

Elizabeth Jorgensen | Nancy Jorgensen

# Go, Gwen, Go



A Family's Journey to Olympic Gold

*Foreword by Bob Babbitt*

MEYER & MEYER SPORT

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## **Go, Gwen, Go**

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# FOREWORD

Imagine this. Your daughter or sister is finishing up her CPA and has already accepted a great job from Ernst & Young as a tax accountant. Then, out of nowhere, she receives a call from someone at USA Triathlon, the governing body for a small sport that was first showcased in the 2000 Olympics. That call will send her life—and yours—on an amazing journey into the unknown and, eventually, to Olympic glory.

Gwen Jorgensen swam for three years at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and ran for three years. During those last two years, while she was finishing up her CPA, she won the 2009 Big 10 Championships at both 3,000 and 5,000 meters.

In 2010, the folks at USA Triathlon asked Gwen if she had any interest in racing for the US and possibly going to the Olympics. The Olympics? Gwen had never ridden a high-performance bicycle before and was just beginning her career at one of the most prestigious accounting firms in the world.

Gwen wasn't willing to walk away from a career at Ernst & Young that was just beginning to take a flier on becoming a world-class triathlete, so she took baby steps. Tom Schuler, a former professional cyclist, was brought in to help Gwen learn how to ride a bike while she attempted to balance both her position at Ernst & Young and learning this new sport.

Early on, she would fall over at stoplights while trying to unclip from her pedals. But Gwen was tenacious and eventually she would learn to not only ride a bike, but also learn how to train for and race a triathlon.

While training on the bike, Tom Schuler introduced Gwen to a friend and professional cyclist who then helped coach and rode with this cyclist-come-lately. His name was Patrick Lemieux, and he and Gwen would eventually marry and become parents to their little boy, Stanley.

This memoir is written by her mother Nancy and her sister Elizabeth. In the pages of this book, you'll be introduced to the Gwen they knew from when she was a little girl. The Jorgensen family was there to support her as she went from CPA to novice triathlete to racing her first professional event.

Less than two years after getting into the sport, Gwen Jorgensen was on the starting line at the 2012 Olympic Triathlon in London. During her triathlon career,

she became the first American woman to win a World Triathlon Series event, the first person in history to win 12 consecutive races on the ITU circuit and the first American triathlete, male or female, to win an Olympic Gold Medal, which she did in Rio in 2016.

Gwen Jorgensen became the very best female Olympic-distance triathlete on the planet, and her family was there to cheer her on.

This is their story.

Get ready for one heckuva ride!

**–Bob Babbitt**

*USA Triathlon Hall of Fame Inductee*

*Ironman Triathlon Hall of Fame Inductee*

*Competitor Magazine Co-Founder*

*Challenged Athletes Foundation Co-Founder*



# PROLOGUE

I was born an introvert. Thankfully, my older sister Elizabeth was not. When I learned to talk, I rarely wanted to share with others, so my sister took over, answering questions I was asked. Elizabeth got to know me this way. She could speak my mind just by looking at my expressions. We spent hours together as children with our mom, Nancy, and dad, Joel. We didn't have cable television, cell phones, or PlayStation. Growing up, we talked to each other, played, and fought. Dad made wooden puzzles that we assembled at night; I always wanted to finish the fastest and pulled out a stopwatch as everyone solved Dad's newest invention. Dad, EJ, and I played HORSE at the backyard basketball hoop while Mom cooked snacks inside. My most vivid memories are of my sister and me playing violin with Mom accompanying on piano. I didn't always enjoy the violin, but I did enjoy time with my family.

As the quiet one, I often observed my older sister and mom talk, work, play, and cook. It taught me about overcoming challenges, being in the moment, and expecting to better myself. In this book, my mom and sister give their accounts of what I was like as a child, and how I developed into an Olympic champion. They accurately capture my struggles, aspirations and joys. They include excerpts from my perspective as well, but often my sister and mom capture my thoughts better than I, the introvert, could convey.

My experiences taught me you don't have to be anything special to become successful. I was born into a middle-class family, and no one pushed me to do sports. My sister and I each played at least one instrument and one sport from the age of eight. Our parents allowed us to make choices for ourselves. From an early age, I was taught to take responsibility for my choices. If I decided on basketball camp, I couldn't quit halfway through the season. I learned to make well thought-out decisions and follow through, no matter the outcome.

I am now starting a family of my own and wonder how my children will grow and mature. I hope I will know my child as well as my family knows me. I love going home as an adult because it is like nothing has changed. Mom still spoils me. She turns my laundry right-side out, cooks amazing meals, and shares what's going on in her life, while my sister injects energy and emotion into our family. Elizabeth brings games, knows what she wants (like Mom's homemade pretzels and Dad's choices of cheese presented on his hand-crafted cheese board) and isn't afraid to tell us. Our family is perfectly abnormal. We get along because we are a family based in love, and I hope the same for Patrick and me. I hope you enjoy this book as much as I do. It tells my story, while also showing the emotions and struggles a family goes through when an average daughter goes from CPA to Olympic gold medalist.

