



## ROBYN BENINCASA

For most of us, reading about an astonishing human endeavor might inspire a twinge of awe, but eventually we turn the page and go about our lives, dining at the hip new restaurant of the week and sleeping under down comforters when the thermostat dips below 50. Not Robyn Benincasa. When Benincasa read a 1993 *Runner's World* article about the first American team to race in the Raid Gauloises (a punishing weeklong odyssey that takes place in a different exotic country every year), she contacted the captain of the team. By the next year, she was off to Borneo, taking part in that race herself, leaving her father in tears petrified that she'd be bitten by a snake.

As it turned out, there was no need to worry. Not only did Benincasa come back alive, she and her amateur all-woman team stunned onlookers by actually finishing the race, a feat that three teams (including a team of Navy SEALs) failed to achieve. The only person not surprised was Benincasa herself. "When I first read the *Runner's World* story, I thought, this is the perfect sport for me. My strength is being the last man standing," says Benincasa, who lives in San Diego.

This past year she became the first woman on the first U.S.-based team to win the Raid Gauloises -- an especially sweet victory because the 1998 race, which spanned 370 miles along the wild and diverse terrain of Ecuador, was considered the most difficult in the history of the event. Each of the five-member teams (all of which must include at least one woman) endured rainstorms, heat, and cold-trekking, horseback riding, and sea kayaking with only maps and compasses to guide them. And then there was the volcano.

"Climbing up Cotopaxi was the hardest thing I've ever done," says Benincasa, referring to the icy 19,000-foot landmark she conquered with two teammates

(the others had to turn back). "As you go higher, you're slowly suffocating."

It's like you're breathing through a rag, then a sponge, then heavy felt. But I kept climbing because we'd get disqualified if fewer than three people on the team finished. It didn't even cross my mind to let my teammates down."

The Raid, the first adventure race ever, started back in 1989 with hardly a stir. This year, 25,000 people (up from 12,000 in 1998) are projected to participate in one or more of the 75 or so American adventure races, which require not only traditional outdoor skills but obscure talents like racing on camels, paragliding, and figuring out how to row with a walking stick when your oar breaks-in pelting rain or 130-degree sunshine.

The pace is relentless. After summiting the volcano for the Raid and climbing back down, Benincasa and her all-male teammates hit the mountain bikes, with only headlamps to guide them. "We raced all night, every night," she says. Throughout the ordeal, they slept only a couple of hours a day, keeping one another warm in a five person spoon position.

"The sport is 40 percent physical and 60 percent spiritual and mental," she says, explaining her theory as to why women fare just as well as men, if not better. "Women are more capable of pushing through pain."

This year Benincasa is lying low, relatively speaking, as she completes fire-fighting academy. "It's not the danger but the hero factor that's so appealing," she says.

Watching the video of her team crossing the finish line, you catch a glimpse of what she means. Dirty, exhausted, and delirious, they are heroes to one another, and their gratitude is immense. As one teammate says tearfully to Benincasa, "You are an awesome woman. You got us to the top of the mountain. I will always remember that. The woman who got us to the top of the mountain."



Photograph by Herb Ritts

Running (to the ends of the Earth, not to mention kayaking, mountain biking, and sometimes even camel riding) is par for the course when adventure racer Robyn Benincasa competes in grueling challenges like the weeklong Raid Gauloises.