

BEING ROBIN FARINA

On June 26, 2011, Robin Farina (NOW and Novartis for MS) out-witted the ranks of a stacked peloton to win her first national title in the U.S. Women's Elite Road Race Championships in Augusta, Georgia. After making the late break, Farina read her companions and nailed the sprint by just a wheel, effectively upsetting pro cycling's most dominating squad, HTC-Columbia. The win shocked everyone, including Farina, who appeared visibly surprised in finish line photos. Since then, the Charlotte-based bike shop owner and coach has been busy racing in Europe, joining the U.S. national team at world's and throwing down at the Pan Am Games in Guadalajara.

Interview > Heidi Swift Images > Jered Gruber

Your win in Augusta was a study in patience and, I have to be honest, I expected an HTC-Highroad win that day. ESPN called it a major upset and I would agree with that. Talk about how you managed to nab the win with such a stacked team working against you.

Honestly, patience was the key. I also had my 'riders to watch' and I knew I wanted to be tactically savvy that day since my team was outnumbered and we lost a rider on the road. I was waiting for the perfect storm and didn't panic—waited even longer for the late break, as I love riding breakaways. Once in the break I had to decide how I was going to win from the break. I played a little poker and gambled a little too. I'm a decent sprinter when I get my head around it, so I knew my chances were good once we had one kilometer to go.

You seemed surprised by the victory in post-race interviews. Were you? What were you thinking as the race played out?

Surprised because I pulled it out in textbook fashion. It's a great feeling to win a race that you deserve to win. I have had some great teammates and mentors over the years, such as Anne Samplonius, that have taught me tactics and how to be a smart rider. I think anytime you win the biggest race of your career you're in a little shock and disbelief. At the time I really didn't know what it meant and all the doors it would open for bigger racing, business exposure and respect.

Lisa Hunt once told me that you were one of the smartest racers she'd ever worked with. What's the secret to reading a race? How can average schmucks learn to be smarter and more strategic? What kinds of things do you look for and pay attention to?

The great thing about cycling—it's not always the strongest rider wins. In road racing many times its smarts and strength that can get you on the top step. To be the best or win a big race it takes time and there's a learning process. Women's cycling lacks mentors and teachers that are willing to help teach and race. I

haven't been in the sport for very long but one of my long-term goals is to help younger riders, or riders with passion, progress in the sport and give them an outlet to do so. I was lucky to have weathered some of my earlier races and found a team, Cheerwine, that would help me develop.

We need more teams that have experienced riders but also have a development side of the sport willing to take on the youth or give rookies a shot. This is not a sport you learn in one season. It will take patience and finding a good teacher or coach to help you get through the highs and lows. Luckily, I have had some amazing coaches/directors who have helped me along the way, such as John Howard, Kurt Stockton and Lisa Hunt.

You co-own Uptown Cycles, a bike shop and training facility in Charlotte, and you're also a coach. How do you manage to do it all and still train enough to be competitive at such a high level? What's the secret to balance?

Luckily, I have a very understanding business partner/fiancé that has been super supportive of my cycling career. He raced pro back in the day so he knows what it means and what it takes to put in the time. During the fall and winter I run around the shop with my head cut off, trying to spend time with all my athletes on training rides and during training sessions. During racing season I am constantly connected, answering emails, texts, phone calls and communicating as much as possible.

After winning the national road title, my director, Kurt Stockton has been very adamant about me spending more time training and recovering. It's been hard giving up a piece of the responsibility but I can see the results. I feel fitter and mentally more prepared than ever.

In a 2010 interview you said that your goal for 2011 was to podium at nationals. Nicely done! Talk about how that influenced your training leading

