cross season. Committed to doing the hard work necessary to race at Tabor.

So today was awesome. I was one with the bike. Riding well. Focused on keeping my feet moving - even when I wasn't sure what was around the bend. I was looking ahead - scanning the trail for roots, obstacles, etc. I was controlling the bike - moving it around to flow through corners and up steep little climbs. I hit the sand hard and made sure my weight was back and my legs were spinning like crazy to keep my momentum and speed.

I was in it. Fully and Completely (thank-you Tragically Hip). I presume I was grinning the entire ride as well. I was simply playing. Good stuff. So it really does make a difference where your head is at. Thankfully, mine is back where it should be: squarely on my shoulders and ready to go.

Today marked my third ride on my 'cross bike this season. So much fun. I feel like I'm stronger technically today than I was last winter. I know, I've only been out three times. But I feel different. Stronger. Smarter. It is like the lessons that I was rebuffing and ignoring last season have had time to trickle in through my thick skull. Yep, I'm finally getting it.

But little did I know that a big change was about to happen. A change that in the end has been okay. But at times, I have to ask, "why me?"

At road nationals, I just wasn't feeling that great. My stomach was a mess. My legs were useless. I knew I was fit and strong, but I got dropped on the first climb. So very strange. And I had these wicked stomach cramps. I chalked the stomach problems up to nerves and a little bit too much carbohydrate. I chose to ignore the bloody stuff coming from my body. Decided that whatever was causing this would "fix itself". I also didn't want to worry Marc, he had his nationals coming up and I didn't want him to be worried about me. So I told him I was fine, when all week I felt terrible. My guts were not happy and at times I couldn't stray far from the toilet.

On the drive home from Beauce, Quebec, I told Marc what was going on. He was a little worried but like me, assumed it wasn't a big deal. I made a doctor's appointment. I was starting to feel worse. Lots of diarrhea. Lots of bloody diarrhea. Terrible cramps. But I didn't really feel sick. I was still training. Still going to work. Still doing the normal stuff. So my doctor rightly assumed that this wasn't a big deal. He suggested haemorrhoids (common bike racer problem) and I went home. Over the next few weeks I proceeded to get worse. At times it actually seemed like I was simply shitting blood all day. Not good. Kind of scary really.

But I kept on going. Still training. Still racing. Still working. I had a big weekend of racing coming up. The OBC Grand Prix on Saturday and the Ontario Provincial Criterium Championships on Sunday. Two races that I had to do. One race, the Provincials, that I really wanted to win. Problem was my guts were in total crisis. I was barely able to get away from the bathroom. So I took four extra strength Imodium pills before each race... These little pink pills didn't work their magic, but at least I was able to race.

The strange thing through-out all of this was that I felt best when I was on the bike. My guts would settle. The crazy diarrhea and for the most part, the stomach cramps would go away. So through this whole mess, there was never any question that I would ride my bike or race. As for those two races... Well, Saturday I rode okay but didn't stay with the main group. Sunday I raced as hard as I could, but I just didn't have any jump. Didn't have the energy to put things into the next gear that I needed. Very frustrating. I was wiped out. And quite honestly, I was starting to get a little scared.

On Monday, I went to see my doctor. He was concerned... He called a gastroenterologist and I heard him say on the phone "she doesn't look sick. She looks fit and healthy. But she is sick. She needs to see you.". I was booked in for an emergency colonoscopy for the next morning. Now, Marc and I had been doing some research, we thought I might have something really wrong with me. But weren't sure. If you've never had a colonoscopy, I hope you never have to have one. The colonoscopy itself isn't so bad. Rather it is the preparation that is the worst of it. I really felt like death going through the preparation. The preparation involves drinking four litres of the sweetest water-based drink you've ever had. At first, it seems highly doable but let me tell you, I had to force that last litre into my body. Not fun. By Tuesday morning, I felt rough and just wanted some answers.

Well, I got them. I was told in a post-sedative haze that I have ulcerative colitis. I was in

shock. Devastated. Partly because of the sedative, partly from being so wiped out, partly from being so scared - I was a mess. When Marc picked me up at the colonoscopy suite, I started crying immediately. Poor Marc. What a rough day that was. I felt like the rug had been completely pulled out from me. I was handed a blue card, a bunch of prescriptions and told to make an appointment with a gastro doctor.

My brain was swimming. I have ulcerative colitis. This is a disease that has no known cause and therefore no known cure. This is a disease that will not cause my death. It is an ugly disease. But it could be much worse. I was overwhelmed with this diagnosis. I was extremely angry. I hated the world. I live a very healthy life - I eat well, I exercise, I don't smoke or drink, etc. I do everything you're told to do to stay healthy. But this didn't make a difference. I still got sick. I was very angry. I see others who live unhealthy lives but appear to not be suffering from it and I want to lash out at them.

With ulcerative colitis, you have ulcers in your colon. This makes it hard for your colon to do its job of digesting food. This results in the bleeding. The constant bathroom trips. The cramps and pain. At times I would be going to the bathroom 30 times a day. Often times this would just be blood. To help me get better, I switched to a low residue diet. This means I couldn't really eat anything. This made me angry. I went through a stint where I wasn't feeling better and the low residue diet didn't seem to be helping - so I just ate the food that I wanted to eat. I knew this food was hurting me. But I didn't care. I felt as if "well, I'm feeling like crap no matter what I eat so I might as well eat what I want". From this I understand people you see who are diagnosed with lung cancer but continue to smoke. You feel helpless. Life feels hopeless.

With my diagnosis, I felt like I was stranded on an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. I had no one to turn to. No one to talk to. I was completely alone. I didn't want to burden Marc with how I was feeling physically or mentally. I knew my diagnosis was taking a toll on him. So I tried to do it alone. I also felt abandoned by the medical system. I was given my diagnosis immediately after my colonoscopy. Handed some prescriptions. That was it. I had to wait four months to see my gastroenterologist. I went through all the phases. I think I actually mourned myself. I was upset. I was angry. I was depressed. I was lost.

But I got through it. I reached out to a friend with Crohn's Disease. Crohn's Disease and ulcerative colitis are in the same "family" of diseases known as Inflammatory Bowel Disease. The difference between the two is that Crohn's Disease can affect the small and large intestines while ulcerative colitis only affects the large intestine (colon). I found web sites and books. And through it all, I had the bike. My doctors were shocked to know that through the really rough part in the summer and fall, that I kept on riding my bike. I had to. It was the only time when I felt like myself. When I was on the bike, my gut would settle (for the most part - there were times when I had to jump off the bike pretty quickly...). But I knew if I could just get out the door and get on my bike, I would be okay for a while. The digestive system shuts down when you exercise, so those hours on the bike were my relief.

For a while after my diagnosis, I was consumed with it. I saw myself differently. I felt I was different. Then one day while out on a ride, I had an epiphany. I realized that I wasn't different. I was still me. Still the bike racer. Still the passionate person. Now I just have this thing. Yes, it is not fun. Yes, it can make me feel awful. Yes, it can be painful. But at the core, I'm still me. I still had my goals and dreams.

If anything the ulcerative colitis has made my goals and dreams that much bigger and richer. I want people to see that even with this disease, I can do this. That there are no limits. Everyone has something. We can't use these as an excuse. There are no excuses for why we don't achieve or aspire. I'm one of the lucky ones. My ulcerative colitis is always there but I've been symptom free now since January. June - October were rough. I was constantly in a flare. (A flare is when the symptoms show up and life becomes rotten. The flare can be the bloody diarrhoea, cramps, bloating, etc.) It was tough to handle at the start of the 'cross season. I couldn't eat a lot of foods that I needed to race well. I was forced to eat foods that are inherently not good for you - white foods, high glycemic foods, no raw vegetables and fruits, no whole grains, etc. But now I'm back to my regular eating. I know what my body likes so I'm going to feed it properly.

The two triggers of ulcerative colitis (well the believed to be two triggers - again there is no proof or science for this) are diet and stress. For most people, they are told to switch to a "healthy" diet - a diet I already eat. So for me one of the keys is the stress. I am a person who can get worked up or stressed over small things. So I've been working hard to limit this stress. I'm working to stop "shoulding" myself. I make a list, I prioritize it. I work on it that way. I don't let things control me.

The travel can be hard with the ulcerative colitis. Even when I'm not in a flare, I'm very careful about what I eat. I know that small changes in my diet can trigger a flare. This is one of the reason why I'm so intense about my diet and what I eat. It is one of the few things that I can control to help limit this disease. I'm not taking any medication now. Initially, I was on two kinds of antibiotics, and a bunch of other medicine. During the 'cross season I was taking an enema daily. Once I got home, I stopped taking it. I don't like taking medicine. I don't even want to take ibuprofen when I have a headache. I'd rather drink more water or have a rest. So I didn't see why I should take medicine for my ulcerative colitis when I'm not even sick. So far so good. My body is feeling good.

The tricky thing about ulcerative colitis is that you can feel fine on Friday and be sick on Saturday. You never know when it will come on. You never know how long it will last. So the only thing to do is to live each day to the maximum. The interesting thing is I'm much more in tune with my body - a cramp or bloating or gas is a signal that something might not be working properly. You just don't know. One thing I can say is that my physical fitness has saved me through-out this ordeal. My gastroenterologist was shocked when I told him I have never been to the emergency room for the ulcerative colitis. Most people during their first flare end up going to the hospital and staying there until they are better. Not me. My doctor also said that he has

found that high achieving people can better handle their disease than others. Basically you just deal with it and move on.

I have become involved with the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada. I'm a Canadian spokesperson for the organization and trying to help put a public face on this disease. I can show people that you can live a full life with this disease. Also, we need to raise the public profile of this disease. No one wants to talk about ulcerative colitis because the symptoms are considered "embarrassing". Well, I have no problems talking about it. The more we talk about it, the more we'll raise the awareness level. This leads to more research, funding, etc. This then leads to finding better medicine and maybe even the cause. The worst thing for me is to realize that there are little kids who are suffering with this disease. I can't imagine what it is like for a young child to be going through this. Or even a teenager. North America has the highest incidence rate of the diseases. In Canada more people have Inflammatory Bowel Disease than Multiple Sclerosis. But Multiple Sclerosis is a much more known disease. We need to change this and raise the profile of the disease.

The day after my diagnosis, I was feeling pretty upbeat about life:

I know this is not the best medium to let you know about this. And to be honest, I was hesitant to write about this. But I've always been honest about how things are going on this site and considering this is a pretty big deal for me, I kind of need to write about it. But, one of the main reasons I'm telling you about this is: I want this to be a signal or reminder to you to not ignore symptoms/signs that something may not be quite right with your body. As a society we are pretty squeamish about talking about digestion and "toilet" issues. But this not talking about things doesn't get you very far when your health is at issue. I'm not trying to turn anyone into a hypochondriac, but there is a time "to suck things up" and a time to pay attention and deal with things.

I feel very lucky today. Hence the super happy feelings about being able to ride my bike. I'm excited to get on the medication, to meet with my new doctor and really learn how to control this condition. I'm stoked to discover what it will feel like to be healthy and symptom free. I'm looking forward to having a big piece of cake again (foods with refined sugar are not good for me right now). I'm looking forward to munching my daily carrots and celery again (too much fiber is not good during a flare up). I'm looking forward to having some spicy food and eating more than fruit smoothies for supper. I'm looking forward to feeling good again.

Don't worry. This news is actually a relief. A relief to know that there is a reason for the current situation and that this won't be my "way of life". As Marc said "This is your reality and we'll learn how to handle it". Everyone has their own "reality". Will this ulcerative colitis change my plans for the cyclo-cross season? Nope. In fact it strengthens my desire.

This condition really makes me appreciate my health and my healthy lifestyle. I firmly believe that I've been able to get through this flare-up thanks to my fitness and good diet. As an athlete, I don't want to be sick. But as a normal person who is sick, I'm very thankful that I'm an

athlete. The lessons learned out training and racing will help me get through the rough patches that I'm sure will come up and will help me appreciate even more the good days.

I'm pretty confident that my ride tomorrow will be even better. See you out on the bike!

Looking forward to tomorrow.

But these positive feelings were fleeting at times. I really did struggle with this diagnosis. I felt lost and alone in a sea of information and no-information. I think that deep down, I was scared. Damn scared. I felt betrayed my body and really didn't know what to do. I wrote this post in early August on my other blog:

Sorry for the lack of posting. I would guess that right now the phrase "Silence is golden" might be best applied to this little spot on the WWW and how it relates to my current head space. Though I'm trying to keep an open-mind and be positive about my ulcerative colitis, I have to admit, I'm struggling. I so wanted to write an angry post or a desperate post, but luckily my inner-editor took over and I simply decided not to write.

Dudes, I'll be honest here: this thing is tough. Really tough. I'm working my way through it. But geez, it is hard. I don't want to induce a pity party here, but really some days I just feel damn sorry for myself. And I know I don't really have a right to feel this way. There are people out there much worse off than I am. But still, sometimes it does seem easiest to simply roll up in a ball for a little bit. But, I'm not doing this. I'm fighting that urge and forcing myself to get out there and keep on going. Monday was tough. Really tough. I did not feel like riding. I tried to come up with some logical reasons why it would be in my best interest to not ride. Surprise surprise, I couldn't come up with any. So off I went. I ended up having a good ride and the time on the bike helped take my mind off of things. Yesterday was rough. I did not feel well on Tuesday. But today, Wednesday seems to be a bit better.

I do think the medicines are starting to kick in. I'm definitely noticing a change in how I feel today compared with a week and two weeks ago. The one frustrating aspect to this is food. The list of things that I can't eat while in a flare is getting longer everyday. It really does seem like a giant science experiment on my body. There is no definitive list of "safe" foods - only recommendations. So far basically all of my favorite foods are out. Smoothies with well blended raspberries and bananas are in. Almond milk (sounds odd doesn't it) is in. Puffed brown rice cereal is in. White rice is in. Yep, pretty darn bland. Oh well, short term pain for long term gain...

One thing I have noticed is a complete lack of interest in food. This is shocking for me. I'm usually trying not to eat and constantly feeling hungry. Not right now. Nope, in fact I've almost forgotten to eat lunch. I guess this is my body's way of dealing with this. I've read about people with IBD having to deal with food phobias and actually becoming afraid of eating. Amazing what the brain will do to try to keep one safe, but in reality, it is actually probably making things worse.

