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## Triple threat

**Jamie Whitmore is a world-class extreme athlete who is facing the biggest challenge of her pro career**

By Suzanne Hurt - Special To The Bee

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Jamie Whitmore prepares for an hour-long training swim in Folsom. Her triathlons include lengthy swims plus off-road running and mountain biking. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.

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When Jamie Whitmore crashed at the Nissan Xterra World Championship held on Maui, Hawaii, in October, her hometown of Sacramento tumbled with her. She was trying to retake the title she grabbed in 2004 as women's pro

champion of that international off-road triathlon.

But outside the world of triathletes and hard-core mountain bikers, few in Northern California know who Whitmore is -- a world-class extreme athlete who often has dominated off-road racing. She's the person who, over the past five years, keeps finding herself going toe-to-toe with the other top-ranked woman: Canadian Melanie McQuaid.

Xterra World competitors took on a 1.5-kilometer ocean swim, a gnarly 32-kilometer mountain bike course and a 12K run through rock, sand and trees. Whitmore crashed and tore open her knee in the mountain bike leg, and couldn't finish. Although it was only the second time she did not finish such a race, it was a humiliating defeat. McQuaid won -- for the second year in a row.

"I was hoping to reclaim my title. Instead, my archrival did," said Whitmore, 30.

She's determined to win it back. The racing season starts in February.

What's so shocking about the crash is that it happened on the descent. Whitmore's a monster on a mountain bike -- a talented, aggressive, downhill diva. You may be able to catch the crash when the race airs on a "CBS Sports Spectacular" at 10 a.m. Feb. 3 on Channel 13.

The only way to see her locally is when she's flying down a dirt trail on her hard-tail bike, or in her running shoes, or doing laps outside California FamilyFitness in Folsom. She trains six to seven days a week.

She grew up in Sacramento and now lives in Somerset, southeast of Placerville, where she's minutes away from trails. At 5-foot-5 and 115 pounds, she looks like a lot of other women out riding in places like Auburn and Granite Bay.

### **Surprise on the bike trail**

Sometimes guys who don't know who she is make the mistake of trying to outride her. Courtney Cardenas, her husband and a mountain biker himself, gets to watch her ride them into the mud.

"A lot of guys think they do pretty darn good on a bike and there should be no woman that can do as well as they," said Cardenas, 32.

"We'll catch up to someone, and they'll look over their shoulder, and they'll realize there's a girl sittin' on their butt. They're trying their (best) to go as fast as they can because they don't want to be passed by a woman," he said. "It's pretty sad to watch. It's like, 'Dude, just pull over. You're having a heart attack.'"

She packs a lot of strength into a small physique -- only one other Xterra racer is smaller. She wants to be a role model for women who think they're too small for an aggressive sport.

Whitmore is fun-loving, competitive and tenacious. Loaded with energy, she has a girlish voice and long brown hair growing out of the orange she dyed it for the Worlds to match her bike and clothes.

Coaches say she was born an athlete. From ages 5 to 11, she competed in swimming. She ran on cross-country and track teams at Valley High School in south Sacramento. As a senior in 1994, she was named athlete of the year. She went to California State University, Northridge, on a running scholarship.

### **Dad an early supporter**

After graduating, she still wanted to compete. Her father, Biff Whitmore, supported her for one year while she gave it her best shot. She knew her training in swimming and running were a great match for triathlons. But she had little riding experience. She signed up for a triathlon class with Total Body Fitness. Her dad bought her a good road bike and she started riding.

She got a flat one day and stopped in at American River Bicycles in Elk Grove. That's where she met Cardenas, shop manager and mechanic. She had no money. He still fixed the bike. They started dating.

Cardenas helped her get a mountain bike. She immediately hated it.

"I was like, 'This is the stupidest thing in the world. It's so hard. I'm falling all the time. And every time I would fall, he would laugh ... well, 'cause it is kind of funny when people fall,'" she said.

She hung up her mountain bike for a while. The couple married in May 2000, and she got back on the mountain bike that winter because road riding was just too cold.

Cardenas taught her the best way to pedal, sit on a bike and fall off -- wearing protective padding. She wouldn't ride with his friends from the shop until she gained enough experience. Once she did, she quickly surpassed them; then none of them wanted to ride with her.

Now Whitmore races professionally each year in six to 10 mountain bike races across the country and 10 to 15 Xterra competitions all over the globe.

### A network of help

She's got something none of her competitors has: a solid support network made up of her two favorite guys, her husband and her dad. Biff Whitmore is now team manager providing support at all the races.

A gifted athlete, Cardenas trains with her and coaches some skills. Friends say Whitmore became such a stout mountain biker trying to keep up.

"Courtney is a seriously talented downhiller. He rides into these things and she just ... does it, because he's doing it," said Davis triathlete Cliff Millemann while training with her recently. "She's this goofy little girl, but then she goes down this stuff that's just unreal."

She's developed more technique and reflexes riding behind her gutsy husband, who crashes in front of her. Top female mountain bikers surround themselves with guys because so few women ride at that level, she said.

