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News & Features

The Chosen One: A Conversation with Mara Abbott

By Fred Dreier
VeloNews associate editor
Filed: August 29, 2007

Imagine one morning you woke up to find you had been transformed into one of the best cyclists in the world. Were that the case, you might just feel like Mara Abbott.

Obviously, Abbott's transformation from novice to national champ' didn't happen overnight (it took two years), but the 21-year-old admits sometimes feels that way. Abbott started the 2007 season off hoping to gain some knowledge and experience in her freshman year in the pro ranks. Four months later, she had racked up palmarès most racers dream of.

She won the Oak Glen stage of the photo: Don Karle Redlands Bicycle Classic, finishing second overall to Amber nevden. She won New Mexico's Tour of the Gila stage race. Against the world's best she finished a close second at the Montreal World Cup to Fabiana Luperini. And she won the national elite road title sprint against Kristin Armstrong.

Now, Abbott is one of America's top hopes to bring home 2007 UCI world championships in Stuttgart, Germany.

The sudden success has Abbott trying to figure out what to do next. First on her plate is finishing her final year of college at W not to mention her last year on the school's NCAA Division team.

After that, the sky is the limit.

VeloNews caught up with Abbott as she was preparing for into European racing - not to mention her first trip to the Europe. Fortunately, Abbott has no problem speaking her mind.

- To read more about Abbott and her success, check out issue 16 of VeloNews, on newsstands now.



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VN: So you've decided to finish your final year of college and your final year of swimming. Why continue to swim when you've become a world-class cyclist?

MA: Swimming is important to me because it's something that I've always loved to do and been passionate about and it's been a focus in my life for over half my life. After college most people stop swimming unless you're going to be an Olympian or a triathlete. Because I'm still young as a cyclist I don't see any reason not to swim one more year. For the last years I've done the swimming and cycling thing together.

VN: But don't you feel that getting off your bike for five months to swim will hold you back as a cyclist?

MA: Maybe it's not the best thing in the world for me right now as a cyclist, but it's something I've done in the past and it's worked out okay and I don't feel rushed to all of a sudden commit myself to be 100 percent a pure cyclist. I still have to finish school and swimming is a part of school, and in the big picture one year isn't that big of a deal. It's a way of having balance and doing things that make me happy. Even though I'm lucky enough to find something that I make it my career, that doesn't mean I should necessarily give up everything else in my life.

VN: So what's so great about swimming anyway?

MA: The part of swimming that I love so much is when you're in shape enough you can feel hundredths of a second in your stroke. You can go swim pace and say, 'that was a tenth of a second slower.' because you know exactly how you should feel in the water and you can feel the minute stroke changes. I think that's one of the reasons I loved swimming more than cycling was because I never had that connection with cycling. But every time I go out on a long ride, I fall in love with it a little bit more. You start to have those days where you can tell when your legs are good or not good. I can have that intimacy with the sport, and that's something that I've always loved about swimming. The more that I ride my bike, the more I am able to love it. I grow to know myself more on the bike.

VN: With your swimming and cycling talents, have you ever thought of pursuing triathlon?

MA: Here's what I think about triathlon. People say that triathlon is its own sport, and not a combination of three sports. Well, it's usually triathletes who say that, and I don't believe it. I did triathlon when I was in Mexico [in 2006], and I can honestly say that I would just rather ride my bike and swim. There's no strategy in triathlon, there's no teamwork. You can't do a stage race in triathlon. There's no amazing mountain passes to ride over in triathlon. Plus, in doing all three you can't be really great at one, you're just kind of good at all three. I'll stick with swimming and biking. I honestly don't like running that much.

VN: I read a quote of yours after you won nationals, and you said the race marked your one-year anniversary of becoming a good cyclist. Explain that.

MA: Well, like I said, up until last year people had been telling me 'Mara, you're such a talented cyclist and blah, blah, blah.' But I kind of still had to prove that to myself. I went to nationals last year and wanted to win

the U23 title and ended up staying in the break and finishing top five and riding with Amber [Neben] and Kristin Armstrong and Christine [Thorburn] and Kim Anderson. I didn't think that I could do that going into that race and I absolutely surprised myself. I realized that hey, I can race with these girls. I can actually do this. That was the first time that I considered myself an elite cyclist. So coming back to Seven Springs this year it was like, I get to go revisit this place where other people believed it before me, but I didn't believe I was a great cyclist before that race. That was what was so special about that race for me.

VN: You could be looking at a long, successful career in cycling. Are there any athletes you would like to pattern your career off of?

MA: You can look at any of those top girls, Amber, Kristin, Christine, and they've all done such cool things. Maybe Amber simply because she's decided that she wants to race and Europe and she used her resources available to create her own cycling reality. I value that. I don't know what I want my future in cycling to look like yet. But I do know that I want to make the decisions that I want to do because I want to do it, and that's the only reason. I don't want to follow the set pattern. I want to make sure that I'm doing what I want to do.

I don't feel pressure to do this or that now because I have so much time to do everything. I could ride my bike 15 year career and I'd be done and be 35, and life is just starting then. It's a lesson in being patient. Life is not a contest of how many things you can do at once, it's a contest of how many things you can do well. How well can you do at what you choose to do? I want to do cycling right now and see how good I can get at it. After that, who knows.

VN: To preserve your NCAA eligibility in swimming, you had to race this year without accepting a salary. Why did you choose to ride with Webcor Builders this year?

MA: Not taking a salary actually made the team choosing process go easier for me because I knew that, no matter what anyone offered me, I wasn't going to accept money from anyone. I had a couple other teams approach me but I didn't have to look at the situation and say, 'well this team is offering me money but I really like this team.' So I could say where I want to go.

I wanted to gain experience this year - that's about it. I talked to Christine, and as a mentor she was someone I wanted to work with. The team valued stage races, which I was interested in. I picked Webcor because it was a place I could mature as a cyclist.

VN: You have to have thought of some things that you would like to accomplish. Care to share any?

MA: Honestly, someone will mention a race and I think, 'Oh, that would be fun to win that race.' I want to keep having fun. If you win a world championship and you're not that happy doing it, I would imagine that you probably won't care too much. I couldn't perform at that level if it wasn't something that really cared about.

My long-term goal right now is I would like every season to be better than the last. I want to keep improving. As this season has gone along and I've had success, I'm setting myself up more and more to fail at that. Honestly, it sounds like a cop out, but my goal is to keep improving. That's a healthy goal - it's totally within my control.

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