into nationals and why goal-setting is important for training in general. I

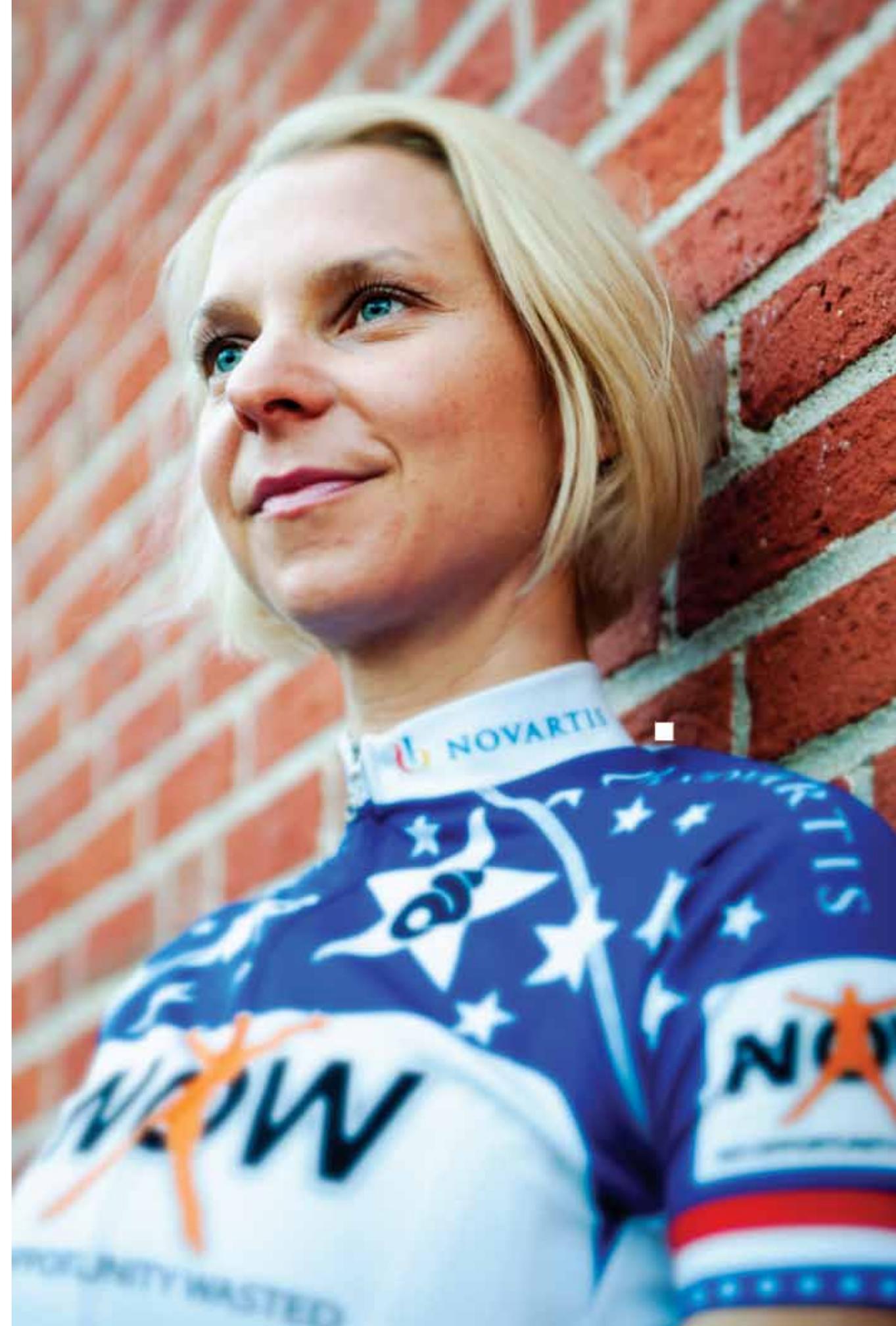
do an annual goal-setting session for myself and for my athletes. I revisit those goals quarterly to see how I am doing. The goals I set for myself are hard yet realistic. The balance between racing and work is what most everyone deals with, so I find it very satisfying to be able to say I have reached one of my career goals while having to balance a full-time job. My goals have evolved since nationals. The nationals win not only has added pressure on the athletic side but on the business side as well. There's a lot to do and not enough time to do it in. That seems to be my everyday motto!

A big factor in Augusta was the heat and humidity. I trained in it and did at the time when it was 95-plus degrees out in the middle of the day, so I would know exactly how it feels to be completely dehydrated and how many bottles I needed during the race. It's no different than training for altitude. In some ways it's more difficult.

I interviewed you once while you were putting on a pair of socks that you described as "lucky." Have you developed any other pre-race superstitions or rituals since then?

There are several rituals I go through before races. I have lucky DeFeet socks that have my name on them with the stars and stripes and a little funny quote that I won't publish. Breakfast is always two eggs over-easy with gluten-free toast and lots of coffee. I have a bracelet that I don't like to race without and my fingernails are most always painted.

What's the key to staying settled before an important event? What were you thinking about in the hours leading up to nationals? All successful athletes know how to manage their head and stress that comes with races. Early on I was much more nervous going into races but now it seems I'm relaxed and prepared. Nobody likes the nervous teammate that is freaking everyone out. We have several young riders on



Uptown Cycles

powered by 

our team, so it's pretty important to set a good example for them along with how to act 'pro.'

The day of nationals I was pretty stress free. Our team only had three riders so there was no pressure to drive the race. I went into the race thinking, 'Be an opportunist,' and it worked. Most of my successful finishes and wins have been from being willing to risk it to win it!

How was worlds? What was the team plan and how did things go down?

Worlds was an intense race with a lot of build up to it. It seems like a blur now as I look back on it. It happened so fast. It was very exciting to know you are lining up with the best riders in the world and anything can happen. This year's course was not super hard. It was such a fast course that it was hard to get a break going and it had lots of very fast sections where the pack would just cruise at high speeds. There

was two significant hills on the course but it didn't break the field up.

The course was designed for a sprint and we had two sprinters on the team, but we all had agreed to work for Shelley Olds. With more than 100 riders going into the finish together, it was bound to get dicey. Sure enough, a couple of crashes happened in the last couple of kilometers, causing panic. Theresa Cliff-Ryan and Shelley got separated at the finish so a proper lead-out wasn't possible. Bronzini nailed the sprint. It was exactly the kind of sprint [Olds] excels in, so needless to say we (USA) were disappointed in how the race turned out. I think we all felt like we should have done more or done something different.