**–Gwen Jorgensen**



*Photo courtesy of Talbot Cox.*

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# CHAPTER 1

## A Convolution of Circumstances

### 2009 & 2010

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#### NANCY

In May of 2009, a few weeks before my daughter Gwen's University of Wisconsin commencement, I took a seat at the Fayetteville, Arkansas, NCAA track finals. My husband Joel, older daughter Elizabeth, and I, traveled 700 miles from Waukesha, Wisconsin, for a celebration and farewell. We were saying goodbye to Gwen's collegiate running career. To three years of track stadiums and cross-country courses. To five-kilometer races in sun-baked summers, and six-kilometer ones in snowy Novembers.

The final meet concluded more than a sports season. It capped a life season. For Gwen, it ended competitive sports and for us, it ended cheering, pom-poms, and spring breaks with a college kid at home. We celebrated too: Gwen's record-setting track wins and All-American cross-country victories, her graduation with an accountancy degree, and her first job at a Big Four accounting firm.

We reveled in Gwen's accomplishments and hoped for one final triumph. In the battle of emotions, pride shoved nostalgia aside allowing only joy and hope.

## ELIZABETH

A few days before the meet, Gwen called me from her apartment. She lived in a rented house on Mifflin Street where hardwood floors moaned in the Wisconsin winters. Charming and perpetually dusty, the two-story structure stood guard each spring during a thirty-thousand-person block party. Uninterested in the bash, Gwen favored its proximity to campus.

She said, "I have a few minutes before class. I'm just on the bed with my feet up. You have time to talk?"

"Yep."

"I'm packed and ready to leave for Arkansas. I have some leg pain still, but it's my last meet so I'm going for it." Gwen rarely admitted to pain, so her mention of injury suggested its significance.

"I'm sure you'll do great, Gwen."

"And after, I'm going to Europe. That will give it time to heal." Gwen had planned a post-graduation backpacking trip, but it seemed unrealistic she could heal while traveling.

"You're okay to run?"

"I want to finish as an All-American. But really, I'll be happy to help the team and get some points."

"Either way, Mom and Dad and I will be there. It should be fun."

"I'm excited to see you guys."

## NANCY

Gwen asserted her place on the outdoor track, toe grinding tar at the 5K start line. Five feet, 10 inches tall, 125 pounds—she towered over girls built closer to the ground. Her dark curls bobbed in a ponytail. She looked fatigued in yesterday's preliminary race, but her results qualified her for finals. The previous night, an ice bath flushed lactic acid from her calves, and a therapist massaged her muscles. Today, the best finishers would be All-Americans. And experts called Gwen a

favorite. The gun went off. Gwen reacted last. Her slow-motion start allowed competitors to charge forward.

“She’s always slow at the beginning.” Joel held a thumb on his stopwatch. “She’ll be fine.”

I wasn’t worried yet. A negative-split runner, Gwen saved her speed for the back end of a race.

Elizabeth shielded her eyes from the sun, squinting to see across the track. “She looks tired.”

None of us was surprised by Gwen’s position, but she didn’t have her usual energy. Then a minor hitch became a limp, and Gwen tipped sidelong with each step. After only one kilometer, she stared at the back of 15 jerseys. At the 2.5-kilometer mark, she hobbled to the side and withdrew. It was the first time I saw her drop out of an event—stoic and unemotional in public, she specialized in pain and manufactured miracles to finish every contest.

By the time we saw her an hour later, an orthopedic boot shackled her shin. I mourned the loss of her final race—it seemed a heartsick way to close a career, without even crossing the finish line. I learned later Gwen suspected a stress fracture but refused x-rays for fear of the truth. She willed her way to finals, but the pain won out.

## ELIZABETH

As we exited the stadium, Gwen limping in her boot, a woman approached. She looked official, her identification tags on a lanyard. “Gwen, do you have a minute?”

Gwen introduced us to Barb Lindquist from USA Triathlon’s collegiate recruitment program. Barb had noticed Gwen’s swim and run background as she searched for potential triathletes. “That was a tough race—I’m sorry to see you’re injured. Give it some rest and you’ll heal quickly.”

“Thanks.”

In high school, Gwen and I confided in each other about basketball, track, and swimming. Now, she made decisions with college coaches and this was the first I heard about triathlon.

Lindquist, 40ish, fit, and tan, smiled. “You should consider triathlon—swim, bike, run.”

Gwen shifted the weight of her backpack and seemed ready to leave. “I can’t do a 10-hour Ironman.”

“This isn’t Ironman. It’s Olympic distance. Only a two-hour race.”

Gwen leaned on her healthy leg. “I don’t have a bike.”

“We’ll find one for you and get you a coach.”

I wondered what this recruiter saw in my sister, an injured track athlete with little success on the University of Wisconsin swim team.

“I have a job lined up with Ernst & Young. I’ll be doing tax accounting 40 hours a week.” Irritation crouched behind Gwen’s words.

“You can try it in your free time, and we’ll help you get started.”

“I’ll think about it.”

After Gwen shook Lindquist’s hand, we continued walking. I wondered why Gwen hadn’t mentioned triathlon and what Lindquist’s proposal meant for my little sister.

## NANCY

After Lindquist offered her business card and retreated, Gwen confirmed her disinterest. “She keeps calling and emailing, but I’m too busy to even think about it.” Gwen committed her summer to studying for the 14-hour CPA exam—324 questions in auditing, business concepts, financial accounting, and regulation.