I find this whole food thing is compounded by the fact that I'm an elite bike racer who is

training for a big season of cyclo-cross racing. All the more reason to get this thing under control. But at the same time, this also leads me down the path of despair. Tough balancing this teeter totter.

One lesson I have learned is this: don't read too much on the WWW. I've found a number of blogs written by other people dealing with ulcerative colitis. Too depressing for me. I don't want to read about any more people in their thirties who have had to get their colon's removed. I know this is a reality for 40 per cent of ulcerative colitis sufferers, but I'm putting myself firmly in the 60 per cent camp.

One of the hardest emotions I've had to battle is anger. I find I can get angry at people I don't even know. This happens when I see them doing unhealthy things like smoking, eating crappy food and not exercising. I see these people and wonder if they realize what they are doing to their bodies. Here I am a person who eats a super healthy diet, exercises, doesn't drink or smoke and takes care of myself, and I get sick. Where is the justice in this? I know, there is no big chart in the sky determining who gets what and who doesn't based on what they've done or not done. But still, it is darn frustrating.

Wow, I'm really unloading here. Sorry about this. But I'm a writer and sometimes I just need to get it out.

As I sit here right now in the middle of the summer of 2010, I'm feeling good. Really good. In fact, I don't even at times remember that I have ulcerative colitis. This is how it should be. My body is on track. It is not fighting me. I'm not fighting it. Suppose really we're listening to one another. I've been relatively symptom free since January. I've had a few days where I haven't felt that great. But nothing to worry about or to make me think that I'm entering a flare. Like I've said, I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm able to live my life and not worry about my disease and how it will really affect me. Now, I know that I need to always be aware of the ulcerative colitis and believe me I am. Every time I eat something, I think about it and wonder what it will do to me. But if you saw me today, you would see me as I see myself: fit, strong, healthy, powerful and ready to take on the upcoming cyclo-cross season. Unfortunately this optimism was not always there through-out the late summer and early fall cyclo-cross season. I was trying to train, race and get my body out of its battle without itself. That was a rough time. I really tried hard to stay positive and to just "plow" through it all. But at times I did wonder if I could still achieve my goal. Would my body stand up to the stress I was putting it through? As the saying goes "If you don't try, you'll never know".

It seemed like before I knew it, it was the middle of August. The 2009 - 2010 cyclo-cross season was just around the corner and life really seemed to be in overdrive. Still lots of training to do. But on top of this was all the planning to ensure a successful and smooth cyclo-cross season. It might appear that there isn't much that needs to be done. Look at the race calendars, choose the races, and go. Ah, if only it was so simple.

The thing about cyclo-cross is that there is a great deal of travel involved. This means car rentals, hotel rooms, meal planning, booking flights, registering for races, and arranging for pit support. The other element looming in this pile of logistics was the qualification standards for the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Each country determines a set of qualifying criteria that each athlete must meet in order to be selected to the national team racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. For me, these qualification standards play a large part in the planning of my season.

Luckily, the Canadian Cycling Association (CCA) released the qualification criteria in late August. This was much earlier than normal, but thanks to some emails and lobbying by others, the CCA got organized and released the criteria in time for athletes to review and then plan their seasons accordingly.

After much discussion with Marc and my coach Steve, it was decided that I would travel to Treviso, Italy for the first World Cup of the season. This was huge. I would be traveling to Italy alone, picking up a rental car, building my two bikes and then racing a World Cup with little to no support. Yikes! I was freaking out a bit, but I knew I could do it. It was a lot to do alone, but it really came down to how badly did I want to race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships? I wanted it badly, so it was time to step up to the plate and take a big step forward.

It would help here to tell you about the qualification standards outlined by the CCA. The CCA defined two sets of standards: one set of standards had to be met to be selected to the "pool" of athletes and the second set of standards was defined to determine how athletes would be selected from the "pool" to the Canadian Team. These two sets of standards were different enough that one had to look at the big picture and determine how best to go about maximizing being selected to the pool and then making it from the pool to the team. Luckily for me, Marc really looked at this information, crunched numbers, looked at race schedules, and took an honest approach to how he thought I would do during the race season.

So, here are the 2009 - 2010 standards to be selected to the pool of athletes:

1. Finish within the top 5 places at the 2009 Elite Cyclo-Cross National Championships or;
2. Accumulate 75 UCI Cyclo-Cross points by December 9, 2009 or;
3. Be the highest ranked Canadian rider on the UCI Cyclo-Cross Individual Classification on December 9, 2009 or;
4. Finish top 5 at a NACT or USGP event.

And these are the 2009 - 2010 standards to be selected from the pool to the team racing at Tabor, Czech Republic:

1. 2009 National Champion;
2. Top-ranked rider on the UCI Cyclo Cross rankings, as of December 9, 2009, or Committee Choice;*
3. Next ranked rider on the UCI Cyclo Cross rankings, as of as of December 9, 2009, or Committee Choice;*
4. Next ranked rider on the UCI Cyclo Cross rankings, as of December 9, 2009, or Committee Choice;*
5. Committee Choice;* * Only athletes having met the minimum performance Pool standards mentioned on page 2 of this document will be considered by the selection committee.

At first blush it seemed the route would be to aim for a top five at Canadian Nationals. This would get me in the pool, which when I first looked at this document, I understood to be what mattered. But upon closer inspection, Marc pointed out that really it came down to how many UCI points each athlete in the pool had. Selection from the pool to the team was done by selecting the five athletes ranked highest on the UCI points list. Okay, so how to maximize UCI points and get in some excellent racing? World Cups. The World Cups are essentially like the World Championships, the top riders from each country travel to these races to get the valuable World Cup points and UCI points. So this would be my route. This meant that I really wouldn't be racing much in Canada.

It also meant I would race in Treviso, Italy in early October and then the next day, get on a plane and fly to Edmonton, Alberta for the Canadian Nationals the following weekend. Yes, whirlwind. But pretty darn exciting at the same time. It really felt like a dream. I would be racing in Italy then in Edmonton and then a few weeks later, hopping on a plane flying to Belgium and getting settled for the winter. All by November! Yes, my head was swirling just thinking about it!

Through all this, I went through a range of emotions and thoughts about the upcoming season. I was excited to be racing soon and seeing all of my hard work paying off. But on the flip side, I was freaking out... What if I wasn't stronger? What if my technical skills hadn't improved? What if my ulcerative colitis kept on flaring up? What if...? What if...?

I like to think this is normal for all athletes who really want to accomplish a goal. But sometimes I'm not so sure. I see others at races who just exude extreme confidence. They're relaxed. Smiling. Joking. And just give off this aura of power and belief in self. I wanted to be one of those athletes. I wanted to be so confident that nothing would rattle me and I could just get out there and race. So I made this a goal. Get on top of my mental game and really own the emotions I was feeling. This meant no more hiding behind the trickery and games that the brain

can play.

I focused on those key phrases and keywords, I removed words like “expectations” and “pressure” from my vocabulary. There was no more “can’t” and “what if”. I tried to really just concentrate on my racing and what I could control. Yes, I’ve told you about doing this earlier. But this process was and is a constant theme of my cycling career. Learning to really trust in myself, be confident in my abilities, and accept that I do “belong” - that I am an elite athlete...

Sitting here, now getting ready for the 2010-2011 cyclo-cross season to start in a few weeks, I can confidently say that yes, I am an elite athlete. I have set and attained some huge goals. I have pushed my body, brain and soul and for this I have been rewarded with some success. I have accomplished my initial goal that I set in 2008. Now, just like any other elite athlete, I can only look to the future and what it might hold. The bigger questions are: am I more confident? Do I believe in myself? Am I honest with myself?

The answer to all these questions is Yes. Looking back on the 2009-2010 cyclo-cross season, as successful as it was, imagine how much better it could have been if I could have answered yes to those same questions in August 2009? Guess it is true, just like anything that is worth achieving, all the little things have to fall into place. The brain is a funny thing - it wobbles around in our heads and some days it really feels like we can’t control it. I suppose just like our heart and lungs, we need to exercise it and remind it that we are who we believe we are.

I am strong. I am confident. I am powerful. I am an elite athlete. There are no limits.

This is the mindset I focused on taking into the start of the 2009 - 2010 cyclo-cross season.

I was excited. Freaked out. A bit nervous. But ready to see how my hard work and training has paid off. I knew that I had done the training, so now it was time for the fun - racing. This is one philosophy I subscribe to - race days are the fun days. The days when I get to go out and play on my bike. I don't need to worry about power, average power, cadence, sprints, tempo, etc. I just need to line up, race and smile.

Of course this is if everything goes to plan. And this season I was bound and determined to have everything go to plan. I really felt like it was my year. Everything was coming together. Even with the diagnosis of the ulcerative colitis, I was feeling like I had a really solid training season. I was hungry and ready to race.

This year, my racing schedule was a little bit different, primarily because I knew what the qualification standards were for the Canadian team. My racing, training, recovery was all focused around meeting and actually exceeding these qualifications to guarantee my selection to the team. I was determined that on Jan. 31, 2010 I would be lining up in my red and white Team Canada skinsuit at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic.

I kicked the season off with a couple of races in the Mid-Atlantic cyclo-cross series. Marc and I rented a massive Suburban, loaded it with our bikes, food, wheels and extra racing gear and set off for Trexlertown, Pennsylvania. I was amped. I was starting the season early and I was getting to race in a new location. Cool. Of course with the first race of the season does come a lot of unknowns. I knew I was strong. I knew I was fit. I knew I was a technically stronger rider. I knew my head was screwed on straight. But could I and would I be able to bring it all together on race day. Time would only tell.

Well, that first race went well. I duked it out most of the race with one other girl who the previous year was finishing typically five places ahead of me. I did crack my head super hard on one low branch (cracking and denting my helmet...) but apart from this blip, the race was a good one. Fantastic course. Great crowd. Perhaps the best part was seeing some familiar faces and getting to meet some new people. The second race of this double-header was in Baltimore, Maryland. So right after the race we loaded up the trusty rental and hit the road for Baltimore. This race course was pretty cool as well. I had a terrible start that put me almost at the back of the field, but I put my head down and dug deep, clawing my way up into ninth place. I was stoked that I could push through the pack and get myself comfortably into ninth but I was a bit frustrated with my start.

But all in all, it was an excellent opening weekend. Fast racing. Challenging courses. New friends. Old friends. Body felt good. Bikes were running super awesome. Nothing quite like having two brand-new cyclo-cross bikes, thanks to The Cyclery and Stevens Bikes I was set up

well with my equipment. The new Ottawa Cross clothing was sharp as well. Really, it was just so refreshing to be racing cyclo-cross again. The sense of community and camaraderie at a cyclo-cross race is like none other.

The next weekend we had a short drive to Vermont for the opening races in the New England Cyclo-Cross series. I was really looking forward to these races. I raced well here the previous season and to top it off, my friend and sponsor, Skip Williams of KingsBridge was going to be there. With the extra bonus being that we stayed with Skip's sister and brother-in-law. It really helps on race weekends to stay with people rather than in a hotel - much easier to relax and prepare for the racing. These two races went fairly okay. Again a not very good start on Saturday, but I managed to move up through the pack and raced well. On the second day I crashed a few times on the opening lap and then got a flat tire. Frustrating. Once I got on my second bike, I put my head down and focused on burying myself. At this point, I wasn't racing for UCI points, rather I was racing to see what I could get out of myself and how far I could push myself. It was one of those weekends where I took the good with the bad and really made the most of it.

Since we were in Burlington, we made our regular stop at Moe's, Starbucks, EMS, and Borders and then hit the road home. A great weekend of racing, cheering, and hanging out with friends. Also kind of a strange weekend since it would be my last weekend of racing in the U.S for the season. I know, the season had just started but I was off to Treviso, Italy for the opening World Cup and then it was time for Canadian Cyclo-Cross Nationals, and then in three weeks I'd be set up in Belgium for the winter. Time flies when you're chasing dreams and having fun.

The decision to travel to Treviso, Italy for the opening World Cup was a big one. This race would use up a large chunk of my racing budget but the pay-off from the UCI points would be huge. So on Wednesday, I flew to Italy.

During my lay-over in Frankfurt, I cracked open my trusty laptop and this is part of what I wrote:

A crazy thing happened on the plane today. I was in the bathroom and quickly glanced at my reflection. I had the biggest grin on my face. I'm talking massive. Reality sunk in. I was on a plane. Making my way to Treviso, Italy because I'm racing in the World Cup on Sunday. How awesome is this? I really can't believe it! I know it shouldn't be a shock or surprise. I mean this is the path I've been working on for a while now. But when it all comes together the first time it is still a bit of shock.

I can't really explain how happy I'm feeling right now. I just simply am. This whole trip feels right. It fits. What a feeling. Yes, there will be some craziness - putting together two bikes, driving in Italy, etc. But I'm not freaked out by it. I feel ready. I can handle the curve balls.

This is thanks in a large part to my number one supporter - Marc. This guy has my back every time I turn around. Words of encouragement. Advice. Stern words when required to shake

me out of a fog. He is just so supportive, it really is overwhelming. I truly wouldn't be here without him.

Good news is I made it to Italy and so did my bikes! I picked up my rental car and set off for my hotel... No easy feat since I couldn't get the GPS unit to work! I was left with two cryptic sentences that I copied off the hotel website. I'm not sure how it happened, but I found myself in front of my hotel. I was hot - not quite ready for the 30 celsius temperatures of Italy, but it was great to be there. Next order of business was putting together my bikes. Another first - building my own bikes and not just one but two. For the most part this went okay. Though I learned a valuable lesson about doing complicated things like putting bikes together when under the influence of jet lag.... Bikes were together, my stuff was unpacked and it was time to enjoy being in Italy. Well, kind of. I only had a couple of days before the race. It was already Thursday and the race was on Sunday so my focus was on recovering from the travel, shaking out my legs and making sure my bikes were put together properly. Luckily an American cyclo-cross racer who is based in Belgium would be arriving on Friday with her husband - so I knew that Jonas would check out my bikes for me.

