

LIVING LEGEND

It's almost impossible to invoke Juli Furtado's name without the word "legend" following close behind. From 1990-1997 she set the nascent mountain biking scene alight with a rare combination of talent, drive and integrity that inspired and energized an entire generation of new riders.

As a ski racer, Furtado was the youngest member of the U.S. National Ski Team for seven years until knee injuries forced her to find a new passion. She transitioned to the mountain bike just at the beginning of the sport's meteoric rise in popularity. In 1990 she won the Cross-Country title (along with Ned Overend) at the first official Mountain Bike World Championships. She went on to win three World Cup series and five national championships over the course of the next six years.

Furtado was inducted to the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame in 1993 and to the United States Bicycling Hall of Fame in 2005, but

her nearly mythological popularity can probably be best attributed to her incredible 12-race winning streak from 1992-93 while racing for GT. In 1996 she represented the United States in Atlanta in the debut of Olympic mountain bike racing, but her career was ultimately cut short when she was diagnosed with lupus in 1997.

Now 46, Furtado works part-time for Santa Cruz Bicycles. In the late nineties, a few years after her retirement, she approached the California company and proposed an idea for the first women-specific mountain bike. She went on to advise the company on its design and production. The result was

the Juliana, a variation on the Santa Cruz Superlight, which has remained in production since.

Nearly 15 years later, the company has just released an entire line of bikes under the same name. The newly launched Juliana line includes four bikes: The Nevis, Origin, Joplin, and Furtado. With size-specific cranks and female-friendly components, the bikes are designed to provide a totally dialed women-specific fit.

I caught up with Furtado to talk about the new line, the glory days of the 1990s and what it feels like to be a living legend.

INTERVIEW: HEIDI SWIFT IMAGES: JIM SAFFORD



\$2 dollar sunglasses.



“I’M RACING OR DOING KIND OF GOOFY THINGS THAT WOULD HELP ME CONNECT WITH FANS ON THAT MELLOW ‘I’M JUST LIKE YOU’ LEVEL.”

You affected and inspired so many people during the course of your racing career. What were those years like? How do you feel about them now?

I’m really proud of that, I do have to say. I prided myself on being a good sports person. Growing up, my hero was Björn Borg. He’s this incredible Swede tennis player and he’s just quiet and respectful and I just loved him. I always wanted to emulate him. At the end of the day, if you’re not good to people, then, well, look at Lance—it’s not just about the drugs. Your whole legacy ends up being that you’re an asshole and that’s what people remember.

I always tried to remain humble and I actually felt that way. The year that I won every race and people expected me to win, I honestly always had the attitude that you’re only as good as your last race. I think this kind of helped the perception people had of me. It wasn’t always about winning the race, it was about laughing while I’m racing or petting a dog while

I’m racing or doing kind of goofy things that would help me connect with fans on that mellow ‘I’m just like you’ level. That did come from my dad, too—he was a performer [jazz musician] and this was an expression of my performance. It was awesome that I could utilize my talent to the fullest, but I wanted to be a good role model and I didn’t want to be an asshole.

I appreciated what I was doing out there for sure, but I never wanted it to define me as a person. I rode bikes fast and that’s cool, but it was much more important to me to have the respect of the people I raced with and the people that were around during that time.

Did you feel like you were representing women as a whole when you raced? That became clear once I did start to win a lot. I knew they were comparing my lap times to the men while I raced, so there were often these races where I was winning and I knew I was going to win, but I would still go hard

because I wanted those times to be respectable. I didn’t want people to look at women’s racing and think that we weren’t as good.

I remember the exact time things changed. I was racing at Sea Otter and we had to start behind the Expert men. There had been a couple of years where we would catch them and they’d be jerks about getting off the trail and it was a big pain in the ass. But I’ll never forget the one year where all of a sudden the guys up the trail would look back and say, ‘OK, Juli’s here, get off! OK, go Juli!’ They had no problem getting off the trail and they would totally cheer me on. It switched from them trying to compete with me to them respecting me as a rider. And I’m really proud that I had the guys’ respect because I think that helped fuel equality in sports, too.

You raced with a kind of legendary intensity. Why are you so driven?

That’s a big question. I think you get formed in childhood, right?