But Lindquist, a former Olympic triathlete, knew about determination and persistence. In phone calls, she suggested Gwen explore triathlon and decide later if she had potential. In emails, she promoted USA Triathlon, coaxing and cajoling. “We need gifted athletes like you in our program.”

I knew Gwen was flattered but that she lacked confidence. Passionate about swimming, Gwen joined the University of Wisconsin swim team, confident she would thrive in Division I athletics. But she plunged from high school MVP to collegiate afterthought, not once swimming an NCAA finals meet. Fresher in her mind were three years of collegiate running that ended with a stress fracture.

Gwen told me what she said to Lindquist. “I know how strong you have to be to succeed at the top. I don’t have that kind of talent.”

Lindquist sweetened the prospect with confidence in Gwen’s abilities. “Gwen, on paper, you are stronger than I was. And I was an Olympian.”

Gwen began to succumb to the allure of competition, of exploring potential, of pushing limits. She started to believe perhaps she could perfect her swimming, leverage her running, and pick up cycling. Perhaps the whole could be more than the sum of swim, bike, run. Perhaps she could be a world-class athlete. Perhaps triathlon was the winning formula to amalgamate her talents and reveal a champion.

Several weeks after graduation, Gwen said, “Yeah, Mom, I’m thinking about giving triathlon a chance. I always planned to work out in my free time, so if I’m running anyway, I suppose I could add a few swim workouts and pick up the bike.”

I understood Gwen’s reasoning. Why not gamble a few hours every day? On the income/loss sheet, her gain in fitness would surely justify the hours invested. And I trusted her judgment—always sensible, she would continue working while she trained.

Gwen had one experience with triathlon. It was a bucket list item for eighteen-year-old Gwen and her Waukesha South High School track teammate, Maggie Lach. Neither knew anything about the sport, but in 2004, when a local group sponsored a one-hour super-sprint, Gwen and Maggie registered.

On a hot July morning, Joel, Elizabeth, and I gathered on Wisconsin’s Pewaukee Lake beach to cheer. “Good luck, girls.”

“Meet us at the finish line?” Gwen pulled a swim cap over her ponytail. “Maggie’s going to wait for me after the bike, and then we’ll run together. We plan to tie, no matter what place we’re in.”

They dove in, swallowed up by the mass of competitors, and after 10 minutes, ran up the beach in perfect step. Maggie mounted her road bike and leaned over her drop bars, accelerating easily. Gwen borrowed my mountain bike—a poor choice for pavement and rolling Wisconsin hills—and struggled on the wide tires.

Maggie waited for Gwen in transition, and once in running shoes, they strode in tandem down the chute—tied for first. The 60-minute event was far from the two-hour professional sport Lindquist described.

As Gwen started to buy in, Lindquist found a bike sponsor and arranged coaching. Gwen began training with Milwaukee run groups, bike clubs, and swim programs. But she also worked as a tax accountant for Ernst & Young which sometimes meant 60-hour weeks. Early morning runs and late evening bike rides bookended her days, while at the office she met with clients, computed formulas, and studied tax law. I asked how she was holding up.

“I’m not sleeping, Mom. It’s hard to relax after late workouts.”

Cramming training sessions into the few free hours of an accountant’s day, Gwen lacked time to recover—or to consume enough calories. One morning, she called complaining of stomach pain. She woke up hungry in the middle of the night. “All I had in the apartment was cereal, so I ate the whole box,” she said.

“What kind of cereal?”

“Fiber One.”

“Did you have any milk with it?”

“No, I was out of milk.”

*An entire box of dry, fiber cereal? Honey, no wonder your stomach hurts.*

For months, she conjured opportunities for swimming, biking, and running. She skipped a movie to clip in for a 50-mile bike ride. She cheated Sunday services for fartleks and hills. She skimmed minutes from sleep to swim before sunup at the Walter Schroeder Aquatic Center—and met program director Dave Anderson, dreamer and visionary.

Some people cast themselves in Olympic stories, while others direct from the wings. Anderson wrote his script long ago, waiting for a superstar to fill the role, and he seized on Gwen’s budding triathlon career. Anderson watched Gwen’s pool sessions, impressed with her stroke, her competitive instinct, and her unflagging attendance. Like Lindquist, Anderson recognized potential—Olympic potential. He imagined himself a facilitator and promoter.

Even as Gwen committed to triathlon, she harbored doubts about her ability to combine swim, bike, and run into a legitimate Olympic effort. But success in local races boosted her confidence, and she entered an elite development race—as an amateur—in Clermont, Florida.

## ELIZABETH

Gwen suggested Mom, Dad, and I travel with her to Florida. Mom and I taught in the same high school, and we both used our personal day to create a long weekend. Dad and Gwen each requested a vacation day from their employers.

I had no idea what to expect, and the Florida triathlon jump-started a learning process for all of us, Gwen included. Still accumulating gear, Gwen lacked equipment, so friends lent her a wetsuit, and she borrowed a bike bag to pack her bicycle, tools, helmet, and a portable trainer. Even with handlebars removed, the



bike in its case was an unwieldy monster. *Do the airlines allow a bag this big?* As Dad loaded the Honda Civic for the airport, Gwen panicked. “Dad, my bike doesn’t fit in the car.”

“Be patient. It might take some adjusting.” Dad, ever repairing broken toys and household plumbing, hoisted the bag in and out, finding the precise angle where the door could close. Gwen and I, accustomed to trusting Dad for solutions, handed him suitcases for the trunk.