The best part about traveling to new places is the adventure aspect. So I set off on one of my bikes for an exploration. I had a great ride in the hot Italian sun - checked out the area, snapped a few photos and even stopped into a bike store. After many hand signals, I managed to get some help with checking my headset and seat bolts. Those few days in Italy really were a bit foggy. I was so excited to be there and to be racing in a World Cup but I did feel a bit overwhelmed to be there alone. Normally at a World Cup, a racer has someone to do the pit work, help with registration, and basically be there on race day in case anything went wrong. I did have Christine and Jonas there but I didn't want to bother them too much.

There sure is a lot of "hurry up and wait" going on today. Today is the day before the big day. The main item on today's agenda is to pre-ride the course. Everything else is pretty much ready to go. Bikes are in good shape (Jonas will check them out for me today at the course.) I'm organized (as is normal). Just really sitting and waiting.

Again, the temptation is there to go out and stretch the legs and the eyeballs. But I'm not here for sightseeing. Don't worry, I'm having a great time. After all. It is October. I'm in Italy. It is 25 celsius. The sky is blue. I get to race in the first World Cup of the season. How can I not be having a good time. This is a bike racer's dream.

Truly living the life. Best to soak it all up. Each and every experience like this is a building block for the next race and challenge.

Before I knew it, it was the day before the World Cup. I really felt like my season was truly starting....

I really have no idea how the race will go for me. I haven't raced with any of these girls this season. I can only do my thing. I know a strong start is crucial tomorrow. So this is my mission -

have a strong start. A strong start will allow me to get in a group. I can't rely on the catch and pass game tomorrow - this is not the field where this can be done. I'm feeling good about the course. I'm comfortable with my lines and race plan. I'll just roll with things and make sure I race my heart and lungs out.

Oh, I've got passes for a pit man, team manager, masseuse, and team mechanic... Too bad I don't have anyone to give them to. Maybe for the next World Cup...

Met a few new people today and saw some faces I recognize. But I decided not to stop Sven Nys and Erwin Verweken (they looked kind of busy).

So, I'm signing off with good sensations in my legs, lungs, heart, and head. I'm ready for this. Can't do anything else to get ready for the race. I know I'm riding some good form right now. Just need to do my thing. Yes, I'm a bit nervous. This is normal. But I'm not stressed out by the course at all. It is a good course for me. Nothing crazy or ridiculous. Just lots of fast pedalling and some guts required to take the corners fast and smooth. I can do this. I'm ready for it. 40 minutes. That's it. Stoked. Sunday is going to be good.

I've tried to stay away from adding in my full race reports from my website to this book, but when I re-read my Treviso World Cup race report, I realized I couldn't give the emotion I was feeling justice with an excerpt, so here is the blow-by-blow of this race:

A World Cup! Wow! Pretty cool to be writing a race report for a World Cup. It was a good one. Good day on the bike. Really, I'm not sure what to tell you in this race report. But here goes...

Had some really last minute excitement before the race - I flatted in the warm-up! Uh oh. Totally a rookie mistake. I had decided at the last minute to run my clincher on the rear because I wasn't comfortable with the wobble in my tubular. But, I only put 28 psi in the clincher... Yep, too low for a clincher. Luckily I was right next to Christine when I flatted so she was able to find Jonas - I hung out at the pit while Christine brought me a wheel. I zipped over to Jonas and he changed my flat for me. Yikes - talk about getting the adrenaline up. Many thanks to Christine and Jonas for saving my day and my race!

So after this excitement, I found a quiet road to calm my adrenaline a bit and get in some warm-up sprints. Then it was show time. Man was it hot. Luckily a friendly guy from France gave me some water and Christine had some extra water. (I drank all of mine during my flat tire stress period!) I was called up to the last row. Kind of depressing to be one of the last ones called up. But at least I know I have nowhere to go but up!

The start was pretty insane. We started at the bottom of a loose sandy/gravelly hill. I knew I needed a good start. And I had a pretty good one. I stayed with the pack! I wasn't even at the back of the pack. The first descent was ridiculous - couldn't see a thing with the dust clouds. I focused simply on staying in contact with the wheel in front of me. On the long climb I moved around some girls and got into my catch and pass groove. I yo-yoed back and forth with Suzie

Godart a couple of times. She ended up passing me on a technical section. She was my rabbit - I came close to catching her but she really turned it on with three to go and I couldn't close on her. So I simply focused on the next girl. I was also pedalling like a maniac because I didn't want anyone to catch me!

The course was dry. Fast. And it was ridiculously hot. The long steep climb really was a challenge. I told myself to bury it on the run because there was a flat section and then a little drop onto the pavement where I could recover. Then it was by the pits and a drop down with a steep climb (which all the girls around me were running). Then another drop and onto the stairs. I'm pretty happy with how I attacked the stairs - no bumbles shouldering the bike or remounting. Then it was some twists and turns with some long sections, up some pavement, past the pits, a drop down on pavement and then a funny little climb and off-camber section and then back to the start/finish.

Although this was not an uber-technical course, it was still very challenging. Momentum was key. I think I did a decent job of this. I felt I got better at the downhill/uphill corners/climbs and started to ride some sections really smoothly. I buried myself on the long climb at the back of the course. I knew this was where people would slow down. I continued to push it across the top as well since there was a descent coming up. Some last lap excitement on the climb when a terrified rabbit darted in front of my wheel. I thought I was seeing things!

I think in the end I finished 28th. Not bad. I really wanted mid-20s. But I suppose there isn't a massive difference between mid-20s and high-20s. Though the raced paid to 25th... Oh well, next time. So all in all, I'm uber-satisfied. The trip was a big one. Lots of things to manage myself. But it was definitely worth it. Really glad I came over to race at Treviso. Extra bonus was getting to know Christine and Jonas. Meeting Suzie Godart and her husband. Catching up with Helen and Gabby. And chatting with Nicole de Bie for a bit after the race. Always helps to have some friendly faces around. Again, many many thanks to Christine and Jonas for all their help these past few days. So appreciated.

So there you have it - World Cup #1 is in the books. Next World Cup for me will be Nommay, France. Cool. Can't hardly wait.

Every once in a while, I ask myself, “what are you doing? Go out and get a job and get on with life.” I hate it when these thoughts crop up. Not sure where they come from. I’m guessing they come from feelings of guilt and good old life pressure. I know, not the best of places for these thoughts to come from. So as I sit here and listen to the rain pounding down and prop up my weary legs, I have to ask myself, “Why am I doing this?”.

A fair question - one I know others have thought but haven’t come out loud and said to my face. So here goes, my take on why I’m doing this. Maybe it will give you more insight to what drives me, keeps me pedaling, and helps me to keep the thoughts of a paycheque, cubicle, and a positive bank balance away.

Strangely enough, I’m struggling with this chapter. You’d think it would flow seamlessly but for some reason I keep looking for reasons to do something else other than write. Amazing how quickly the laundry and recycling can take on a level of extreme importance! But I digress what I need to do is get down to business here and really just tell you why. Why I race my bike. Why at the age of 38, I’ve decided to drop-out of the corporate world, leaving behind a good income to basically earn no money and ride my bike everyday.

Reviewing the previous sentence, I ask myself “well, who wouldn’t?”. Suppose this cuts to the heart of the matter. The Bike. I love riding my bike. I always have. I always will. I’ve tried a lot of other sports and activities but the bike was and is always there. For some reason the bike just fits me. Or maybe I fit it.

As a teenager, I was one of those kids who didn’t really fit in. I didn’t stand out as not fitting in, but I never really had a “best friend” or a solid “group” of friends that I hung around with. Somehow I was always on the fringes. So I spent time alone. Reading. Riding. Yes, riding. I had an obsession with bikes as a teenager. I think every year I would ask for a new bike for my birthday... In the spring and summer evenings, I would take my trusty mountain bike out for a road ride. Same route every day. Down the highway riding from Nipawin to Codette. This was a 10 km route that I would ride along the paved shoulder of the highway. No helmet. Red spandex “biking” shorts (really red spandex shorts that my mom made me - no chamois in these!). It was my time to be free. I felt no pressure and was just able to be out there riding. The winds could be fierce at times but I really didn’t care. Out there on my bike, I didn’t have to worry about being “cool” or “fitting in”. I could just be me.

I remember a few of those bikes. There was the blue mountain bike. It was so beautiful. Deep, shiny blue. Had toe clips. It was awesome. I loved that bike. Then I moved onto a yellow and green mountain bike. This one had riser bars. A good trusty bike. From there I moved onto a fuschia-colored Peugeot mountain bike. This one was special. The color was so smooth. The gears shifted like butter. It was a great bike. All tickets to freedom.

When I was in high school I worked at Kentucky Fried Chicken. I worked a lot and I saved every pay cheque I received - stockpiling it for university. That summer before leaving for university in Ottawa, I decided to buy a new bike. This would be the first time I would “cash” a

pay cheque and buy my very own bike. Cool. We drove to Saskatoon and I bought a Specialized Rockhopper. Jade green in color with purple accent coloring. A really good mountain bike. I remember it cost around \$700. A large amount of money for me at the time (it was 1990). That bike was truly my “gateway” bike.

It got me around Ottawa for many years. I rode it to university. To the grocery store. Downtown. Wherever I went, I pretty much went by bike. I was still riding that bike in 1994 when I started working at Southam News and met Ian Austen. Ian is an avid cyclist and used to commute to work clad in his spandex and pointy shoes. Ian saw I had a fascination with bikes and with his advice and help, I bought my first road bike at Pecco’s.

A road bike. I had always wanted a road bike. This opened up a whole new world to me. Time trials. Criteriums. Long rides. Road races. Spandex. Bike pumps. Tire pressure. Real bike shorts. I was in heaven. And I rode. I rode and rode and rode. And I’m still riding.

I really can’t imagine not riding. Riding still gives me that same feeling that I had as a teenager. Freedom. The bike just allows me to get away from it all and be me. There are no pressures out there. The road or the trails, the bike, and hopefully fresh air with blue skies and sunshine.

But why not just ride and race on the weekends? Why take this to such an extreme level? Why?

I’ve always believed in taking something to the top level. To going as far as I can with it. Pretty much every sport I’ve ever competed in or tried, I’ve wanted to get to the top. When I played hockey in my early twenties, I started out at the very bottom of the ranks but after much hard work and sweat, I moved up to playing on a AA team and loved every second of it. When I got involved with taekwon-do, I started training with no clear ideas of earning a black belt or competing in tournaments. I signed up purely for the strength and fitness aspects. But soon I became immersed in taekwon-do and set my sights on a black belt and competing at the World Championships. So I did it. When I could no longer compete due to injuries, I ended my involvement with taekwon-do and moved onto running. I decided to run one marathon and then had plans to get into ultra-running. But after one marathon, my body rebelled and my long-distance running days were over. The bike was always there. Sitting in the basement ready and waiting for me. I thought about how much fun I had had with time trials in the mid-90s and how welcoming the cyclo-cross crowd was. Drawn to the trails, thanks to a love of trail running, I bought a mountain bike and I quickly became hooked. Inevitably, I started racing and crashing - I stopped mountain biking and instead polished up my road bike and got into road racing.

Through-out all of these sports adventures, was the drive to be one of the best. I longed to be a good enough hockey player to play on the AAA team. I practiced. I trained. I just couldn’t get there. I so wanted to be a world champion taekwon-do athlete. How cool would it be to be on the national team and earn a medal at the world championships. I fought through injuries, illness, and the voices that said I couldn’t. Eventually my body and brain said “no more” to

punches to the face. If I couldn't be at the top, I didn't want to be doing it. (I do have a shiny bronze medal from the 2003 World Taekwon-do Championships in my sock drawer). I loved running so I ran a marathon. Marathon done, okay, move onto ultra-running and ultra-marathons. But it was not to be. So I came full circle, back to the bike where I started at the bottom and longed to be at the top. I idolized those other women out racing and winning races. So I got busy.

I'm still getting busy. I still need to get better. I've still got lots of room to improve. I can squeeze more watts out of my legs. I can learn more technical skills. I can become a smarter bike racer. I can do a better job of putting it all out there and giving it my all. I can go further. I will go further.

Still, I haven't answered the questions. Why ditch the solid job and big pay cheque for this? Life is short. Seize the day. Live everyday like it is your last. You just never know.

Choose one. Roll it around in your brain and on your tongue. Exactly. How can I not? I have this gift and I have to make the most of it. In the words of the incredible Steve Prefontaine "Anything less than my best is a waste of my gift". I truly believe this. I have a gift - the ability to push my body to the next level. So I better do the best I can with this. For you, your gift might be a truly sharp mind - this leads you on a path to important work or perhaps your gift is a deep love of children - so you are a parent, a teacher, a social worker. See what I mean, I have a gift and I need to do something with it. This all comes full circle to my guiding belief that we are all put on this earth for a reason.

We all have a purpose. A reason for being here. I've struggled for many years with what my "reason" is. I used to drive myself crazy trying to figure out how I was supposed to change the world and make a difference. Well, I've found it. I ride my bike. I race my bike. I tell you about it through my web sites. I've become a role model. I've shown you that any goal can be met if you work hard enough and believe in it enough. If I can get one more person to set a goal and work to achieve that goal, then I've made a difference in this world. I'm not finding a cure for cancer or putting a man on Mars, but maybe through my bike riding and racing, someone who can cure cancer will get inspired and do just that.

There are days when I don't feel like riding. The weather is crappy. I'm tired. I'm feeling beaten down emotionally. I just don't want to go out there and push myself to levels that will inflict pain on my body. But I do it. I have no other choice. I need to make the most of it. It could all be gone tomorrow so today is really the only day I have to get out, ride my bike, push myself, inspire you, get you motivated on your path, and in turn you end doing the same for someone else. A community is being built - each inspiring one another.

You might be thinking that I could do this and keep on working in the cubicle day-in and day-out. Not really. I tried it. The cubicle sucks the very life blood out of me. Drains me. Drags me down. The bike did help to give me a reason to go to the cubicle everyday. But the cubicle was too big of a barrier. I was left with a big hole - a feeling of not doing enough. I also had this

nagging feeling that I might run out of time. What if I don't do enough? What if I don't make a difference? Will this have been a waste?

Life is short. Seize the day. Live everyday like it is your last. You just never know.

Exactly. I really have no choice. Get out there, I'll ride my bike, you get out there and do your thing, if we all do this, imagine what can happen.