Whitmore crashes a lot, too -- she's got the scars to prove it. One month after the big race, each arm was carved with more than a dozen pink and white scars up to 3 inches long. Her ankles, shins and hips are always covered in scars, she said one afternoon during a break from swim training. Her injured knee was a mess of deep purple scars.

Luckily, her husband thinks they're cool.

"We often compare -- see who has the better scars," she said.

Cardenas races as an amateur at all the Xterra races in which Whitmore competes. So they also compete to see who gets the fastest times, or "splits," in each segment.

He said, "Obviously, I swim faster, so I gloat and brag that I whupped her in the water. Then she'll push her thumb in my back and say, 'Aw, I smoked you on the run.' It's usually a battle on who has the fastest bike split. If it's a big climbing course, I get killed. If it's very technical, I usually will put the hurt on her."

But they're definitely a team. Cardenas works as her race mechanic, equipment adviser and training partner, pre-riding courses with her. His advice has led to wins.

### Funding is a challenge

That all paid off when Whitmore became the couple's primary income earner.

She's one of five off-road triathlete women earning money through sponsors and cash prizes. In 2004, she earned \$60,000 in salary and bonuses from sponsors, plus \$54,000 in winnings. She also gets an average of four bikes, 10 helmets, 30 pairs of sunglasses and endless supplies of Clif Bars, vitamins and energy drinks each year.

Not too shabby for doing what you love. But it can disappear as quickly as it comes.

After her crash in the Worlds, key sponsors dropped her as hard and fast as her bike. She also lost from \$30,000 to \$40,000 in prize money. Now Cardenas, a general contractor, said he'll earn more money for the couple next year.

Her bad luck actually started Oct. 1 at Xterra's USA National Championship at Lake Tahoe. From 2002 through '05, she'd won the race and the national title (for collecting the most points in all races). She also had the most total career wins of any Xterra athlete, female or male -- 32. Then, on the course she'd always dominated in her own backyard, she got a flat tire and finished fifth.

"It was kind of like a punch in the gut. It had always been effortless," she said.

### Insult after injury

The Worlds began with a bruising mass swim. Whitmore struggled free from men and women kicking her in the face and grabbing her legs. She was in fifth when she entered the mountain bike course, where a recent earthquake

exposed more loose lava rock.

"It's like riding on marbles," she said. "There was just carnage everywhere. People were falling left and right."

She reached the Plunge, an infamous one-mile descent, and found another rider taking the good line down. Whitmore cut over to a bad line to pass. She flew down the Plunge at 35 mph; the bike fishtailed and flipped.

"That crash was so fast and so hard, there was nothing I could do," she said.

She made herself stand, fixed the bike and started riding. Something wasn't right; she crashed again. She almost passed out assessing the damage as blood filled her shoe; her knee was ripped open.

Emergency room doctors found no bone, tendon or ligament damage. She was surprised when race organizers didn't call to learn how she was, and neither she nor her spectacular crash was mentioned at the awards banquet she got to that night on crutches.

"It was as if I never even existed," she said. "I'm not used to DNFing. I'm someone who finishes at all costs. It was like I never even raced."

Sponsors who loved her in 2004 dumped her. A Christian whose bikes say "Powered by God," Whitmore says she believes God has a reason for everything. She got depressed anyway.

"Day after the race, I wanted to crawl into a hole and hide," she said. "You start wondering if you could have done anything differently. You have to fight yourself and not let yourself go there. But it's hard. 'Cause what else do you have to do but sit on crutches?"

She told people to let her be alone and sulk, adding, "It's like grief."

She thought about hanging up her race jersey and coaching instead.

### A path back to the top

But friends and family stood by her. Cardenas took two weeks off so they could pull her through it together. Whitmore turned a corner.

She rested two weeks, then eased into low-impact, active recovery in mid-November: easy biking for an hour, and 20 to 30 minutes of running a day. By week four the cut had healed, so she added weightlifting and swimming. In mid-December, she started base training as if she had never been injured.

Her strength's not all that's returning. Her spirit is, too.

"As an athlete, you just have to let it (her drive) come back on its own. If you force it, it'll never come back," she said.

She made changes to get herself going -- switching coaches and searching for new sponsors. She'll use everything that's happened to push for the top so she can try to wrench the world title from McQuaid in 2007. She even trains in bike shoes covered in blood that spilled on Maui.

She said, "I leave it on so it reminds me every day of what I need to conquer next year."

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In taking on the mountain-biking portions of race courses, Whitmore is used to getting her knees bloodied.  
XTERRA/Rich Cruse



Jamie Whitmore was a competitive swimmer from the time she was 5 years old. She later added crosscountry and track to her athletic repertoire, excelling at Valley High School and earning a scholarship to California State University, Northridge. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.



Mountain biking was the last extreme triathlon discipline that Jamie Whitmore learned - and it has posed some of her greatest challenges. XTERRA/Rich Cruse

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