At the airport, Dad piled the bike bag and luggage on a cart, arousing curiosity as travelers guessed at the hulking black case. “Is that a set of golf clubs?”—“A massage table?”—“A musical instrument?”

Once through check-in, inspectors opened the oversized bag, searched, and hastily reassembled Gwen’s equipment—then charged Mom and Dad an extra \$150.

## NANCY

At the Florida race, triathletes lined up on the beach in neck to ankle neoprene wetsuits. All wore the same color swim cap. Gwen, like the others, jogged in place, swim-stroking the air to stay warm, or perhaps to battle jitters. When the horn sounded, 30 women dashed into the water, initiated dolphin dives, and finally swam freestyle. Heading for orange buoys, the pack morphed into a line, barely visible from shore, as they stroked through the one-mile course. Twenty minutes later, exiting up the beach, competitors tore off caps and goggles and yanked wetsuit zippers while sprinting toward their bikes. The bikes rested on racks in the transition zone, lined up at numbered stations according to ranking. The best-ranked athlete, number one, racked closest to the bike course.

In the transition zone, athletes peeled off wetsuits, donned helmets, and guided their bikes one-handed toward the cycling course. The best competitors switched from swimming to biking in fewer than 30 seconds.

After a flying mount at the yellow line, cyclists pedaled barefoot. Their feet pushed against the top of shoes attached to their pedals; they gained momentum before sliding their feet in for the 40-kilometer ride. Eight times, riders sped around a five-kilometer loop, circling past the crowd once per lap. On each lap, Gwen lagged farther behind, her fear of corners evident as she stalled around curves while experienced cyclists shot past.

In the final meters, the women slid out of their shoes to pedal barefoot again. They dismounted before a designated line and ran back into the transition zone where they racked their bikes, discarded helmets, and put on pre-tied running shoes. Gwen's novice biking skills left her eight minutes behind the leader.

The 10-kilometer run was completed in two loops, and we could see Gwen twice on each lap if we dashed from one viewpoint to another. Stopwatch in hand, Joel clocked Gwen's splits while Elizabeth shouted encouragement. "Gwen, you're only eight minutes down. Go catch those girls!"

With each step, Gwen propelled herself closer to the leaders.

"Go, Gwen, go! You're only down by three minutes now!"

Gwen finished in eighth place, right behind the pros, and earned her professional card—the official license to race as an elite triathlete with entrance to top-level competitions and top-tier prize money. It was March, 2010, only 10 months after she rebuffed Lindquist's first overtures.

With Gwen's rapid rise to elite status, Lindquist revised her playbook. She wanted a public commitment to Olympic pursuit. Anderson needed an Olympic commitment for a car deal he arranged. The word "Olympics" became a persistent theme in their vision of Gwen's future.

But Gwen hesitated to say the word. "I'm just not sure, Mom. What if I say I want to go to the Olympics and I'm not good enough? Once I make that announcement, everything I do is public."

I understood her hesitation—but also the power of her competitive drive. As Gwen worked full-time and trained more seriously, demands increased in both work and sport. Considering a move to part-time accounting (and Olympic pursuit), she asked my opinion.

"Honey, you're only 23 once. If you want to try professional sports, now is the time. Move home if you need to. We can help with finances."

"I'm not doing this if my parents have to help me."

The next time we saw Gwen race, she wore a Timex kit and used their sponsorship for expenses. USA Triathlon supplied her bike and coach, and she was negotiating a car sponsorship with David Hobbs Honda in Milwaukee. But she still worked for Ernst & Young, hashing figures on corporate taxes and bumming rides to workouts while she waited to secure the car.

\*\*\*\*

In April 1986, when Gwen was three-days-old, I drew her first bath. As I dribbled water over Gwen's toes, her fetal coil relaxed. Three-year-old Elizabeth dipped a tiny washcloth in the water for me. "Mama, she likes her bath."

In July, Gwen splashed with Elizabeth in Grandma and Grandpa's outdoor pool. In October, Joel and I registered them for winter lessons at the YWCA. While Elizabeth whimpered about chlorine in her nose, six-month-old Gwen laughed when I plunged her head underwater. Wet-dark lashes blinked away drops as her lips bubbled the swells. Even as a baby, Gwen loved water in every form—outdoor pools, cool water beaches, long baths.

Several years later, when Gwen was in grade school, the Waukesha Optimist Club offered third grade students a formal swim meet experience—one Saturday with whistled officials, diving block starts, electronic scoreboards, and ribbons for finishers. Gwen packed her goggles and suit and when the weekend arrived, she stepped from snow-packed streets to sky-high natatorium. The combination of steaming air and chlorine was like flint and steel sparking her eight-year-old proclivity. A craving for water/swim/compete crystallized that day.

After the meet, Gwen climbed in the car. "Dad, look! These papers tell about the swim team. Do you think I could join?"

"Let's see." Joel and I looked for cost and commitment. Since I worked as a high school choral director with evening rehearsals and concerts, I counted on Joel to chauffeur Elizabeth and Gwen. "The schedule looks fine," he said.

"Can I, Mom?"

"Would you enjoy swimming twice a week?" I already knew the answer and swimming offered exercise, competition, and friends.