The other reason I do this? One person: Marc. Marc is the one who first motivated me to train for and set my goal of racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. When I was working full-time at the RCMP and was not able to handle the training, working, and day-to-day life commitments, it was Marc who urged me to switch to part-time work. And now, I'm working less than part-time from home while Marc goes to work everyday. Our income has been sliced in half, but the same bills are still here. Yes, I've made sacrifices, but really no one in this relationship has made more sacrifices than Marc. It is not easy. But Marc believes that if I can truly focus on my training and racing, I can achieve some big goals. So he goes off to work everyday, squeezing in his training when he can and I have the luxury of training in the middle of the day and only working two or three hours a day. Yes, I'm very lucky. Lucky to have such a supportive husband who really is putting himself second so I can do this bike racing thing. Yes, there are days when I feel guilty. Tremendously guilty. This only makes me train harder, race harder, and try to be a better person.

Having a life purpose is a funny thing. Do you have a life purpose? Yes, of course you do. Do you know what your life purpose is? Depending on where you are in your life, you do know what your life purpose is. We don't all know what this is. I think the key is to really look at each day as the last day you have - get the most out of it, squeeze it until there is nothing left. Your purpose will expose itself.

So this is why I do this. Do I miss the stable life, the paycheque, the hefty bank balance? Yes, I do. But this will always be available to me. This bike racing lifestyle will not be here forever. I'm 38. I don't have that many more years left. I'd like to have my last World Cyclo-Cross Championships be in 2013 in Louisville, Kentucky. So not a lot of time left. The cubicle will still be waiting for me. There will always be documentation, collateral, and websites to write and edit. But the World Cyclo-Cross Championships won't be accessible forever.

After that heady race experience in Treviso, Italy, I was quickly packing up my bikes and making my way to my airport hotel for the night. Monday morning came fast and I soon found myself lugging my bike boxes through the Venice airport and my mind drifting to the upcoming Canadian Cyclo-Cross Nationals.

The next priority was getting over the jet lag from traveling from Italy to Alberta so I could race well on the weekend. Yes, the weekend. Thanksgiving weekend in Canada and it was time for the Canadian Cyclo-Cross Nationals. Talk about whirlwind. I went from racing in 30 celsius in Treviso, Italy to landing in a very chilly and frosty Edmonton, Alberta. By race day the temperature had dropped to minus 10 and we were racing on frozen ground coated with snow... Well, one thing about cyclo-cross is you just never know.

I landed in Edmonton on Monday and had a few days to myself before Marc, my parents and other friends from Ottawa arrived. Luckily for me I didn't have to stay in a hotel alone for this entire time. I ended up with staying with colleagues of a friend of mine. This worked out perfectly. A big house. Friendly people. Coffee shops and grocery stores close by. And excellent riding out the door. Can't ask for much more.

Through all this travel, I really wasn't sure how well my body would hold up. This was the first time I'd be putting it through so much stress this season and I really didn't want my ulcerative colitis to rear its ugly head. Knock on wood, I managed to keep things under the control for the most part.

This was the second season that nationals were in Edmonton so I had a pretty good idea of what to expect on race day - this helped me to stay fairly relaxed. I got out for some excellent rides and then once Marc arrived and the course was set-up we spent some time together going through the key sections of the course, playing with tires, tire pressure, and just generally getting a feel for things. It was so helpful to have Marc there and the best part was really just seeing him. I hadn't realized how much I had missed him when I was in Treviso until I saw him walk through our hotel room doors. Such a wave of emotion when I got to tell him in person how the race went. My parents arrived the day before cyclo-cross nationals and this was great as well. I hadn't seen them in a long time and to have them at this important race weekend meant a lot to me. It would also be our last chance to visit with one another until I returned from Belgium in 2010!

The day before the race I was feeling good. Body was good. Legs were loose. Brain was clear. My mind was sharp. I was riding a wave of confidence since the World Cup and the early season racing I had done in the U.S. When I lined up on race day, I truly felt like I belonged. I had come along way. Time to get out and race and have some fun. But most importantly I really wanted to finish in the top five. A top five finish at the Canadian National Cyclo-Cross Championships would guarantee me a selection into the pool of athletes to be selected for the Worlds team. Well, I didn't finish in fifth. Nope. I was in fifth for a while. I got a bit excited. I made some mistakes. I crashed. I got passed by a girl. I panicked. I crashed again. And I got passed

again. Now I was in seventh. I was frustrated. I got tight on the bike. I made bad decisions and I let the course win.

Got a nice front row call-up. Pretty nice to get this. I had a decent start but made a few critical errors in the first twisty section. I decided to take an inside line... Not smart. This caused me to have to slow drastically and I lost a bunch of spaces. I could see the train getting away. Well, put the head down and picked off the riders. I was just sitting off the fifth place wheel. Perfect.

We yo-yoed a bit. Still okay. I wasn't at my limit so I thought I'd just wait for the "right" time to pass. Well, I waited a bit too long. In the infamous "bowl" I ended up hitting the deck. This resulted in the little manageable gap growing exponentially. I put my head down and started working on getting it back. It was working. But then I hit the deck again - this time just as I entered the start/finish straight. Now I'm in seventh. Uh oh. Panic set in. As did caution. I started taking the corners a bit too tentatively. I was closing on sixth on all the long power sections, but then the gap would open in the technical sections. Then on the last lap, I was really closing and I crashed again.

Hmm, lots of lessons learned. I learned more about how to ride in icy conditions: don't corner like I'm in a crit... Be smart about the lines I take at the start. But there were a lot of positives as well. I did ride quite well. I felt pretty strong out there. I rode the bowl section fairly well (maybe a bit too much brake at times) but definitely an improvement over last year. It wasn't the result I wanted. But I gave it my all, made some mistakes, recovered, and just kept on pedalling. Can't do much more than that.

So that was cyclo-cross nationals. The race I had penciled in on my calendar months and months earlier. The one we had been targeting all summer, was over before I knew it. I had a good ride. Not a great ride. But a good ride. That night I think the stress and emotion got to me as my friend ulcerative colitis popped up on the radar. Ridiculous cramps and just overall feeling pretty lousy. But I had another race to get ready for, so no time to worry about this. I'd raced through this before and I'd do it again. Sunday was the Jim Horner Classic and was raced on the same course as nationals. Once again my parents were out there cheering me on and taking lots of photos. So awesome to have them there. It was my mom's first cyclo-cross experience and hopefully it won't be her last. Sunday was a better race for me. I still finished in seventh position but I rode a much stronger and smarter race. I crossed the finish line feeling pretty good about my race. An excellent weekend of racing was in the books. I didn't get the fifth place finish I wanted but I rode two strong races, learned from my mistakes on Saturday, and I really felt like the changes I made in the summer paid off.

Ah, day two of the weekend double-header. Day two brings with it so much. Plans of repeating or doing better than the day before. A chance to avenge oneself of mistakes out on the course. A chance to maybe catch that person who was just ahead. Maybe even eke out a podium spot. But, day two also brings with it some fatigue and maybe a bit of a lethargy.

I was feeling all of these things today. I was pretty wiped from Saturday - combination of racing, stress, adrenaline, and perhaps travel fatigue had me feeling a bit uninterested today. But thanks to my super-helpful pre-ride with Peter Mogg (Canadian Nationals Masters 30-39 champion), my zest for racing was re-ignited. Peter was super helpful and took me out for a couple of laps after his race to show me some lines, offer suggestions on how to ride certain sections and generally just helped me chatter away any doubts I might have had. Peter did say something that really stuck with me "You know your strengths so ride sections in ways that play to your strengths.". This was a key piece of advice for me.

We had an earlier start time today which was refreshing. The bonus was we could warm-up on the course right before our race. So the course, the feeling of the ground and the sensations were all fresh in my mind as I stood on the line. I had a much better start today than yesterday. Still not an awesome start but better. I was in a better position - did get caught behind one girl who went sideways through a corner. But I kinda saw it coming and was able to adjust. For the first part of the race I yo-yoed with one girl until I got fed up with it and put on the jets. Then I set my sights on the sixth place girl. I caught her and was focused on catching number five. I came close, but close doesn't count in bike racing.

It really came down to the last lap. I had ridden a very clean race. Some excitement on the fly-over when I caught my pedal on the lip going down. But luckily I just kept on pedalling. Everything was going well until a bobble in the bowl on the last lap. I didn't hit the deck but the horizontal slide was enough to cause me to hesitate a bit and gave the rider behind me enough incentive to put on her jets. We hit the pavement with me in front. Uh oh. And as it came down to it, Jean Ann caught and passed me in the sand. Darn. She opened a little gap - enough that I ran out of real estate to catch her back.

So in the end I finished in seventh place. Same result as yesterday but a totally different ride and race for me. I rode much better today. I pedalled through more of the corners. Made sure not to lean my bike as if I was racing a criterium. I was more aggressive coming out the corners. Made sure to sprint everything. I also took more risks in the bowl. All in all, a good day on the bike. Nothing like a solid second day to round out the weekend.

And with that the race weekend in Edmonton was over. Canadian Cyclo-Cross Nationals had come and gone - I didn't achieve my goal of finishing in the top five but I did succeed in other areas. I rode two strong races and I showed myself that I am a strong and confident cyclo-cross racer. Really, it was a pretty darn solid weekend of racing. The conditions were tough and there was a lot happening besides racing - through it all I came out on top with my eyes still focused on my season goal. What a different experience from last year's Canadian Cyclo-Cross Championships... Yes, it was a new season and I was a new rider.

Even though I didn't finish in the top five at Cyclo-Cross Nationals, I was still on track and focused on my goal of qualifying for the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Marc, Steve and I had a plan and we were sticking to it. After nationals, life was a bit of a whirlwind. I traveled to Toronto for the a couple of UCI races but unfortunately it was not to be my weekend.

I was really hoping to have some strong races and earn some more UCI points to help me on my way to reaching the 98 UCI points required to qualify for the selection. But not only was I racing my competitors, I was also racing my body. The travel, race stress, and just general day-to-day life had caught up with me and my ulcerative colitis was back in full force. My race on Saturday was not good. I just didn't have the energy to put the power out in the pedals. It was frustrating. I wanted to go faster but I simply couldn't. At times during the race I debated about dropping out. I was out of the UCI points chase for this race (UCI points are awarded to the top 10) but at least I could still get some prize money. Not the best reason to keep going, but money was something I didn't have a lot of so every little bit counted.

I think one of the hardest parts of this race was that I had such a large cheering section at the race. My brother, some of his friends and other friends from Ottawa and Toronto were all out cheering me on. I really felt like I let them down and had embarrassed myself. Yep, here it is again - embarrassing myself and letting others down. I had a good talk with Marc after the race and resolved to race better on Sunday. In fact I was looking forward to Sunday - the course was much better suited to my riding style with short punchy climbs and some long power sections.

Gregory and I cheered on Marc during his race and then it was off to downtown Toronto for a fine Indian meal. I was feeling not badly at this point - just fatigued. The worst of the colitis hadn't shown up - just zero energy. But then Sunday morning came... I woke up with vicious stomach cramps and pains. These are pains that are really hard to describe, it really feels like your insides are being ripped out. I was very close to going to the hospital but I didn't want to disrupt Marc's race and his day. Marc begrudgingly left me in the hotel and went off to his race. Not how I had planned to spend the second day of a double-header weekend. But this is the way life is. Really you have to take things day-by-day. Good with the bad. Ups with the downs.

I had a couple of more weeks at home and then it was off to Belgium for the winter. This year we did things a bit differently, and I went to Belgium a month earlier than Marc. Racing cyclo-cross is not easy and it is even more difficult when your number one support system is not there. But luckily for me, I have some very good friends in Belgium who would be helping me out at some of the races. Before I knew it, it was early November and I was hanging out at the Ottawa Bicycle Club cyclo-cross race in Kanata. I was flying out the next day so my head really wasn't into the race. I ended up not finishing the race and just relaxing cheering on my friends. Best part of the day was giving some of the little kids some of my old race clothing. The local cyclo-cross series has such deep roots and really is the reason I'm on this path. Anything I can do to encourage young kids to race and have fun is fine by me. It is just such an inspiring feeling to see these little kids racing with their heavy bikes, running shoes, baggy spandex and big grins.

Monday was a whirlwind. Last minute packing and cramming of stuff into my bike boxes and luggage and then before I knew it, I was sitting in the departure lounge. My stomach was doing backflips. I was missing Marc already and excited for what lay ahead. This day of travel turned out to be an epic day. The plane was rerouted to Halifax due to a medical emergency, subsequently I missed my connection in Frankfurt and my bikes did not make it to Brussels. By the time I got in my rental car I was tired and just wanted to get to my winter home in Blaubeurg. My bad luck did not end, I ended up with a flat tire a mere five minutes from my new winter home... I really think it's a good a think I'm an experienced traveler - for some this could have sent them over the edge. But I really was so tired at this point there was nothing left to do but shrug it off. Oh, and call Marc... Luckily Joscelin (Jos) Ryan my friend and landlord in Belgium came to my rescue. Flat tire was changed and I was finally at the house in Blaubeurg.

The second part of my season was about to begin. In a few days I would be lining up at my second World Cup of the season in Nommay, France. Jos and I set out for Nommay and had an easy drive making it to the course with plenty of time to pre-ride and catch up with our racing friends. It helps so much to have Jos at the races - she does the pit work, helps clean my bikes, cheers me on, takes photos, and navigates any issues that come up. I was feeling pretty confident on the course - it wasn't as muddy as it had been in years past and I felt as though I was riding it fairly well. Race day came quickly as it always does. The atmosphere at a World Cup is really quite special, all the top athletes are out and everyone is a little bit on edge. I saw many friendly faces and settled into my pre-race routine. I had an excellent race at the first World Cup in Treviso, Italy so I naturally assumed that today's ride would be similar. Well, I rode okay but not fast enough - unfortunately I was lapped. I wallowed in self-pity for about a minute and then gave my head a shake. This race was the wake-up call I needed.

Fitness was spot on. But my technical skills needed to improve. I knew where I was losing time and that only hard work could change this. I left that race feeling charged up. It was almost a good thing that I was lapped - I couldn't be complacent and assume that I was riding as well as I possibly could. Nope there was more work to be done and no time like the present to get down to business.