How did you find the level of racing in Europe?

I love the European racing. I think it brings out the better racer in me. The tougher and more

aggressive the better. I definitely had an adjustment period to the racing when I got to Europe, but I enjoyed it. Every day seemed epic and always animated. I learned a lot from my experience over there.

Anything in particular stick out about the experience for you?

The Ladies Tour of Holland is the race that I can't get over. Just when you think it can't get any harder it does. Then you in throw bad weather, small roads and crosswinds and all of the sudden you can't believe how hard it is or that I found myself shuffled to the back so quickly. It was pretty outrageous but I enjoyed the suffering on the bike.

Your last major race of the season was the Pan Am Games. What were your goals and how did things shake out?

My goals for the Pan Am Games were to bring back a medal. I wasn't sure how I was going to be riding after coming off such a long stint in Europe and throwing in worlds with that. I raced the six-day Ladies

Tour of Holland and then the six-day Giro Toscana back-to-back and then had a few days off before worlds. Basically, I flew home from worlds and then a week and a half later flew to Guadalajara for Pan Ams. I missed out on the TT podium by a little over one second and got 9th in the road race. The U.S. only took one rider to the road race so I was completely outnumbered by all the other countries. Cycling is very much a team sport, so I was marking and covering certain riders but it came down to a field sprint so I had to give it my best sprint. Pan Ams was a fantastic experience. Although I did not bring a medal home I was honored to represent the U.S. at the games. It will be something I will never forget.

What's in store for 2012? Thinking about the Olympics? Who will you race with?

I would think the Olympics is every athlete's dream. Let's face it, I'm not getting any younger and the chance of going to the Olympics down the road is slim so I am going to race my bike as hard as I can and see what happens over the course of the next year. If the Olympics arise as an opportunity I will give it 100%.

I am staying with the NOW and Novartis for MS team. We had such a great breakout year and I loved my teammates and the staff we had in 2011. We have high hopes for 2012 and I am very happy to be part of it again.

How are you spending your offseason?

Working, riding mountain bikes, running and doing yoga. I am working full-time. Today I had a 5:45 a.m. compuTrainer class, went mountain biking and trail running, came back to the shop and had a bike fit on a client and then had two other back-to-back compuTrainer classes at my shop. I have long days but it makes me appreciate the time I have during the season where I get to focus on the racing and do some traveling.

I feel like there's an unspoken problem in cycling. Weight management seems to cross over into extremes for some, bordering on or perhaps moving into eating disorders. Am I making this up? Is this an issue in the pro women's peloton?

It's a small problem that can turn into a big problem if the teams continue to foster the attitude that it's OK because in the short term there



are better results. If one pays attention to any kind of training protocol, we know that having the ultimate power-to-weight ratio can bring big results. The problem lies when it becomes overboard and damage is being done to the body long term. Cycling requires reserves. You can starve yourself for a year or maybe a little longer and go uphill pretty fast, but then crashes happen and the body won't heal itself. Bones are brittle and nutrients are lost. It could take years to get your system back to order.

My suggestion if you're totally serious about finding your ideal weight is to hire a sports nutritionist to walk you through the process. As a pro athlete you are a role model to younger girls and women getting into the sport. Teams shouldn't hire riders that have known eating disorders. They should be encouraging them to seek help instead of paying them bigger salaries. Each team should require an annual physical with blood work and each team should implement no-doping policy like some pro men's teams have done.

If you had to pick, who's doing the best job of bringing new women into the sport right now? Is there any one program or person that stands out?

Several teams have included a development squad this past year, which is essential if we want to see women's cycling continue or grow. I think the Peanut Butter & Co initiative is doing a good job of finding young talent and partnering with USA Cycling to see them get European racing experience. Tibco had a small junior squad that raced some early-season races which was great to see.

Of course, I am biased. The NOW and Novartis for MS team had junior standout Addy Albershardt who went to more NRC races than any other junior in the country. At the young

age of 16, she came off of finishing the Nature Valley Grand Prix to going to Junior Track Nationals and winning a national championship in the individual pursuit and team pursuit. I think it shows if you race these juniors and mentor them they are going to bring home medals at future world championships and Olympics—but we have to invest the time. Next year, our team plans to grow our junior contingency and race them more often.

Any words of advice for women who are just starting out? Racing is not just for the overly competitive individual. It is an outlet to be social and have a good time. At my shop, Uptown Cycles in

Charlotte, we saw an influx of women Cat 4 racers this year. Instead of having them go out and try to race by themselves against each other, my shop has started a beginner racing team. We don't have race obligations and I am not promising to give them free bikes or kits. What they will get is instruction, tactical clinics and an avenue to have fun with other women while getting to experience one of the greatest and healthiest sports you can do for the rest of your life! Go out and look for a local team or shop that wants to support women's cycling.]p[

*More: uptowncyclescharlotte.com;
@robin_farina*

