

GOING VARSITY

WOMEN'S TRIATHLON HAS BEEN GIVEN PROVISIONAL STATUS BY THE NCAA AND HAS 10 YEARS TO PROVE ITS WORTH. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF AMERICA'S TOP YOUNG TALENT AND THE BOOMING COLLEGIATE CLUB SCENE?

BY CHRIS FOSTER

It's early January and it's a sunny Southern California day in West Los Angeles. I'm standing alone in a mostly empty parking lot at the Veterans Administration in Westwood, waiting for the UCLA Triathlon Club. The turnout for the early evening run is light, and at first, only two runners arrive for the 4 o'clock meeting time. Assistant coach Dylan Oliva, the de facto leader at the moment, greets me with a wide smile, holding out his team T-shirt for me to read when I ask if he's with the UCLA Triathlon Club.

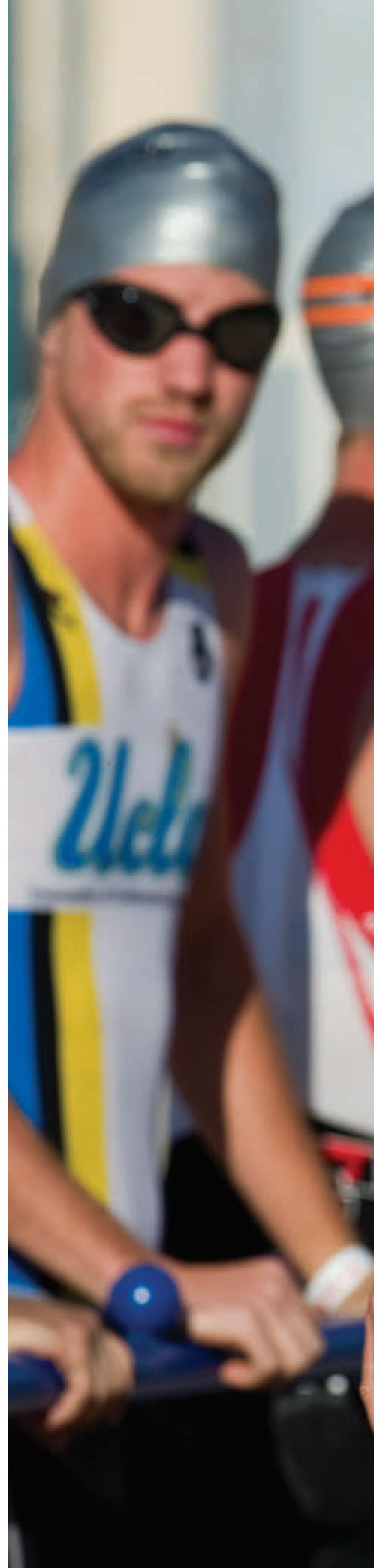
The first day back from winter break is probably to blame for the low numbers, but Oliva hints that runs usually have fewer attendees than swims, bike rides or other sessions. "For our brick workouts on the weekend, we'll have as many as 30 people," says Oliva, who goes on to say that most students are crunched for time, and runs on their own are the easiest to fit into their busy schedules; a necessary concession that most triathletes can empathize with.

Busy schedules are the norm as college triathletes can be some of the most academically driven. Rachel Allen is a third-year stu-

dent majoring in psychobiology and a UCLA Triathlon Club member taking the maximum allowable 19 credits per quarter this winter. To put it in perspective, a unit at UCLA is equivalent to roughly three hours of work per week. In other words, Allen's classes constitute a 57-hour work-week at a job that doesn't even pay her—she pays it.

When asked what the toughest part of being a college club athlete is, Allen replies with an admittedly tired-sounding answer: sleep. And that's not the only challenge facing collegiate triathletes. During our run together, Allen tells me about the biggest race of the year, Collegiate Club National Championships held in Clemson, South Carolina—an event that draws 1,454 athletes represented by 121 clubs, according to USAT. "Last year, half of the team drove the bikes to South Carolina," recalls Allen. "The other half flew." While a 2,300-mile college road trip sounds like fun, imagine driving a total of 30 hours with dozens of bikes in tow, having to race at a national championship, finishing, then driving back to a 50-hour work-week.

While the school provides much-needed facilities like pool access, most clubs must





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support themselves. The UCLA team's most successful fundraising comes from hosting races like the IronBruin, an event that draws over 200 participants. Also, club members pay yearly dues of \$250 to cover the cost of coaching and team clothing. But as any triathlete knows, the biggest cost is equipment, which athletes must supply themselves.

Meanwhile, for some sports in the U.S., the most athletically gifted students can have their college-bound path paved with gold. Students who excel in sports ranging from fencing to football can receive scholarships whose value reaches into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Top recruits get preferential admission, have their tuition paid for and get priority class scheduling. Some receive free books, housing and food. These benefits often rest squarely on one question: Does the athlete compete in an NCAA sport?

In January 2014, after five years of tireless work within USA Triathlon, the NCAA approved women's triathlon as a new emerging sport.

In other words, women's triathlon has been given a sort of provisional status and now needs to meet the criteria to become a championship sport. In order to become a championship sport, triathlon has 10 years to entice 40 institutions into creating women's triathlon programs, or show meaningful progress. Though a seemingly high bar to meet, sports like beach volleyball, rowing, ice hockey, water polo and bowling have met the standard in the past. Championship status would ensure that triathlon has a home in the NCAA for years to come, give immense exposure to the sport and also impose drug testing on athletes.