That month in Belgium was a blur of training, racing, recovering, and just keeping my eyes focused on the goal. At times this focus on the goal became all encompassing. Almost driving me a little bit crazy. I became so focussed on improving my technical skills that I started doing lots of "double days" - particularly when my coach hadn't scheduled them. Marc warned me against trying to cram in too much, but I was so desperate to improve that I barely listened to what he was saying. These extra double days were a lot of fun and I do think I did improve technically, but I sacrificed an athlete's best friend - rest...

I so wanted to be better. I so wanted to get the technical skills I knew I needed to compete at the next level. But at the same time, I was battling my old friend "low self-confidence". I had done a bunch of races - had some excellent ones such as at Hasselt where I raced with the Junior boys. I had a great race and finally felt like I was racing my bike. The highlight of that

month was the week-long UCI cyclo-cross training camp that I participated in. For one week, myself and four other athletes (three from Denmark and one from Australia) trained with the coach of the Belgian National Cyclo-Cross team. We trained in Koksijde, Belgium the location of the next World Cup. This was a course like I'd never seen before. The race course was built in and around a sand dune. This was more sand than I've raced in. Definitely a challenging race course but after a week of training on the course I was feeling good and felt I could lay down a pretty strong race at Koksijde. I had an overwhelming feeling of self-confidence and for some reason expected that I should have good ride at the third World Cup of the season.

Marc tried to talk some sense into me before the race and remind me that all I had to do was finish. Racing and finishing Koksijde would give me the last chunk of UCI points that I needed to qualify for the selection pool for the Canadian team. But I expected more from myself. I expected to have a good ride that day. Well, I had a rough day on the bike. So bad that during the race I had thoughts of quitting cyclo-cross and giving up on my goal. Really not a good day. Marc and I burned up a lot of phone minutes after the race - he was trying to keep me from packing it in and reminding me that I met my goal - I had qualified. I had earned the UCI points I needed to get selected. I should have been happy but I was really down in the dumps. I felt embarrassed and like a fraud because of my race at Koksijde. Marc was due to arrive on Monday, so instead of racing on Sunday, I decided to head home and get in a good hard training day.

I really couldn't think about racing. It was the best thing I could have ever done. Slept in a bit on Sunday morning and then headed out for a long off-road/on-road ride. I loaded my iPod with some of my favorite CBC podcasts and hit the woods. I ripped around the trails, up, down, through ankle deep mud, along dry smooth trails, just generally had fun on my bike. That ride was the perfect medicine. It reminded me of why I race my bike and that I still wanted to keep going.

I woke up on Monday morning with butterflies in my stomach... It was Marc day! Finally Marc would be in Belgium for the winter. I was super excited to see him again and talk with him face-to-face. I tried desperately to not arrive at the Brussels airport too early - easier said than done. I think I arrived about 30 minutes before Marc's flight was due to arrive (you never know the plane could be early!). I sat at the arrivals area and really just took in the atmosphere. There is nothing quite like seeing people being reunited with one another - at times I was close to tears watching these reunions. Finally after what seemed like the longest wait of my life, Marc came through the arrival doors with a giant smile on his face. It was just simply perfect to see and hold Marc - and best of all to hear his strong confident voice in person again.

Those first few days with Marc in Belgium were a bit of a whirlwind. He was trying to get over jet lag. I was trying to stay calm about the selection announcement. And I was busy planning Marc's 40th birthday party! So lots of good stuff going on. Marc's birthday was most excellent, celebrating over some Chinese food take-out and with a group of friends. The perfect way to welcome Marc to Belgium, to celebrate his big day, and to stay loose while waiting for

the team announcement.

Even though I had met the qualification standards, I still had another month of waiting to find out if I would be selected to the team. There is no guarantee that even though the standards have been met that you'll be selected. With Marc in Belgium now things were a little bit easier for me. With Marc there I no longer felt so lonely and it was just perfect to have my best friend there with me. We traveled to races together, trained together and just generally supported one another. The month of December was not an easy one. Lots of tough racing, more people coming to stay at the house, Marc was juggling work and his own racing and training and I was trying to keep my head from falling off.

Life is never boring I suppose.

Once again, I'm back talking about the mental game. This aspect of racing really is as important as my physical and technical skills. It would be nice to say that my mental game is one of my strengths. It definitely wasn't for the 2009 - 2010 season, but I'm hard at work to make it my "secret weapon" for the 2010 - 2011 season...

I had and suppose I probably still do, an idea that people are paying attention and noticing how I was racing. Yes, I know that this really isn't the case. Most people are so consumed with themselves that they really aren't paying any attention to what I'm doing. And if they are and are being judgemental - so what. They aren't the ones out there racing their bikes. But still for some reason I felt like if I really "deserved" to race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships then I should qualify more than one way. And deep down I know this really just doesn't make any sense. Qualifying is qualifying and this is the goal.

These demons of self-confidence and feeling good enough are very hard to shake. I was convinced that I was the only athlete dealing with these emotions. It seemed to me that all my competitors simply oozed confidence. They all give off this impression of knowing and believing that they are strong, fast, powerful bike racers. And here I was standing there wondering if I really truly belonged with this elite group of female bike racers. All along I simply felt lucky to be there and to be able to race with these women.

But this wasn't luck. This wasn't a gift. Nope, I worked hard to be there and deserved to be racing with them. I earned that right. Each and every race, I was proving myself and getting one step closer to my goal. This is what I know I should have been thinking. I also should have recognized that these women that I'd put up on a pedestal were having the same feelings of doubt, concern, and fear that I was having.

Fear of failure. Many many books, articles, and research papers have been written on this topic. Fear of failure is a demon and a friend. It can help motivate people to work harder and really do what needs to be done to achieve and get ahead. It can also keep people from setting goals and really striving for success. This fear of failure for me is wrapped up in feelings of embarrassment. Feeling embarrassed about my results - convinced that people at home or wherever are looking at the results sheet and passing judgement on my racing abilities.

Three days before the World Cyclo-Cross Championships, these fears were realized with the following comment on my Ottawa Cross website:

watched you race in holland with my friend and was wondering why you do not compete at the master worlds instead of the world cup. would it not be better for you to finish in the top 10 at a the world masters championships then dead last at a world cup race. i applaud your competitive drive just think when representing canada you should be up there in the result list. Vos who won came across the finish line seconds after you crossed it to do your bell lap.

Well, you can probably imagine what reading this comment on my website did to me. I quite literally became a puddle of despair. My thoughts and beliefs had been validated. People

were watching my results and they really did think that I was an embarrassment to Canada. I was a mess. Part of me was angry that this person who didn't even know me would post such a comment on my website. And on the flip side I felt terrible - I began questioning why I was there racing and what I was doing. Luckily Marc and my strong support network including some friends at home, my coach, and my mental strength coach were there to help me through this mess. In the end I posted the following response on my website and really just tried to put the ugliness of this person behind me.

Now, I don't know about you but this comment was pretty surprising. Surprising because I'm shocked that someone would take the time to write such a negative comment on my web site. I also found this comment disappointing. Disappointing because this person clearly does not have dreams and goals.

I'll be honest, the first time I read this comment I was angry. Then after rereading it, I was hurt. Devastated is probably the better word. If you know me or have been reading my blog for a while, you know that I struggle with self-confidence. Let's just say this comment didn't do much for my self-confidence.

Luckily, Marc came to the rescue. He read the comment. Smoke started to come out of his ears and then he reminded me of the following:

- I've already raced the Masters World Cyclo-Cross Championships - three years ago - I was 4th - and in fact I'm ineligible for Masters Worlds (I have 160 UCI points and am ranked 48th in the World UCI Ranking)

- that Jonathan Page was multiple laps down in his first World Cups - he went on to finish second in the World Championships - and was 8th on Sunday in Hoogerheide

- how else are we supposed to get better as a nation at cyclo-cross if we don't start at the bottom?

- that Vos hit the finish line as I was already past the pits

- that this guy really isn't on the "same lap" as the rest of us

I can do two things with this comment: let it drag me into a pit of despair and zero confidence or I can use it to fuel my fire and desire. The old me would have wallowed in the pit of despair. Well, I'm not letting this guy put in that pit.

I'm going to use this comment to fuel me. To make me push on the pedals even harder. To attack every corner. To rip through the snow and ice. To rail the corners. To race so hard I can't breathe and my legs are screaming at me to stop.

Deep down inside I'll be laughing at this guy. Because I'm out here doing it. Mixing it up with the best in the world. Where is he? Sitting somewhere safe - not chasing his dreams? Watching the race on television? Settling for mediocrity?

Luckily on the same blog post I received this awesome comment:

"Thanks for all the reports and the great efforts that have put you on that same lap!

Sweet to sit in cubicle land here and get a few minutes of enjoying your adventure.

Tales from the big ring. Good luck next week."

This comment was from a Canadian cycling legend (John Large). I have to say that his comments and emails hold much more value and weight than the other guy. John is a guy who has been there, done it, seen it all, and is now helping to inspire and guide cyclists such as myself who have hopes and dreams. Thanks John for the awesome comment. It means a lot.

Okay, time to switch gears here...

Lets just say, I'm super stoked to be here. This is a massive step forward for me in my bike racing career. This is not my last World Championships. This is my first. I'm looking forward to taking it all in. Learning as much as I can and having fun while doing it.

All this to say that through-out the entire season, even when I should have been feeling super confident and very satisfied, I was battling internal demons. I've learned from working with my mental strength coach and with talking to others, that I'm not alone with these feelings. That feelings of self-doubt and fear are normal. Particularly when you want something so badly. But on the other hand - I shouldn't be having these. I need to feel confident and believe in myself each and everyday. Easier said than done.

Expectations. Whose expectations? Pressure. Whose pressure? Pretty much these are my expectations and my pressure. No one is telling me I need to do x or achieve y. Nope. I'm telling myself this. Kind of goes down to the root of the problem which has typically prevented me from setting big goals and really going for them - not being good enough in my own eyes.

There is a saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I think this also holds true for confidence - confidence really has to come from within. It doesn't matter how much others tell me that I'm strong, I've worked hard, I've come along way, etc. I need to believe it for myself.

I remember Marvin saying, "Do you realize you're doing something that not very many people can say they've done? You're racing at the top of your sport. You're racing at the World Championships. You're representing your country. You are an elite athlete."

I am an elite athlete. Yes I am. I worked hard. I got here. I deserve this. I am on the Canadian National Cyclo-Cross team.

I Vicki Thomas am an elite athlete.

December. This is a big month for me. For the past three years, I've spent it in Belgium racing my cyclo-cross bike. It is also an important time for me emotionally - I have Marc's birthday on December 8 and my little brother's birthday on December 11 and toss in Christmas and it becomes one big stretch of thinking about, talking with, and missing family. This time around was no exception. With one differentiator - December 11 was also the day I would find out if I had been selected to the Canadian Team for the World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic.

Marc also arrived in December. So there was lots going on. I had just spent a month alone in Belgium, getting used to the racing and training routine. It was so nice to have Marc there. My best friend and uber-supporter was with me to take in this amazing experience. Not to mention, I missed having him at my races and cheering him on at his races. And, I'll be the first to admit it, but I also needed Marc there to keep my head from falling off. This guy is so good at noticing when things might be going a bit crazy in my brain and stepping in before things get out of control. Really, it is hard to explain how much Marc does for me in life, racing, training, and just being there. Pretty darn lucky.

So, December 11 was looming. I knew I had made the selection criteria. I also knew that a few other women had decided not to race at the Worlds. I was pretty sure I would get selected. But still, you just never know. Well, December 11 came. And I waited. I literally sat in front of my computer obsessively checking my email. Nothing. I waited. I checked the time back in Ottawa. I waited. Nothing. Finally, it was getting close to supper time and Marc and I decided to go out for supper. This is not something we normally do in Belgium. The culture is not one that really is a "restaurant culture". But we had planned to go out on December 11 regardless of the decision - either I'd be having a celebratory meal or I'd be chasing away disappointment with some fine food. Either way - a nice meal out was in order.

I didn't realize how nervous/excited Marc was about knowing until I noticed he was obsessively checking his email on his iPhone while we were out. He had logged into my email and was checking it as well. As for me, well, I was channeling positive thoughts and trying to stay relaxed. Through all of this we had a great meal and I decided to splurge with my favorite Belgian dessert - a dame noir. Picture a super tall sundae cup. Put some hot fudge sauce in the bottom. Then add some chocolate ice cream. Add some more hot fudge sauce. Add more chocolate ice cream. Add one more layer of hot fudge sauce. Top with whip cream and serve with a very long spoon. Mmm, my mouth waters just thinking of it. Most definitely my favorite dessert of all time.

We got home to Blaubeurg at around 9 p.m and still we didn't know. I was about to go to bed when I checked my email one last time. There it was. The email. Subject: Cyclo-Cross World Selection. I was nervous. I was almost afraid to open the email... When I opened it, I found an attachment that read:

Dear Vicki Thomas,

I am pleased to announce that you have been selected to represent Canada at the 2010 UCI Cyclo-Cross World Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic.

Wow, I'm totally overwhelmed right now. Just re-reading that letter has brought up so many emotions for me. Yes, I'm sitting here crying. Silly I know. But I guess it just goes to show how much this selection meant to me. I sometimes feel a bit blasé about the whole thing, but then I reread emails and blog posts about the World Cyclo-Cross Championships and I realize how truly important this is to me.

So, I had done it. I had reached my goal. I would be racing at the 2010 World Cyclo-Cross Championships. A goal that I had started working toward the previous year, had come to fruition. The hard work, sacrifices, highs, and lows had all paid off. I was pretty excited. And really overwhelmed. Actually I was a little bit freaked out. I would be racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. I would be representing Canada. I was on the Canadian Team. I had done it. Yikes!

By now it was getting pretty late but I had a couple of important things to do. First off was to call my little brother. He is one of my biggest supporters. As much as I talk about him and sing his praises, I know he is doing the same about me to his friends and colleagues. You see, I don't have many mentors/role models - but I do have my little brother. My brother is one of those people who wears his heart on his sleeve. When he was a teenager he decided he wanted to be a professional actor. He could have chosen any career out there - he's a super smart guy who excelled in every subject at school. But it was acting that captured his soul and his spirit. He didn't buckle to pressure, instead he pursued his dreams. He went to the University of Toronto and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, graduating from a tough program that only accepted 12 students a year. He is good. He is super talented. But this doesn't mean that things come easily to him. The life of a professional actor is not easy. I'd say it is even harder than that of a professional athlete. Imagine having to deal with rejection day-in and day-out. It takes a lot of auditions to finally land a part in a theater production, television show, commercial, or movie. But my little brother has stuck with it. At times he was tempted to pack it all in and go back to school. He thought about going to law school or journalism school. But his heart wasn't in these careers. The pull of a stable income and a higher salary were still not enough for him to give up on his dream. We have had many talks over the years about listening to your heart and really going for it. He has taught me so much about sacrifice, goals, dreams, and believing in myself. If there was anyone out there who believed that I could race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships, it was my little brother.