We indulged Gwen's love of water and swimming, just as we cheered Elizabeth in basketball and running. But so many activities required miles of driving, so one summer, I convinced 12-year-old Gwen to join 15-year-old Elizabeth at track camp. Before doing a backward drill, the coach cautioned against speed. He said the exercise targeted balance, form, and posture, and one year too much hustle broke a girl's arm. Competitive drive can be a perilous virtue. While Elizabeth and the other girls lifted their knees and corrected their slouch, Gwen accelerated. Unable to control her momentum, she slipped and her full weight landed on one forearm—snapping both bones.

While prepping for surgery and an overnight hospital stay, she said to the surgeon, "I've seen kids swimming with a special cast on their arm. Can I have one of those?"

When the surgeon looked from Gwen to me, I saw disbelief and amusement in his face. “It’s not that kind of break.” Gwen kept her cast dry for eight weeks and spent her time reading Olympic biographies.

Gwen entered high school with one goal—to swim on a Division I university swim team. Each year, she was Waukesha South High School’s MVP and earned seeds in the Wisconsin State Swim Meet’s distance events. For every meet, Joel and I rooted from the bleachers, unless one of us watched Elizabeth in a basketball game. For some events, all four of us traveled to Minnesota, or Indiana, or just across town.

Although a regular on the Wisconsin State High School podium, Gwen never stood on the top step. But she believed a bronze or silver medal could be converted to gold with 30 more minutes at the pool, 20 more pounds on the weight machine, or 10 more minutes with the club’s sports psychologist. Impressed with her devotion, I arranged our schedule to accommodate added workouts.

During her junior year in high school, Gwen booked recruiting trips to Big Ten universities. But swimming in a small Waukesha pond did not prepare her for the collegiate sharks. Every woman loved water as much as Gwen did, but they were six-foot tall, muscular, and buoyant, with strokes that stirred tsunamis. While they sorted through offers, no one wasted paper on Gwen’s 120 pounds stretched over a 5’10” frame.

While she could have scored a full ride with a less competitive team, Gwen decided to walk on at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. And I gave up my notion of a tuition-free college kid.

Gwen’s dream slowly dissolved in the waters of Indiana University, Notre Dame, and Michigan State. Her seasons ended at the Big Ten Conference Championship while talented swimmers went on to NCAA Finals and Olympic trials. After three seasons, in 2007, her coaches agreed—Gwen had reached her potential.

Lucky for Gwen, her high school track coach, Eric Lehmann, followed her career. Lehmann believed in Gwen’s natural talent for running, and he intervened to spin her from the UW pool to the UW track. The transition would propel Gwen’s future triathlon career.

\*\*\*\*

In March 2010, Gwen returned from Clermont, Florida, an elite triathlete with credentials for top-level races. With the help of USA Triathlon and her coach, Cindi

Bannink, she booked eight more triathlons in Valencia, Montreal, San Francisco, British Columbia, Edinburgh, Tuscaloosa, Huatulco, and Puerto Vallarta.

On each trip, Gwen traveled with an Ernst & Young computer, completing corporate tax returns from hotel desks and airport terminals. Over the next year, she pared work hours gradually, reducing from 80% employment to 60% to 40%. Meanwhile, USA Triathlon added her to the National Team, which provided financial assistance including race fees and a travel budget.

Although we helped Gwen travel to Clermont, Florida, job responsibilities kept Joel, Elizabeth, and me in Wisconsin for most of the 2010 season. As Gwen prepared for each trip, I quizzed her about terms I discovered in online articles. “Gwen, what is a World Cup? And Continental Cup?”

“Mostly, I’m entering less competitive races. World Cup is just a little more competitive than Continental Cup.”

“Okay. What is the World Triathlon Series?”

“Oh, I’m not ready for that yet. That’s the WTS and only the best women can enter. But my next race isn’t any of those. It’s for university-age women—anyone under 25.”

On May 28, in Valencia, Spain, Gwen competed in the World University Triathlon Championships, representing USA on a team of five women. I wondered how she would compare to her international peers, but I was nervous about her solo travel and looked for her first email.

*can't type long. but i'm here...:)*

*YAY love it. see you guys soon.*

*Gw*

With no live coverage, we waited for Gwen to contact us with results.

“How did the race go?” I asked during our international phone call.

“I got second place, but it was a limited field—only people in my age group.” She tucked triumph behind self-critique.

“Wow! A silver medal. That’s unbelievable!” Proud, and pleasantly surprised with Gwen’s success, I felt a pang of regret at missing it.

“Mom, this was just university-age athletes. It doesn’t mean I’ll stack up great with people who have been doing triathlon for 10 years.”

But Bannink, Gwen’s coach, sent an enthusiastic email.

*Gwen!!! Holy cow, you are amazing!*

*2nd place and just 7 seconds out of first? I can’t wait to hear your full race recap, what a day! Congrats!*

*Don’t worry about getting in a workout tomorrow, just focus on your travel, getting back into a routine once home, and overcoming the time change. Mon and Tues are easy recovery days IF you feel like it.*

*Let’s chat when you have some time, looking forward to it.*

*Cindi*

Gwen responded.