For me, you have to go way back. I was definitely always driven to succeed, for sure. I was a dedicated kid growing up skiing in Vermont, and for me it was kind of an avenue to a future as well. I didn't have a lot of other opportunities. Part of it for me was also an escape from my childhood. I'm sure I was born driven; in terms of the intensity, I was competitive but I don't know if you find anyone out there racing who isn't competitive. That whole debate of what makes someone a winner—is he or she more intense, do they try harder, do they want it more? I think that's such an individual thing.

I personally tried to downplay that whole intense image with some humor or through some interaction with the crowd. If I was feeling comfortable I can't be serious all the time.

How did your background in skiing help on the mountain bike? People ask me this lot and I think that

maybe they're thinking about downhill ski racing, but I didn't do that kind of racing. I was a technical skier, so it was a very different event. It wasn't the adrenaline and high-speed stuff. I wasn't very good at that and it scared me quite honestly.

I went to Stratton [ski academy] and was on the U.S. Ski Team for so many years, but my knees were just shot. When I switched to mountain biking it wasn't really an extension, it was really quite different. I went from slalom—this very short and quick event—to mountain biking, which is a long endurance event.

I was always driven and I was always fit, so that definitely informed the transition a little bit. I think in terms of the technical aspects; I honed really good hand-eye coordination during slalom and learned how to pick a good line, and that definitely translated for me on certain courses.

When did you actually discover that you were good at bike racing and decide that's what you were going to do? After I moved to Colorado I remember winning a Bianchi road bike at a ski race in Vermont, and that was my first real bike. Mountain bikes were just coming out when I first moved to Colorado—I didn't know anything about them at all. They were giving them out as a prize one year in ski racing, and it was supposed to be this bike where you could ride anything, and that really made no sense to me.

There were ski racers that road raced and I thought it was so cool and they looked so great in their uniforms. They were all men and the Coors Classic was happening and it was just the most exciting race. That fueled my enthusiasm for biking in general, and then mountain biking was a much more gradual thing. Boulder at that time actually wasn't that friendly to mountain bikes, but I actually



ended up going to school with Sara Ballantyne's roommate, so I ended up meeting her and I had read about her. I started competing in both road and mountain biking and it just sort of took off.

Do you remember your first mountain bike race? I think it was in Vail—a summer series or something like that. I did it in sneakers and I remember it being so hard. It was so painful. You're at altitude, and I just remember suffering so bad. I wasn't used to doing events like that. I mean, we trained super hard for skiing, but it was a much different thing. Now I actually love altitude, I thrive at altitude. My body is best at 6,500 feet.

If you had the tech of today, do you think your style would have been different? Probably not because I was racing cross-country. I think it would have been more comfortable with the suspension and less chance of flatting, but not necessarily faster. I could be totally wrong here,

but I still think XC racers are really concerned with the weight of the bike. For me it was more important to get up the hill fast than to go down the hill fast. I would go down the hills fast because I could, but also because I was thinking, 'I don't want to give away any of the time that I just gained going up this hill.'

How do you feel about full suspension? My take on full suspension now is obviously so different. Back when I was racing you didn't have that choice, you just tried to make your bike as light as possible and make sure it was durable and worked well. We didn't have all this suspension and all these different wheel sizes—it was pretty simple. For me, even in today's paradigm, yes, I would want efficient pedaling and all of that, but weight is such a big thing, right? Our courses had a lot of climbing, so I personally would be more concerned with the climbing than anything else. It's not to say I would never have used suspension

for racing, I mean we've come so far with suspension. But I do have to say now just as an everyday rider I would never go back to a hard tail [laughs]. For me, suspension is just so much more comfortable.

In other interviews, you've said that gender didn't really affect you that much when you were racing. What did you mean by that? What was women's mountain biking like during that era? In both skiing and mountain biking, I never personally encountered any kind of sexism—it just took a little bit of time to get the respect from the men. But we had equal pay and the venues were the same—it was really a pretty equal thing. I kind of pushed it, too. I knew for sponsors it was all about coverage, that's why they pay athletes, because it promotes their brand. So if you're getting the coverage and giving them the exposure, then it doesn't matter what your gender is. I didn't personally have any kind of issues, and I'm super

Mammoth, 1990.