So I had to call him. It was his birthday and I knew he'd be thrilled to hear this news on his birthday. Well, I think he was more excited than Marc and I put together. He was so proud. I really can't explain how awesome it was to tell him this news and to hear his reaction to it. He immediately wanted to know how he could watch the race and wanted all the details. Amazing - it was his birthday and he was more interested in what I was doing than getting out to celebrate with his wife Liz.

A call with my parents to tell them the good news and it was time for a quick blog post before hitting the sack. It was Friday night after all, and this meant that I had a race on Saturday... Here is what my website Ottawa Cross read on December 11, 2009:

Maple Leaf

This just arrived in my email inbox:

Dear Vicki Thomas,

I am pleased to announce that you have been selected to represent Canada at the 2010 UCI Cyclo-Cross World Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic.

It's funny but you'd think that after being selected for the World Cyclo-Cross Championships I'd be riding a bit of a high and be brimming with confidence. Nope. In fact the reverse seemed to happen. I started to get a bit freaked out about the reality of racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. I suppose because I had built it up to be this big "thing". The ultimate goal and now that it was a reality, I really wasn't sure how to handle this.

In typical fashion, I started to become a bit crazy. I put more and more pressure on myself. Now, all of sudden since I was going to be racing at the World Champs and would be representing Canada, I expected more of myself. I somehow determined that I should be racing faster, smarter, and better. Overnight. Yes, I expected a radical transformation in my racing abilities. Somehow I had done the dreaded "goal creep". I had achieved one goal but now that I had, I had determined that this wasn't really enough and that I ought to be able to achieve higher results in my races.

So December and January were a bit nutty. To top it all off, we were getting close to the big block of winter racing. Typically the two weeks around Christmas are packed with races. A couple of World Cups, some UCI-sanctioned races, and some local junior races thrown into the mix. Add in a bunch of new people arriving at the house for a few weeks of cyclo-cross racing and my stress level was beginning to overflow.

To help Tim and Jos (the owners of the house in Blaubeurg) out, I find people to live in the house during the cyclo-cross season. Typically this means an influx of people right before Christmas with the house full with eight people until mid-January. This year was no different with six new people arriving within days of each other. For me this means, I have to help them get settled, show them where the grocery stores are, show them some good training routes, and get used to living with six new people. This just adds a little bit extra stress into the mix into a time when I was already a bit on edge.

I was having trouble keeping everything in the air and not collapsing. And to just add an extra layer of intensity to the mix, my ulcerative colitis was creeping up. No doubt this was a result of the stress I was imposing on myself. If I've said it before, I'll say it again - thank goodness for Marc. He really did an amazing job of keeping my head from falling off. He just reminded me pretty much everyday that I had done it. I had reached my goal. To enjoy this. To soak it in. I had done it.

But still, even with this amazing support, I was struggling. I started to tighten up on the bike. Became rather twitchy and nervous. It seemed like every type of course gave me trouble. Where in the past I looked forward to racing in the snow or mud, I was becoming nervous. Afraid of crashing. Worried about making mistakes. Stressing about my results. I had this crazy idea that now that I was going to the World Cyclo-Cross Championships, "people" would be watching my results. Yes, really not in a good place.

Thank goodness for the power of the Internet. As is normal for me, I was blogging about this and trying to keep up a good appearance. I thought I was doing an admirable job of keeping

the “real truth” from the pages of my website and really painting a picture of “good things”. But I guess not.

I wrote this in the midst of the Christmas racing craziness:

Onwards. Upwards. Forward. Moving ahead. Looking up.

Looking forward to the future. I've had a few good days of racing, training, and learning. Some highs and lows in both races. But all in all, lots to look forward to and more lessons to transfer from my brain to my legs. Of course, I always a higher result on the score sheet. (Who doesn't it?)

But I can take satisfaction with the small successes from each race and really from each lap of the race.

If there is one thing I've learned this weekend is that a clean ride really is a fast ride. This is the trick to the sport of cyclo-cross. Going fast. Keeping the feet moving. Stopping the brain from doing too much work. Staying loose. And most importantly, staying upright. But on the flip side, a true sign of riding on the edge and pushing your limits, is when you hit the deck a few times. Granted, hitting the deck is not optimum. But mistakes have to be made to learn.

Tightening up a bit, but trying to stay positive:

Today was one of those training days... Since it is Wednesday, we went to Floreal Lichtaart to train in the woods. This is our weekly routine. Well, it seems that is is the routine for most 'cross racers here. So even though there is snow on the ground we loaded up the trusty Kangoo and made our way.

I'll be honest here - it was a tough one out there. I got into that "trying too hard" thing. I was trying to do everything and do it all perfectly. You know - spin, stay loose, look up, and nail all the technical sections as well. Of course, when you're learning - it is not optimum to try to work on everything at once! Sigh. Luckily Marc was there to remind me of this and to give me some good tips.

Number one lesson I can take from this training session - I need to focus on my cadence. With a higher cadence, the bike will float more easily through and over the snow. When I get into the slow cadence I start to stomp, this causes traction issues with the rear wheel and causes me to sink in the snow. So the name of the game for me is "spin".

I know that if I can get this, the other things will come as well. So this was a great training session. With Marc's help, we identified the biggest thing to work on right now. No more of this trying to fix everything at once. Back to basics and put the puzzle together one piece at a time.

And the unravelling:

Funny because I had a good warm-up today. Yesterday the "big" descent was not open. So today my mission was to conquer this descent. And I did this. In the warm-up I crashed the

first time down. But I picked myself up, climbed up the descent and rode down it properly. I then rode the rest of the course and then came back to ride the descent again. Again, I got down it. Good. Feeling confident. Last year, this descent really scared me. So I was happy to roll back to the car knowing I could ride the descent. Rest of the warm-up routine went well.

So when I approached the big descent the first time during the race, I was ready for it. Confident. Knew I could get down it. Well, I didn't. I crashed. Hard. Damn it. Lost contact with the group and played catch up and survival. Then each time I came to the descent I would try but I didn't try hard enough. I couldn't ride it. It got the better of me. Damn it. This frustrates me. I'm a better rider than this. I let fear catch me today. Ridiculous because I've ridden down harder. Yes, I'm ticked off with myself. I need to do better. I have to do better. I put in the hard work physically and I need to ride better technically. I have the skills. I just have too much "brain" happening and not enough "freedom on the bike".

So what's next? Well, in short order - I need to get better. I have it in me. I really just need to unleash it. I need to ride my bike with the unbridled attitude of a 12 year old boy - no fear. Just going for it. Big smile plastered on my face, trying to beat my buddies racing around the block.

I wrote the above after the Zolder World Cup. A race that has always pushed my buttons. Last year when I raced this race, I froze on the big descent, raced poorly, and felt utterly dejected. This time around, I vowed that things would be better. I was a different rider and I could race this course. I told myself I could and would "do it". I had a solid day of pre-riding with Marc and was feeling good going into the race. And then I met my nemesis - the big descent. And as I wrote, the same thing happened again. Sucks. Really sucks. Even sitting here now thinking about the Zolder World Cup and I get a bit tense. I so want to conquer this race course and I get rather frustrated when it wins. Sigh. I really tried to put on a happy face after this race but I was really struggling. It isn't easy when you're living in a house with other racers as well - tensions are a bit high, everyone is struggling with something, and it is hard to just "be".

Avoiding the crack? Or not?

I was so tempted to put another title on this blog post. One that truly expresses how I'm feeling right now. But I'm working really hard right now in seeing the "positives" and the "small successes" - so I'm not going to be a downer from the get go.

Today was not my best day on the bike. And it has nothing to do with feeling sick yesterday. I woke up today feeling pretty good - a few pains but nothing I haven't trained or raced with before. Today I let my mental game get the better of me. I had a not very good pre-ride - skittish and tense. Which was frustrating since I really like this race course and I'm comfortable with mud (I'm not that fast in the mud - but I'm not afraid of it). It is thanks to Marc and his help that I toed the line today. I started the race with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and some smallish goals.

Things were going okay. Typical slowish start. But I'm good at recovering from this. Then I crashed and ended up twisting my saddle so it was pointing in the complete opposite (horizontal) direction. This cost me a lot of time and positions. I had to run things I normally ride. I had to stand on the side of the course and jam my saddle into a somewhat straight position - though it was still pointing up. I put my head down and tried to catch and pass. But I was so far out of the race it was futile. Rode to the pit - got a clean bike and rode to the car. Not good.

So now where do I go from here? Well, I can wallow in self-pity and self-induced misery. Or I can be realistic and take each race as it comes and with it each small improvement that I'm making. I think the problem is that I don't see my improvements. Others are seeing them. But I'm not seeing them. I look at the results sheet and I'm still where I was at the beginning of my Belgian season. Hard to convince myself that I'm improving. I think I'm actually taking the easier route - telling myself that I'm not very good - so that I have an "out".

But, I know deep down this is not the attitude that I want to portray. It is definitely not the attitude and perspective that got me where I am right now. But it is hard to remind myself of that when I'm not satisfied with where I am right now.

It is so darn hard. It is hard to want to be something and to not be there. It is so tempting to roll over and give in. But I'm a bigger person than this. I need to remember that the goal was to race at the World Championships - not to win it! I guess this is what makes me a "type a" person. Never satisfied and too critical of my own self.

So I came really close to cracking again. Really really close. There was not one race or experience that was working its way into my brain to bring on this crack. Nope. I did it all to myself. I initially had too high of expectations. Then I reset and focused on improving on my weaknesses. But as always happens with me, I failed to see the small improvements that I'm making with my weaknesses. So the negative self-talk and the frustration set in.

I'd like to say that right here and right now, I've beaten the crack. But lets just say, I've applied a thin layer of silicone and I'm not letting anything else nasty in. I've got a pair of binoculars and I'm only looking forward and focusing on the improvements and gains I'm going to continue to make.

Starting to come around and thinking about elephants...

Ever wondered how you eat an elephant? Have you ever thought about how eating an elephant relates to cyclo-cross racing? Well, guess what? I have been wondering just this.

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

How do I improve as a cyclo-cross racer? One pedal stroke at a time.

Hmm, kind of the same thought process. Bit by bit, slowly but surely, with steady, measured and small improvements, the bigger improvements will come. Soon enough I'll have eaten the elephant. The tough part is remembering not to rush this process. An elephant is

massive. There is a lot of muscle, flesh, fat, to get through. Lots of lesson learned on the way. I'm sure to overdo it at times and have to take a step back, but this is part of the process.

One pedal stroke at a time.

This was the focus of today's ride. Marc joined me for some riding at the Averbode Abby race course. With Marc's help I broke the course down and focused on improving how I was riding through the corners. The focus was on pedalling. Always pedal. Kay Van Den Brand who rides for Scott was out and we watched him ride through various sections. He does slow or brake but then he is quick to apply heavier pedal pressure to get on top of his pedals and back up-to-speed. So this is what I worked on. I could feel myself getting faster and more confident during each "sectioning". Marc rolled off to do his intervals and I kept on hitting the course.

Definitely a good session on the bike. Small improvements were made. I didn't eat the elephant but I was able to start in on it.

And finally realizing that I can't do everything by myself...

I'm looking forward to this last block of training. It is the last bit of training leading up to the World Championships in Tabor. Lots of longer rides with interval sessions and tempo blocks. Just the kind of riding I like to do leading up to a big event. I like to have the feeling of "effort" in my legs prior to an important race. I find these hard rides give me a lot of confidence regarding my fitness and preparation. I know that I really can't build any "new" fitness by Jan. 31 but I can sharpen some of the edges both physically and mentally.

This week I'm talking with a sports psychologist that has been recommended to me by my coach and Marc's coach. Looking forward to talking with him. I wonder if I should have done this a couple of weeks ago. But it might have been too much too soon. I'm in a better head space than I was a few weeks ago. I'm more realistic and aware of the possibilities I have ahead of me. I'm not feeling as down on myself as I was. But I still am not feeling it 100 per cent. It will be useful to talk about how I'm feeling with an "expert" and get some advice on how to handle the race pressure I impose on myself and how to deal with my own expectations. One revelation that has been helpful these past few days has been looking at the ages of some of the other women I race against (and who are finishing where I want to be...) - 43, 41, 45... Yep, lots of riding years left in these legs, lungs, and heart.

So as you can guess, I was pretty much all over the place in this last phase of racing and training before the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Luckily I have an amazing support system from Marc and my Belgian friends to complete strangers who read my blog and sent me emails of encouragement. It might sound a bit corny but these emails from people I've never met really mean a lot - that a "stranger" would take the time to send me words of encouragement is just truly overwhelming. With only a couple of weeks to go before the big race, I was really just trying to keep focused and enjoy the moment.

There was lots of action at the house with new people arriving and lots of logistics to be

worked out for the trip to the Czech Republic. But in true form, Marc wouldn't let me worry about any of this - my job was to ride my bike and he would deal with the rest. Words can't express how amazing he is.

Through all of this, at least my training was going well. I was getting out and really just enjoying the bike. Yes, we had some snowy weather, but it is the winter in Belgium - some days the sun shines brilliantly and other days it snows. It is the same for everyone...

To make the most of where I live in Belgium the best kind of ride is a on-road/off-road ride. This ride sees me mixing it up with some pavement on the perfect Belgian bicycle paths and then tackling the deep trail system that the area is known for. A few days before the Roubaix, France World Cup, I set out for such a ride. My intention was to work on my technical cornering and just focus on flowing through the singletrack. Perfect way to get the brain and body on focus for what was sure to be a challenging race in Roubaix.