*all due to GREAT coaching!!!!*

*just want to verify i’m going to montreal for sure - parents want to book a flight. i am delayed at airport, trying to get some stuff settled (bags are lost, etc.) but will call soon to talk :)*

Gwen had always been humble about race outcomes, even with family. She preferred to analyze her performance, scouring ways to improve, sometimes forgetting to celebrate accomplishments. I recognized the characteristic in other successful people—those rarely satisfied always had a new goal. Despite Gwen’s humility, I knew her Valencia race was a significant accomplishment and an accurate gauge of her talent on the world stage. Of 57 women from 27 countries, Gwen placed in the top two.

Joel and I were eager to see one more 2010 event, and I lobbied for Coteau-du-Lac, near Montreal in Canada. “We could get an international experience without the European price tag. And I know a little French.”

Joel never turned down a chance to see a race. “All the European races conflict with your teaching schedule anyway—let’s do Montreal.” Because Elizabeth taught summer school, she skipped this trip.

We flew with Gwen to Montreal for the June 26 race. For travel, Gwen wore an official team warm-up. White letters, eight inches high, blazoned her blue jacket: USA. She toted a USA backpack and wore USA on her red-white-and-blue hat. Always affiliated with some sport, Gwen amassed gear from Waukesha Express Swim Team, Waukesha South High School, and the University of Wisconsin. She rarely wore anything else. But seeing her in Team USA gear stirred a new order of parental pride. When next to her, I walked a little taller, matching her stride. And more than once, I dropped back to see USA on her jacket. I hoped travelers noticed too, and I sneaked a peek to see who might be looking at our not-so-famous-but-important daughter.

Once more, tiny cars balked at so much gear. Overstuffed bike bags bullied their zippers. Airport inspectors, with no interest in caution, ripped through costly equipment. As Joel hucked backpacks and duffle bags onto airport scales, I read relief in Gwen’s eyes when she whispered, “Thank you, Dad.”

Language also complicated our trip. In French-speaking Montreal, our first snafu occurred en route to the hotel. We arrived on June 24, surprised to find decorations in the streets, marching bands, banners, and costumes. “Gwen, what is this? Is it for the triathlon?”

“No idea.”

Confused by the hullabaloo and French road signs, we made a wrong turn into extremely slow traffic. We soon realized a marching band set our pace, and the sight of a giant float behind us confirmed we had driven into a St. Jean Baptiste Day parade. We smiled, fluttered a royal wave, and searched the skyline for our hotel.

“There! I think I see Holiday Inn.” Joel zipped into underground parking. After that, we planned routes more carefully.

Race day arrived on June 26, and after years of accompanying Gwen to swim meets, track meets, cross-country meets, and now triathlons, we knew her routine. Rising early, Gwen quietly and methodically prepared. We worked

as support team, supplying fuel and carting gear like a motorsport crew in the pit. Performance requires calories, so we supplemented her hotel breakfast with bananas and almond butter from the corner store. Tires must be checked, so Joel spun wheels and adjusted pressures. Concentration must be cultivated, so Joel and I silenced ourselves. Pre-race, Gwen occupied an alternate world that only coaches could invade. We learned years ago not to be offended by her reticence or emotional distance.

Gwen unapologetically insisted on these conditions, and I realized this too was a trait of winners—successful people know what they need and advocate for themselves.

A novice triathlete, Gwen faced fresh challenges with each event. In Montreal, she confronted cold conditions. Before the race, competitors warmed up in the water, stretching muscles while exploring the lake for current and depth. But when Gwen completed drills and scrambled up the water bank, she looked anything but warm. “Oh, she’s shivering. Why does she only have that tiny towel?” More sturdy women appeared comfortable as they stretched or relaxed their limbs. It would be years before Gwen engineered a fix.

While the Valencia, Spain, event compared Gwen to university-age peers, Montreal’s Coteau-du-Lac Continental Cup set her against a range of athletes, many older and more experienced. As the race began 100 yards away, Joel and I stood on the canal bank. “Do you see Gwen?”

“With all the matching caps, I can’t tell where she is.” Peering into binoculars, he searched for Gwen’s familiar stroke.

Twenty minutes later, swimmers bolted from the lake. “There! She’s running up the steps.”

When the 28 athletes exited the water, they scooted up a flight of stairs and dashed across a grassy expanse to their bikes. Earlier, Gwen explained the physics of transition. “When I’m swimming, my body is horizontal and I use my arms, but I don’t kick much. Then, when I stand up to get on the bike, blood rushes to my legs and they feel super heavy. And my heart starts to pound.”

For the hour-long cycling stage, Joel and I jogged back and forth between vantage points. “What do you think?” I asked.

“A lot better than Clermont. She’s quicker on the turns, and she looks faster too.” Instead of eight minutes, as in Clermont, only three minutes separated her from the front pack when she dismounted.



On the run, as Gwen passed competitors, I called, “Go, Gwen,” as though she could use my cheers to make up the deficit.

With only minutes before the race ended, we staked our place at the finish, pushing close to other spectators. I waited nervously, peering down the road.

“Here she comes.” Joel counted the women as they finished. “One...two...three...four...Go, Gwen, go!” Gwen took fifth, completing the 10-kilometer run faster than any other competitor.

Once again, I reveled in how well Gwen had done. But that evening, Gwen downplayed the result. “Mom, this was only a Continental Cup. The women are a lot faster in WTS races.” Gwen’s questioning and self-scrutiny would prove integral to her success. Assuming all elite athletes possess talent and training, winners cultivate an extra-fertile mental territory. Gwen grew her internal space long ago, and I learned to appreciate it as perhaps her best weapon for winning.

