

Ex-triathlete Benincasa makes history in Raid

Like many triathletes, Robyn Benincasa, 32, had come to a crossroads. She had finished six Ironman races between 1989 and 1994, including three in Hawaii. Two of those resulted in top-five finishes in her age bracket, yet she still wasn't satisfied.

The hard-working Benincasa loved the grind-it-out intensity of competition and the thrill of personal achievement, but she was seeking more — something completely different, actually.

"I was like, 'you know what? I'm kind of tired of just shaving off minutes. I'm getting pretty good, but I'm not going to be a pro,'" she said. "I knew I couldn't swim and I was too heavy. Basically, I knew there was something else."

The professional firefighter from San Diego found that "something else" in adventure racing, where teams spend a week covering ungodly amounts of diverse terrain in remote corners of the globe. Specifically, she found it somewhere near the upper reaches of Ecuador's 19,600-foot Cotopaxi volcano last September during the Raid Gauloises.

As a member of Team Salomon-Presidio, Benincasa became the first American athlete to win a major adventure race. And that's saying a lot, considering the caliber of U.S. racers who have been involved over the last decade, from Navy Seals to ex-American Gladiators.

The Raid is no ordinary race, and last fall's ninth edition was deemed the most grueling yet. It required teams to maneuver across more than 350 miles of wicked terrain between the Amazon and the Pacific, from raging rivers to icy peaks and everything in between.

Benincasa teamed up with arguably the most accomplished group of adventure racers ever assembled: Irishman Robert Nagle, legendary Kiwis John Howard and Steve Gurney and Aussie Ian Adamson. But, as an accomplished racer in her own right, she more than held her own when the going got tough.

In fact, when veteran racers Nagle and Howard were deemed too weary to make it up the final 2000-foot climb to a checkpoint near the icy summit of Cotopaxi, Benincasa was at her best. She picked up the physical and emotional slack at a time when Salomon-Presidio could have lost considerable ground to multinational Team Spie Batignolles, which passed them on the way up the mountain.



WILD CHILD Adventure racing filled a void for Robyn Benincasa.

as how good of an athlete you are."

Benincasa had read about the Raid in the early 1990s, and quite frankly, running through jungles, kayaking on the high seas, mountain biking through deserts and rafting vicious whitewater rapids — non-stop over the course of a week with little sleep — sounded right up her alley.

"Adventure races are races of attrition, and I'm really good at being the last one standing in individual events," said Benincasa, who picked up judo in 1996 and last summer won a U.S. national title at 78kg. "But it's an even better feeling knowing that you're doing all that for your team — if you have the right team." ☺

— by Brian Metzler