I pulled on my Ottawa Cross kit and off I went down the main street of Blauberg on my trusty Stevens Super-Prestige cyclo-cross bike. The sun was shining, the air was crisp, and there was a light dusting of snow on the ground. Perfect training conditions. I don't remember what I was listening to on my iPod but more than likely it was a mix of CBC Radio podcasts. After an easy 15 minutes of riding I was on the trails at the Averbode Abby. It was just me, the singletrack, and my iPod. Perfect. Lots of opportunities to really work on specific corners and sections of the course.

One of the technical aspects of cyclo-cross racing that I was struggling with was momentum - I had a tendency to over brake and ease off on my pedaling when the terrain got soft or slippery. So the goal of this session was to keep pedaling, to not brake, to look up and to embrace the speed in the corners. Everything was going really well until I took too much speed into a corner. I ended up hitting a massive tree stump but miraculously I didn't crash - my bike simply jumped over it and I banged my right thumb on my brake hood (the place where most people rest their hands while riding). I instantly felt a sharp pain in my right thumb. Hmm, oh well - I didn't crash and I can still move my thumb. Now the smart move would have been to turn around and ride home - after all the Roubaix World Cup was in four days and the World Cyclo-Cross Championships were in just a few weeks.

But of course I didn't do this. My thumb didn't hurt that badly... So I kept on riding, following the bicycle path to another section of woods that has a great mix of walking, cycling, and horseback riding trails. I did notice that with every bump, my thumb was starting to hurt a bit more. Ah well, I could still move it, so I really thought nothing of it. Well, by the time I got back to the house in Blauberg a couple of hours later, my thumb was rather sore. I didn't say anything to Marc, I was kind of worried about how he would react. I cleaned my bike - trying my best to protect my thumb. Finally after I had showered and plunked myself down in front of my computer, I showed Marc my thumb...

It was really swollen. In fact it was massive. Marc urged me to go the doctor immediately. But I subscribe to the theory that the doctor is the last resort. I convinced Marc that with some ice, elevation, and rest, my thumb would be fine. Well the next day it was worse... Off to the doctor I went. I feared that it was broken as did Marc, Tim, and Jos. Well, luckily it was just a

terrible sprain of the ulnar collateral ligament. The cycling doctor I saw bandaged it up and gave me some special anti-inflammatory cream to rub on it. The big question was - could I race? I really wanted to race at Surhuisterveen, the Netherlands and at the Roubaix World Cup. I decided to take a wait and see approach.

After much discussion with my coach, Marc, Tim and Jos, I decided the smart thing to do was to miss these races. My thumb was slow to heal and I really needed it to be 100 per cent for the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. To say this was a bit stressful would be an understatement. I felt like an idiot for injuring myself just weeks away from my goal race - the race I had focused on for so long. It was disappointing to miss the two races but after seeing the crazy muddy conditions at the Roubaix World Cup, I must admit I was kind of relieved I didn't race. Everyone who went said it was so hard and there was more running than riding. As for the race in Surhuisterveen - well we still went so that Marc could race. This race was held in knee-deep snow and minus 10 celsius temperatures - again - I was relieved to not be racing. So maybe this thumb injury was a blessing in disguise?

It gave me a chance to recover both physically and mentally. I spent my training time riding the trainer and catching up with my movie and television watching. To pass the time on the trainer, it really helps to have some form of entertainment. Luckily I had a bunch of movies on my laptop so I would simply set up my laptop in front of the trainer, pop in my headphones, and start pedaling.

It was strange to not be racing when everyone else was putting in some big efforts to get ready for the World Champs. But I have extreme confidence in my coach, Steve Weller, so I knew that I would be ready for the race. It just meant that I would be riding the trainer and sweating it out indoors instead of outside. Small trade-off to ensure that I was race ready.

Now, if you're a regular reader of my website, you might not remember me writing much about my thumb injury... I really didn't want to write about my injury because I didn't want it to appear as though I was making excuses for why I wasn't racing. Only as it got close to the Roubaix World Cup did I finally fess up on my blog and tell you what was going on:

So my thumb. What a hassle. Just got back from the doctor. It is badly sprained. Luckily it is not broken. But I'm not racing tomorrow or this weekend. This is a bummer.

I really was looking forward to racing in Surhuisterveen. Cool downtown course. And just simply fun to race in a mid-week race. Besides, I love to race - so why miss the chance. Also a drag about Roubaix. I was looking forward to racing in all the World Cups this season and of course to racing in Roubaix. I guess I'll have to wait until next year.

Basically, I need to give my thumb some time to heal. The risk of crashing and doing further damage that would put at risk my ability to race in Tabor, are much too high. So we take the safe and smart road. This is definitely not the most fun road. But in the long run, the correct decision.

My mood? Well, it is what it is. Disappointed I can't race. But I can train. And my thumb is not severely injured. So no need to be down in the dumps. Just a little bump in the road. I've been through worse, so this is nothing. Looking forward to getting in some good hard trainer work-outs and cheering Marc on tomorrow. Yep, we're leaving at the crack of dawn on Wednesday so that Marc can race in Surhuisterveen.

So, with this, I'm going to sign off. I've got some organizing to do for our little road trip. Have a good one.

Luckily the trainer time combined with missing two races, really put me in the mood to race. I missed racing those two races and I wanted to get out there and finish off my season as well as it had started. Only two races left: the Hoogerheide World Cup and the World Cyclo-Cross Championships.

Eleven days before the World Cyclo-Cross Championships and I was feeling good. I had been working steadily with my mental training coach and was seeing progress. Impressive that in such short time, I could see some improvement in the mental component of my bike racing.

You might have read that title: Reality Check, and thought "uh oh - something not good is up..". Well, dear reader, this couldn't be further from the truth. In fact this reality check is all about the good stuff. Really good stuff. The last two days have been break-through days. Mentally.

I've just started working with a mental training coach and I wasn't expecting much this early in the process. But was I wrong. This guy is super good. He really gets to the core of what is going on in my head, asks the right questions, waits for me to answer and then prods and digs some more. Before I know I'm letting it all out and telling him about some of the crazy thoughts that rattle around in my thick skull. Then he sets me straight and we work on ways to help keep me in a positive frame of mind.

My most recent call with him was pretty World Championships focused. It was an awesome call. We laid down my goals for the race. Created a coping strategy/mechanism for when things leading up to the race or during the race "don't go according to plan". He gave me some homework focused on building my self-confidence. All super good stuff. When the call ended I was on such a high. I just wanted to jump on my bike and go race.

I'm not sure how he does it, but this guy just knows the right questions to ask and how to get me pumped up about myself. My only regret is that I didn't start working with him sooner. But I'm doing it now, so this is much better than nothing.

Suffice it to say, I'm stoked to be racing this weekend and next weekend. I've got some awesome goals to focus on. I've got some practical and purposeful coping strategies in place.

I'm feeling good. I'm finally feeling confident in myself. I've finally clued in that I deserve this. That I worked hard to earn my spot on the World Championships team. This is something that no one can take away from me.

I had one more race before the World Cyclo-Cross Championships, the World Cup race in Hoogerheide, Netherlands. I had never done this race, only watched some video of it and I must admit I had some feelings of trepidation. There was a pretty infamous descent that in previous years was the scene of some major crashes. Well, everyone has to go down so I will too. So imagine my surprise when during the pre-ride I kept on waiting for the descent and I never found it. For the 2010 race, the organizers reversed the course direction... So now we had to run up the descent instead. Phew, what a feeling of relief. I had super day of pre-riding with a couple of other Canadians - Erik Box and Conor O'Brien. Conor had just arrived for the World Cyclo-Cross Championships and Erik was in Belgium to get in a few weeks of racing. They helped me out on the course choosing lines and feeling comfortable. Unfortunately Marc wasn't able to pre-ride with me, he was in Mol, Belgium racing at the Masters World Cyclo-Cross Championships.

It was super hard for me to not be at his race to support him and cheer him. But my heart was with him. On the drive home from Hoogerheide, I was feeling good. Good mental sensations, good feelings in my legs and a hunger to get out there and race. My final race before the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Time to get out there and have some fun.

Now as you know by now, I had been struggling in the World Cups and was typically getting lapped. But not at Hoogerheide! I had a great race. I rode hard. Accelerated out of the corners. Attacked sections. Kept my head on straight. Duked it out with a couple of other girls. And most of all - finished on the lead lap. What a feeling! I was pretty stoked to have such a great race only week out from the highlight of cyclo-cross career so far.

Suffice it to say, today was an awesome day. Just from waking up to this point - the day has been truly great. I had a great time at the bike race today. I had spectacular support. I had good legs. I had a great head on my shoulders. My bikes were working great. Just a sweet day.

My result really wasn't that different from any other. With one major difference.... I did not get lapped! That's right - you read correctly - I did not get lapped. I heard the bell. What a sweet sweet sound. Really, it was like a symphony in my ears.

I had so much fun out there. I kept things in perspective. I raced in a World Cup. I raced with past, present, and future World Champions. I held my own. I finished on the lead lap. I had fun. I smiled. I accomplished a few of my goals. And even better - I smiled while doing it.

The crowd support was incredible. People were supporting me through-out the day. From the warm-up, to the start, to the finish. Marc and Alex were awesome in the pits. Luc took some awesome photos. The Canadians were awesome today - the three juniors did their first World Cup, Erik did his second World Cup - they all cheered me on as well. This was just a great day.

And now it was time to load up the van and hit the open road to the Czech Republic. It really was an amazing time in my bike racing career and life. I was on my way to the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. A dream come true. Proof that focus, hard work, dedication, and a strong heart can bring success. I had done it. I was really going to race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. And yes, I was a bit of a nervous wreck! But I like to think most other athletes racing in this race were having some similar vibes!

After an uneventful but long drive, we made it to Tabor, Czech Republic. The drive was long but thanks to Marc and Alex, I was able to relax and not have to do any driving. The hotel in Tabor was pretty darn good and we were well set up for the week leading up to the race. I was the only elite woman racing and then there were four junior boys and one U23 male racing. We had parents, Matt Knight from the CCA, Marc and Alex there to support us. Pretty darn lucky. My focus for the week was to rest, do my work-outs, enjoy myself, focus on the race and just stay relaxed. Things went fairly well for the week. It was pretty cold for a few days so I stuck to the trainer and the rest of the time was spent on the Internet or reading - staying off my feet and just recharging. I was struggling with a bit of an injury that came out of nowhere. I ended up

with a wicked shin splint in my right shin. No idea where it came from or what I did to cause it. Walking was painful. It was sore to the touch. Not good. But I wasn't letting it worry me. I iced it. Kept it elevated. Wore my compression socks. And generally just put it out of my mind.

On the Thursday before the race, Marc and I hit up the course to check it out. I had a good sense of what it would be like since the Czech Republic National Championships were held on the same course in pretty much the same snowy and icy conditions. I had watched that video so many times I could clearly see Zdenek Stybar out there dominating the other racers.

Hit up the World Championships course this afternoon for a bit of pre-riding. It is as we expected - icy. Most of the corners are glare ice. But with some special ice riding techniques and a boatload of confidence, the course is super fun.

Actually - I really like it. There is nothing "crazy" or "scary" on the course. I think the key is stay relaxed and to really try to maintain speed. There are some steep ups after the start section that get the heart rate up and the pain in the legs. There are some definite leg sucking, lung burning climbs. The two stair sections are challenging because the steps are so big. A tricky off-camber thrown in to rattle the nerves a bit. The fly-over is okay - the entrance is a bit tricky - definitely need to get the post swinging action down. The descent and corner off the fly-over are fast and slippery.

Definitely a course that keeps you on your toes. I've watched the video of the Czech National Championships so many times, but the video does not do the course justice. I didn't realize how much the camera deadens out the steepness of the ground. There is a reason why the guys are running on what "appears" to be "flat ground". Trust me - that is not flat ground - those are climbs.

I've got to say it was super awesome to be out there with my Team Canada jacket on. It definitely turned a lot of heads. Nothing quite like the feeling of riding with the maple leaf on your back. Definitely makes the pedals turn a bit more easily.

Alright, it is time for supper. I'll check in with you tomorrow. Feeling it right now. Loving it. Everything was worth it to get to this point. I just can't believe it! Today I warmed up on the race course for the World Cyclo-Cross Championships! Amazing!

WE DID IT! THANK-YOU!

Yes, I was feeling good. So happy to be in Tabor and to be racing at a race I had obsessed over for two years. It was all coming together. Now it was time to get out there and race. Put on the red and white skinsuit and soak it all up. No pressure. Just me, my bike and you along for the ride.

So now what? I accomplished my goal of racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Where do I go from here? Well, I'm going for it again. I want to race at the 2011 World Cyclo-Cross Championships in St. Wendel, Germany. I want to get faster. I want to get smarter. I want to get stronger. I want to ride better and see how far I can go.

I'm 38 years old now. I haven't really got many racing years left. Yes, I know 38 is not old, but in the grand scheme of bike racing years - it is getting up there. But I still have a lot more I want to accomplish on the bike. The goal is to race at the 2011 World Cyclo-Cross Championships but on the way to this race, I've got some smaller goals to tick off on the way.

Most of these goals are intangible. Ones that really only I and those very close to me will know if I've accomplished. Not because they're "secret" but rather because they're hard to measure. On the way to the 2011 World Cyclo-Cross Championships I want to become stronger technically, really get myself in excellent mental condition, lose the "fear factor" that at times takes over when I'm racing, and just be sure to keep having fun and improving.

As I sit here on this humid summer day, I realize that I've told you a lot about myself and my journey. But I don't know if I've really told you how lucky I do feel. I sit here in the middle of the afternoon in a coffee shop with the time and opportunity to write this final chapter of my story. I spent the morning relaxing on the front porch with my laptop and fat cat Murphy and then went out for a sweet recovery ride on the mountain bike trails in Kanata Lakes. Then I met up with Marc for lunch and followed that with coffee with a good friend. And now here I sit.

Really, I am so very lucky. I may not have a beefy bank account, a fancy car, and brand name clothes. But I've got a head full of memories and experiences that are worth so much more to me. Watching Marc race at his first Masters World Cyclo-Cross Championships in 2008. Finishing fourth in that same race and deciding I had to reach higher. Spending the fall and winter traveling all over the United States and Europe racing my bike. Relaxing in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, France in January munching freshly roasted chestnuts. Watching Marc win the Masters National Criterium Championships. Having my brother and sister-in-law cheer me on when I won the Ontario Provincial Cyclo-Cross Championships. Meeting so many amazing people from bike racing. Having the chance to see the world and to really get the most out of my life.