While pre-race we supplied Gwen with silence and assistance, post-race our game played on. Our job was not to question or analyze—coaches are paid for that—but to be present. After the race, Joel and I met Gwen at the finish line. I allowed a thousand questions to go unspoken: *How did you get so far behind in the swim? How tough was that uphill bike? Did you feel strong while you passed those girls on the run?* I knew Gwen would reveal herself after she decompressed, refueled, and rehydrated.

After the medal ceremony, we followed Gwen to the transition area where she packed her gear. Joel slung a backpack from each shoulder, and I carried an extra wheel. On the ride to the hotel, Gwen slipped particulars of the race into our conversation. “That swim was really rough today—everyone swimming on top of each other. Mom, can you look at my neck? Is it all scratched up?”

“No, but you might have a bruise on your shoulder. Is it always so dangerous in the water?”

“Oh, Mom, don’t worry. It’s just part of the race.”

At a team dinner that evening, I listened as Gwen talked with Lindquist. “Some of the leaders on the bike were yelling at me.”

I saw interaction among runners on a track and some elbowing on a basketball court, but I didn’t know cyclists communicated directly.

Lindquist nodded. “They were hoping you would lead. It’s grueling to be in the front of the pack, and they wanted you to take your turn.”

“So, did I make some enemies today?”

“It’s all part of the sport. As you get stronger, you’ll play a bigger role.”

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Until her junior year in college, Gwen’s only passion was swimming. But Joel and I insisted on a broader experience for both Elizabeth and Gwen, with mandatory violin lessons and optional basketball and track. While Gwen recoiled at any activity that interfered with swimming, she easily fit grade school basketball into her schedule. With Joel coaching and scheduling practices, she never missed a swim workout. She passed the ball in afternoon drills, dribbled in Saturday games, and perfected her layup before evening swim practice. But when she tried out for the high school team and coaches forced her to choose between sports, the basketball squad lost their best free-throw shooter.

Focused only on the pool, Gwen set school records in individual and relay events. But one random workout session rattled her strategy. Preparation for the pool includes dry-land workouts—weights, crunches, stretching, running. It was during a freshman run session that Waukesha South High School track coach, Eric Lehmann, noticed Gwen’s natural stride, her long legs, her light frame ideal for running, and her absolute alignment ankle to knee to hip. Lehmann walked into Gwen’s perfectly painted scene and scribbled all over her plan.

## ELIZABETH

As a senior on the track and field team, I enjoyed socializing more than competing and used practice for gossip instead of improving my personal bests. Lehmann recognized my talents as better suited for the yearbook and orchestra and entered my name on junior varsity heat sheets. But he saw something different in Gwen.

At an outdoor workout, the sun reflecting off asphalt, I staked a position near the hose, sipping water, delaying my next interval.

Lehmann, broad and stocky, with short hair that never lay straight, walked over and splashed water into his cup. “Your sister, she’s a great athlete, hey?”

“She does love swimming.”

“Bet she’d be really good at track.” Athletes shot past us, Lehmann shouting encouragement and times.

“I don’t know. She’s probably not interested.”

“Well, I could keep her in junior varsity meets for the season. You’d be okay with her on the team?”

“Sure.” I didn’t think Lehmann stood a chance at convincing Gwen to exit the pool in favor of looping the track.

After swim and track practice, Lehmann approached us. “You’ve got talent, Gwen. I think you could be one of our top runners. You should join your sister on the track team.”

“Yeah, that’s Elizabeth’s thing. And I swim every day. I don’t have time.”

“What about cross training? With all that aerobic work in the water, I bet you could just step on the track and run.” Lehmann suggested she skip workouts and only compete.

It was the only scenario Gwen would consider, so Lehmann signed her up for the 800-meter run and his 3,200-meter relay team. In her first season, she graduated to varsity and was on the podium at the Wisconsin State Track Meet. My times never qualified me for varsity events, much less State, but I didn’t mind. We each did what we were best at—Gwen competed while I decorated the car and shook pom-poms.

## NANCY

In spite of her running success, Gwen remained committed to swimming. When conflicts arose, she sided with her favorite. Lehmann remained steadfast too, trying to convince Gwen her true talent lay on dry land. When Gwen was on the Wisconsin State High School Track podium as a freshman, Lehmann chided her. “Hey, Gwen, you did better at State Track than you did at State Swimming.”

Gwen shot arrows of contempt at him and ignored the truth. But Lehmann refused to give up. He followed Gwen’s college career, and when she struggled on the University of Wisconsin–Madison swim team, he suggested she return to track.

Quoted later by the press, Gwen said, “We have a little tiny break where we have a couple weeks off, and I was doing some running. My high school coach talked to me about trying out for the [UW women’s] track team and called Coach Stintzi about me.”

Gwen ran a time trial for Stintzi and found herself a rookie junior on the track team.

During holiday break, Gwen explained, “I wanted to do both swimming and running, but the coaches think it will be too much for my body. So, now, I’m just going out for track.”

I worried how Gwen would cope without her lifelong passion, but I knew my daughter well. Dedicated and emotionally attached to swimming, she was also analytical, practical, and bold. She expected effort to yield results—and when necessary, she would shift her focus to achieve success.