Mammoth, 1995.



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thankful for that. I think in a lot of ways it was pure luck, really.

So much of life is timing. My personal trajectory in mountain biking was very specific. It was becoming a bigger sport and everything was coming together in a good way for me—kind of a perfect storm. If my career had been a few years earlier or a few years past, I think it would have been a much different scenario.

In the glory days of NORBA, the sport was at its all-time high. What happened? You know, it usually shocks people that I had a really, really, really short career. People think that I was in the scene forever; I know some people of my era raced for another 10 or 15 years after I retired. So really I have a very small sliver of personal experience, and I can't really speak from personal experience to what happened afterwards because I totally removed myself from everything. That was just what I needed to do.

For me, the sport that I was in had so much excitement and it was the new sport that was getting so much attention from the media. We had the Grundig World Cup series, the NORBA series, there was tons of enthusiasm and there was money in it—we were on TV. And then the big thing was getting in the Olympics. The Olympics can basically either make or break sports, so that was a really, really big deal for mountain biking. I was in *Newsweek*, *Delta Flight Magazine*, on the *Today* show and all over mainstream media, and none of that would have been happening without the Olympics. All of these things really helped propel the sport.

What do you think are the biggest factors for driving women's cycling forward and getting more women pedaling? There are tons of things that are already working. There are women's clinics that fill up rapidly, and you didn't see that 15 years ago. I get solicited by all of these women's groups that are

super cool. In every community there's a strong contingent of women riders. Women-only rides are so common now. I feel like the sport is actually very healthy.

I would love to change this perception that mountain biking is this totally gnarly, hard sport. If a mom has this image that it's this hardcore sport and that it's crazy and dangerous, they're not going to want to get their kids involved. I hear that all the time: 'Oh, you're a mountain biker, that's so crazy.' But it's not! If you're on fire roads for the rest of your life, that's great: you're in the woods, you're on your bike—it's great!

If you take a women out on her first mountain bike ride ever and she gets scared, she's never going to do it again. You don't want women out there discouraged because they will find other sports to do. I see women riding with their boyfriends and they're just suffering and not having any fun at all. I think 99% of the time it's



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better if women stick with other women in the beginning.

In 1999, Santa Cruz released the original Juliana, the first women-specific mountain bike. Now that's expanded into a more comprehensive brand with four models. What are you trying to do with the new Juliana line? You have to go back to the beginning, when I proposed a women-specific bike to Santa Cruz 15 years ago. That whole concept was not even on anyone's radar. I mean, it wasn't in anyone's brain that it was even a viable thing. When I told them my idea in the conference room, it was just met with total silence. I told them: 'I know that there's a market for this, you just need to make slight changes in terms of a woman going in with a different experience ... so they can pick out a bike without having to make big changes to it.'

It's a lot for me to take this on because I never want to live in the past. But on a personal level, I

have to go out and talk about my career a lot. It's not that I'm not proud of it, it's just going back to that realm of being very public and visible that some people really thrive on, but I think is really unhealthy. That was always my reluctance. I got over that because I knew that the opportunity was there to give women more range and more choice.

I have to also say that the idea for the original Juliana could not have ever come to me had I remained more involved in the industry after I retired. I had to remove myself totally and zoom out to see a bigger picture. I think it's pretty common for athletes to stay in the industry and continue to do endorsements and stuff like that, and I vehemently didn't want to do that because I knew I would not progress as a person. So, ultimately, the whole line is a direct result of me being outside of that bubble for a few years and taking a much broader look at things.

Fifteen years ago I had to battle to even convince anyone that the market was actually there, but if you look around at the market now every company pretty much has a women-specific aspect. So that was nice this time around when I came to Santa Cruz a few years ago with the idea for the Juliana line; I didn't have to go through that battle again. But we'd had this original Juliana bike for so many years and it was doing fine, but I just knew we could do more and better. So we were able to branch off and do the whole Juliana brand and change the whole look of the bike and put on some different components and really go after a different woman—take the angle of doing a great bike for the everyday rider and really bringing more women into the sport. We wanted to create this vibe that is important to women, to really pay attention to the whole picture. It's all about having fun and having great energy on the trail. ☺