At times I take for granted the traveling that I do. I suppose this is because my parents raised me to never doubt my heart and my dreams. They followed theirs, moving to Canada from England in 1968. They left behind family and friends. Landing in Toronto with \$20 to their names and an idea that this big country would allow them to chase their dreams. They followed their hearts to northern Canada. They wanted to really experience Canada so for them this meant the Northwest Territories. They moved there with no idea of what to expect. I can't imagine how scary this must have been. But they did it. They don't talk much about those years, but I know their experiences helped shape them into the parents they became. We lived through a fire that burned our apartment building to the ground in the dead of winter in the middle of the

night. But they got through it. They believed that this was the right choice for them. To create a life for them and my brother and me in this new country. I am so lucky that they took a chance and decided to follow their hearts. They didn't listen to the naysayers back in England - they held on strong to their dreams of a new life.

And now here I sit. Relishing in this amazing gift. Their example of saying you're going to do something and then doing it has paid off. My parents never really pushed me in one direction or another. They were just always there, quietly and subtly guiding me. Letting me figure things out. Encouraging me to move away at the age of 18 for university. To get out and see what the world has to offer. I think this really is the best gift they could have ever given me. The support has been amazing. I see it in myself and in my brother. We both followed our hearts, just like our parents.

Funny, I didn't realize how much their example really has shaped me. They took a chance in 1968 and came to this great big country seeking a new life and opportunity. And now I'm taking a chance. Putting my career on hold to follow my heart - see where I can go and what I can learn along the way.

All I hope is that through-out all this I've been able to be a good role model. That I've encouraged just one other person to really go for it - to set a goal and to achieve it. Really the journey is worth so much more than accomplishing the goal. I won't lie racing in the World Cyclo-Cross Championships was amazing and through it all, if I never get to do it again, at least I can say I set a goal, I worked towards it, I accomplished it, and now here I am ready to take on the next challenge. This, I think is what life really is about. The hopes, dreams, stories, and memories are what matter.

Thanks for coming along this bumpy ride with me. I appreciate your support and encouragement. And if you take one thing from this - know that there really is nothing you can't do. I fully believe this. The human spirit is an amazing thing. You can do whatever you set your mind to.

I'm proof of this.

Epilogue

It is February 10, 2011 and I'm sitting here at my kitchen table looking out at the piles of snow in my backyard. At the start of the 2010-2011 cyclo-cross season, I really expected to have a season similar to the one that saw me finishing off the year with racing at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Tabor, Czech Republic. Unfortunately, this was not to be.

Instead my season was the exact opposite of what I had planned and trained for. It was one of those seasons where I was racing not just my competitors by my body as well. The ulcerative colitis that I thought I had under control last winter, showed its ugly face in the spring and just wouldn't go away.

The frustrating aspect to this was that I was able to train and push my body really hard throughout this flare. Myself, my coach, my doctor and Marc all assumed that I had "beaten" this flare and that things were looking good for the season. Nope. My body literally gave out on me in September. Those first few weeks of the season were so frustrating. I had no idea that I was racing with severe anemia and no iron stores. I couldn't figure out why I was so tired and instead of being close to the front of the race, I was barely hanging on to the back.

You can imagine the thoughts that went through my head. I was very close to having my head "fall off" but luckily I knew deep down that this wasn't something I couldn't control. Each race I'd line up and tell myself this would be the race where I would feel like myself and race my bike like I knew I could. Nope - no such luck. Eventually we discovered that I really was quite sick, so I began an intense round of iron infusions in an attempt to get my body back to at least a non-athlete level.

I was freaking out - after all I had plane tickets booked and plans were made for another season of racing in Europe. We stuck to the plan - I still went to the early season World Cups in Aigle, Switzerland and Plzen, Czech Republic. These races were more of the same for me. Here is what I wrote after those two races:

It is October 26, 2010 and I'm writing this on a plane bound for Ottawa, Ontario. I've just spent the last 12 days in Europe racing the opening cyclo-cross World Cup races of the 2010 - 2011 season. When I left on this trip, I had some big goals and dreams. I really felt like the first World Cup in Aigle, Switzerland would be my chance to press the reset button on this season.

You see, this has been a rough racing season for me so far. Little did I know that I was racing more than my fellow competitors on race day - I've also been racing my body. As much as I like to believe that I can overcome anything and that I am stronger than this damn disease, sometimes it really does win. And unfortunately, the 2010 season has started with the ulcerative colitis coming out on the winning side and I'm on the losing side. This is hard. Really hard.

The early races of this season really tested my fortitude and character. I lined up ready to race

my bike and to perform like I know I can (and have in the past), only to be left literally gasping for breath and watching the field ride away from me. There was nothing I could do. I simply couldn't ride my bike hard and fast. At first I thought my head had fallen off and I just wasn't fully committed to the races. But I've worked hard on my mental game and I just knew that I was lining up to these races with the fire and fight that got me here.

After only three weeks into the season I was really starting to doubt my abilities. What was going on? Why couldn't I ride my bike fast? What did I do wrong? I was stressed. Marc was stressed. I started to hate the bike. I was really worried about the rest of the season and going to Europe racing the way I was. I felt horrible. Utterly horrible.

Well, it turns out I was (and still am) rather sick. Thanks to some blood work and a couple of tests, my doctor discovered why I was so tired and simply couldn't pedal my bike. My iron levels were very low. My red blood cell count was very low. The medicine wasn't working. My body couldn't heal itself - let alone allow me to race my bike. I've since had to iron infusions and was forced to take close to two weeks off the bike.

All this with the World Cups looming over my head. Plane tickets were paid for. The RV was rented. I had no choice but to make the trip and race with my fingers crossed that things would come together. Well, the first two World Cups are in the bag... They were good, bad, and ugly - everything a cyclo-cross race can offer.

I went into the race in Aigle, Switzerland with zero expectations. I really just wanted to get around the course and honestly I really really did not want to be last or get lapped. I got around the course. I rode it better technically than I would have last year. So this is an improvement. My body felt not bad - I did hold back a bit out of fear of not knowing how my body would respond. I did get lapped. I was last. Not what I wanted. But I was realistic - I couldn't expect much more considering what I had been through. I wasn't thrilled with this - but I accepted it.

Somewhere though after this race and before the World Cup in Plzen, Czech Republic, my perspective changed. I learned from talking to Marc that I'm in a tight points race to make it onto the Canadian National Cyclo-Cross Team to compete at the 2011 World Cyclo-Cross Championships in St. Wendel, Germany. I need 75 UCI points by Dec. 10. Before the Plzen race I had 20 points. By earning a 30th place result (out of 35 starters) I would earn 30 points - giving me a bit of a cushion going into the last few races and pretty much ensuring that I would qualify.

So now I'm stressed. Really stressed. I really want to race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships again. I want it more than anything. So I told myself that I could do it and that I could get the 30 place. (Keep in mind that last year I was last or close to last in every World Cup I raced - so to achieve a 30th place result, I'd have to have the race of my life.) But I truly believed I could do this.

I got in lots of time at the course. I felt comfortable on it. I believed it was possible and doable.

This would be my race. My break-out race. I'd have the best start I've ever had and move up through the field, pass a bunch of girls, get in a group, race hard and fast, finish on the lead lap and get the points I needed.

I wish this is what happened. It didn't. I was last again. I had the same old mediocre start I've always had. I made a mistake on the first lap that cost me lots of time. I didn't catch and pass any girls. I didn't get in a group. I raced at the back of the race alone and hating every minute of it. I didn't have fun. I hated myself. I hated bike racing. I wanted to quit. I only got in three laps before I was pulled. I was embarrassed. Ready to throw in the towel.

That race was a definite low point. Worse than the early races when I was so tired I could barely ride around the course. This one was worse because I truly believed that I could do it. I felt like I let myself down - I couldn't even achieve goals that I believed were possible - let alone the ones that others like you believe I can achieve. I really felt sorry for myself. I just so wanted to have a good race. To finish on the lead lap. To feel like I belonged. I hate being last. I hate being lapped. It is a horrible feeling.

This is cyclo-cross racing. At least for me. A battle on the bike with the other racers, the course, the clock and lap cards, my brain, and my physical well-being. It is hard. So very hard. But if bike racing were easy, everyone would do it. But sometimes I just wish I could be like the other girls - line up knowing that I won't get lapped and that I won't be last. It is frustrating because I'm physically very strong. My technical skills are better - still not top-notch but they're better. I just don't know what else to do. I need to be 100 per cent healthy - but who knows when this will be?

So where does this leave me? Well, now with a couple of days to think about the race and to talk with my friends and most importantly with Marc - all I can do is ride my bike. I need to forget about results, points and qualification standards. I need to find the fun again. I need to fuel the passion that got me dreaming of the World Cyclo-Cross Championships way back in 2008. I need to find this again. I need to get out on my bike and rip around like a little kid. Pedal as hard as I can, zip through the trails, go down big hills and up and over even higher ones. I need to feel the air in my lungs and the wind whistling in my ears. To find the joy that got me out on the bike in the first place. Just like when I was a kid and begged my parents to let me get my bike out "by my birthday".

I need this spirit back. Will I find it? Time will only tell. All I can do is roll my bike out of the garage everyday, pop in my headphones and roll down the street. If the spirit is there - the body is willing. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that the next time you see me, I'll have a big goofy grin on my face and I'll pedaling like the wind.

Well, as much I would like to tell you I spent the season racing my bike and riding with a goofy grin on my face, this did not happen. Things actually got worse. After only four races in Belgium, the ulcerative colitis came back with a vengeance. I thought I could continue to race and train through it, but this flare was like none other I'd ever experienced. This flare culminated with me

spending one week in the hospital from Dec. 24 to Dec. 31 - Christmas in the hospital was also not part of the plan... I ended up losing six kilograms and watching my arms and legs literally shrink before my eyes.

This was a very rough time. I really feel terribly about the stress this put on Marc. He had just arrived in Belgium and was having to manage working, racing, training and dealing with a very sick wife. If I was feeling pretty rotten, I can only imagine how rotten Marc felt.

So my season ended in November. I was five points short of qualifying for the World Cyclo-Cross Championships in St. Wendel, Germany. Not as if I could I have raced the big race anyway...

Through all of this, there have been a few really good lessons and I would say a silver lining. Thanks to the excellent care I received in Belgium at the Herentals hospital, I learned that my ulcerative colitis had progressed from mild to severe and that I simply couldn't handle the steroid medication protocol. I'm now on some new medicine for me that if everything continues as well as it is now, should keep me in a remission for the long-term. I'm still battling low iron and hematocrit issues but with a good diet and some further iron supplementation, I'll be able to get on top of this.

I had a lot of time to think while flaked out on the couch or in bed. I thought a lot about life, bike racing, and what I value most in life. If anything I learned and finally recognized that I really am lucky. Yes, this season did not go according to plan, but through it all, I was still better off than a lot of people. Even though I was riding slowly and at the back, I was still riding. Not being able to race the full season has only strengthened my resolve to race at the World Cyclo-Cross Championships in Koksijde, Belgium in 2012. I will be there on the start line with my red and white Team Canada skinsuit.

But beyond racing and cycling, the biggest lesson learned is how important family and friends truly are. This is what is important in life. This is going to sound cheesy but stick with me here... The type of car you drive, the brand names of the clothes you wear, and the size of your house really are meaningless. At the end of the day, this thing called life is really about the people who you love and support. Being alone is not worth a dime even with the fast car, fancy clothes and big house. I've said this before, but I'll say it again, Marc really is it for me - without him, I wouldn't be sitting here right now. I don't know where I'd be and what I'd be doing and frankly, I don't want to know.

All this to say, life can be a real drag at times. Things don't work out the way you want. But take it all in stride and remember that there will be better days. I'm not a religious person but I do believe that everything happens for a reason. You are not handed anything you can't handle. It may take days, months, years to understand why something did or didn't happen for you - but when you understand this - savour the moment and do with it what you can.

As for me? Well training for the 2011-2012 season starts today. I've got a 45 minute session on

the trainer planned and then some snow shovelling to get my muscles working again. I've got my eyes set on a bigger and better season. I want to have fun this year and enjoy racing my bike. I will ride and race like I know I can. I will smile everyday and take pleasure in the gifts of each day. An attitude of gratitude will take me a long way.

Thanks for downloading my book. I hope you enjoyed reading it. Chances are that if you've just downloaded and read my book then you most likely know a bit about me already - you most likely found my book on one of my web sites (<http://ottawa.cx> or <http://victoriasisland.typepad.com>).

Really, I'm not sure what to tell you here... I just feel like I'm supposed to have this about section - every other book does...

You know what, I'll use this space to give thanks to some very important people:

- Marc: my husband and rock. He keeps me grounded and looking forward. Thanks to Marc for the inspiration to write this book and for his patience when I would discuss it at length and send him chunks of it via Skype chat.
- Gregory: my brother read the first draft of this book and gave me excellent feedback. This guy really is a source of energy and inspiration for me. If I could be half the person he is, well I'd be thrilled.
- My parents: they took a chance a long time ago and moved to this cold and snowy place. It is only after writing this book that I realized how much their decision to do this and their example of what truly chasing your dreams means has shaped my life.
- You: thanks for reading my book, my web site and sticking through some tough times with me. Your comments and emails really do make a difference to me. I hope that one day I can do the same for you.
- Sponsors: over the last three cyclo-cross seasons, I've been supported by an amazing group of companies and people. They took a chance with me and believed in me enough to let me use their products and display their logos on my clothing. Thank-you for this trust and belief in me.
- Coach Steve Weller: without Steve I wouldn't have accomplished what I have. Never shy of a challenge, he has been with me every pedal stroke - a calm voice, a tough voice, a supportive voice. There is no way for me to repay Steve for his support, advice, knowledge, and expertise.

Okay, my eyes are watering now and I really best go. Thanks again for reading. Feel free to drop me an email (vickith@yahoo.com), a message on Facebook, a Tweet ([@vickitopcrosser](https://twitter.com/vickitopcrosser)) or a comment on one of my sites - I'd love to know what you thought of my book. Truth be told, I was a bit nervous to hit publish and put this book out there - but you only live once...