Lehmann’s assessment was accurate from the start. He recognized Gwen’s gift for running but diagnosed her swim obsession as nearly insurmountable. He persisted—and then chose the right moment to steer her to the track. It took six years.

Given opportunity and training, Gwen’s running led to success, including Big 10 Championship victories. She earned 2009 Division I Great Lakes Track Athlete of the Year. On the University of Wisconsin scoreboard, her times ranked in the top five for 5,000 meters and top ten for 3,000 meters and 10,000 meters. After years of devotion to swimming, Gwen started to explore her true talent and began her love affair with running, competing...and winning.

## ELIZABETH

While working at Ernst & Young, Gwen settled into her Milwaukee apartment. As we chatted on the phone and sent text messages, I appreciated having my sister closer to home. Often, Gwen convinced me to join her downtown. Sometimes, I drove to Milwaukee just to cart her to Mom and Dad’s house for dinner. At one meal, Gwen shoveled salad and meat and between mouthfuls said she met Tom Schuler, a former professional cyclist. Like Anderson at the aquatic center, Schuler recognized Gwen’s talent and volunteered to coach her.

On one of their rides, Schuler introduced Gwen to Patrick Lemieux, a twenty-something professional cyclist from Minnesota. “He’s tall, tan, with dishwater blonde hair.” During a three-hour trek, Patrick coached her in shifting, descending, and powering through hills. But Gwen said they found more in common than aero bars and derailleurs. She smiled and blushed. “Patrick suggested we exchange contact info. While he was cycling, he took both hands off his handlebars and typed my number in his phone. I couldn’t believe it.”

Gwen said she agreed to dinner and during the next few months, Patrick traveled to Milwaukee for additional bike races—and late-night dinner dates.

Patrick knew road cycling would improve Gwen's triathlon performance, so he encouraged her to race competitively, and Gwen entered criteriums (crits) in the Tour of America's Dairyland series. Set in towns across Wisconsin, the tour offered Mom, Dad, and me a chance to see Gwen, learn more about cycling, and figure out how serious she was about this new guy.

We discovered crits comprised laps around a closed circuit.

"Let's watch from here—we can see the last corner and the finish line," Dad said.

Race organizers shut down streets, forming a course around several blocks. The tight course demanded repeated 90-degree turns on each loop. Mom agreed. "Sure. It's crowded, but we can hear the announcers. Maybe we can figure out how this works."

As riders repeated the one-kilometer loop for an hour, a formula of time and laps determined the winner. Crits allowed the same draft-legal format as International Triathlon Union (ITU) races—riders pedaled in congested groups and those in the back of a pack benefited from the leaders' work. Only inches from each other, riders risked crashes from wheel-to-wheel contact and chanced disaster if another cyclist went down.

We applauded attacks where cyclists broke from the group to establish a lead. We admired team strategies that leveraged an individual win. We averted our gaze as riders leaned so far on a corner we thought they would tip. And between races, we studied Patrick—his athletic frame, his doting attitude, his ever-smiling face.

In men's races, Patrick rode in the highest category, controlling pack dynamics to maximize his team's opportunity. Mom, Dad, Gwen, and I stood on the side of the road, cheering. The male cyclists whizzed by so fast, Gwen had to point him out in the blur.

Gwen entered lower category races. She improved (but never graduated to the top level) and by the end of the summer, she attacked hills and read race dynamics. But she still feared descents—a challenge in becoming a proficient cyclist.

## NANCY

Between pre-race preparations, hour-long races, and post-race cool-downs, Gwen and Patrick had little time for socializing. I got acquainted with Patrick through quick chats. "So, what are your days like, Patrick?"

“Well, a lot of days I travel for my team—Kenda 5-Hour Energy.” Like Gwen, he relished competition and pushing limits. “But it doesn’t pay all the bills, so when I’m not on the road, I live above the bike shop and make a few extra dollars doing repairs.”

Patrick won me with his personality and hard work. Committed to coaching Gwen, he arranged his schedule to accommodate hers. He bettered her cycling skills, avoiding criticism and applauding progress.

In training, Gwen and Patrick played student and coach. But off the trail, they equaled each other, Patrick towering over Gwen in height only—never in attitude or bearing. They enjoyed a balance of Gwen’s restraint and Patrick’s loquaciousness; Gwen’s driven temperament and Patrick’s laid-back nature; and Gwen’s realistic mindset and Patrick’s romantic side.

I welcomed Patrick’s partnership in Gwen’s career, but dismissed thoughts of a serious relationship. In the past, Gwen eschewed high school flirtation in favor of her true love: the pool. In college, she prioritized studies over courtship. Although she dated an accountant while working at Ernst & Young, the demands of training and competition killed the relationship. How could a long-distance Milwaukee-to-Minnesota romance possibly survive?

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In the eight ITU triathlons of her 2010 debut season, Gwen finished top ten in every race except Edinburgh (which was actually a hilly duathlon of biking and running). In six of the races, she scored in the top five. She capped her season with a runner-up finish in Puerto Vallarta and earned USA Triathlon’s Rookie of the Year award. Accolades flooded her Facebook, Twitter, and email. It was an auspicious beginning with results some athletes work years (or decades) for.