But in today's age of tightening budgets, as sports programs are cut from schools left and right, why would a university pick up a new sport? And why just women's triathlon? The answer is the same for both: Title IX.

In brief, Title IX says that federally funded institutions may not discriminate based on gender—this includes opportunities in sports and the scholarships associated with them. For some schools, this has meant



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adding women's programs, often to offset the massive budgets and numbers of big roster, big expense, men's-only teams like football. The alternate strategy is cutting men's programs to maintain the balance. In a tragic twist for triathlon, two of the three most often dropped sports include both men's swimming and cross-country running.

So it's no surprise that Title IX has its enemies, particularly in the old guard of college athletics. Fifteen years ago, Harry Groves, my own college cross-country coach at Penn State was famously quoted saying that he ranked the effectiveness of Title IX at the time as "somewhere between whale shit and the bottom of the ocean." Not everyone agrees, and in a weird way, the inclusion of women's triathlon as an NCAA sport may actually end up helping men's triathlon. Some schools, like Queens University of Charlotte, South Carolina, offer partial scholarships to male triathletes despite the fact that men's triathlon is not even an emerging NCAA sport. And though chances are very low (somewhere between whale shit and the

bottom of the ocean) that men's triathlon will ever become an NCAA sport, the addition of new women's programs could help institutions avoid cutting the men's sports that form the bedrock of post-collegiate triathlon.

For female collegiate NCAA athletes, many of the struggles associated with being in a collegiate club will dissolve: scholarships help with tuition; expensive equipment and travel is paid for ideally; athletes get the best coaching because NCAA coaches are, in theory, paid well; and priority scheduling helps athletes get the classes they need to work around practice times. But the battle is far from won. Currently there are 11 institutions spread across the three NCAA divisions that have varsity programs, and only five have student athletes on campus for the 2015-2016 school year.

Of course there's no such thing as a free lunch, and according to the NCAA, emerging sports must follow all NCAA rules. Some of the highlights include restrictions on recruiting and various limits on practice

time both in-season (20 hours per week) and out-of-season (eight hours per week), on receiving prize money in excess of expenses, and on sponsorships. Club programs face none of these challenges, so potentially, a club team could end up training more than an NCAA varsity squad.

Unfortunately, the rules have not been clear so far. In November, a completely filled field competed at the Women's Collegiate National Championships, and while Colorado's Abby Levene won the draft-legal sprint-distance event, Jocelyn Bonney of Queens University was the first varsity finisher. (Colorado does not have a varsity program, but the race was open to all collegiate club and junior athletes.)

At first glance, the obvious issue is that Bonney is a high school senior. She has committed to Queens for 2016-2017, but is in no way a student at the university. After nationals, competing institutions called foul, but according to emails obtained by LAVA, USAT gave Queens the green light to let high schoolers race for

their team, months before the event.

Also, there is more murkiness: Queens University is calling their team a "varsity program," not an "NCAA varsity program," which means that despite receiving USAT grant money and competing at Women's Collegiate National Championships, they do not currently have to abide by NCAA rules.

This is not to say USAT is simply pushing its baby birds out of the nest to see if they can fly—they have committed a \$2.59 million grant to institutions that qualify. It's money that goes a long way towards convincing stingy athletic directors to open their minds to the possibility of a new team. Meanwhile, USAT can use this opportunity to patch an ever-gushing hole in the athlete pipeline between juniors (high school-aged), under-23 (college and immediately post-college), and elite triathletes.

"We have an unbelievable youth and junior elite series pool of athletes. Then we lose them," Jess Luscinski, a former NCAA soccer player and the coordinator of NCAA triathlon at

USAT tells me during a phone interview. "Then when they get to college, they become runners, or they become swimmers."

Luscinski adds, "We have 10-year-olds who, from a very young age, are saying, 'This is the sport I want to do.' Then when they get to college, they're almost told, 'If you want to go to college and you want to get a scholarship, you have to pick a different sport.'" Unfortunately, it's an all-too-familiar story.

Lukas Verzbicas began racing triathlon as an 11-year-old, but in high school, he was known as a running phenom. In his senior year, he smashed the U.S. two-mile record at the Prefontaine Classic in Oregon. Only a week later, Verzbicas broke four minutes in the mile at a rainy meet on the opposite coast in New York City. Three months later, he traveled to Beijing and won the 2011 ITU Junior World Championships by 30 seconds; another American, Tony Smoragiewicz, took third.

Yet well before his world championship win, Verzbicas had already committed to the



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University of Oregon to run cross-country and track. Smoragiewicz later went on to run at the University of Michigan. Though Verzbicas was an incredible runner, his rise to fame came at a price. "I was overwhelmed with the attention and pressure that came with being a top high school runner, which I never experienced before in triathlon," Verzbicas wrote me in an email. "All of a sudden random people I didn't know came to cheer me on at races and would reach out to me about how awesome I was to them, which before, as a triathlete, would only happen within my small circle of family and friends."

Verzbicas struggled through less than a season at Oregon before abruptly leaving the college program to return to his true love, triathlon. Meanwhile, Smoragiewicz has remained at Michigan and has not raced an ITU event since 2013.


In the years after Oregon, Verzbicas had a few good results, but he was ultimately sidelined by a terrible bike crash—a crash that nearly ended his ability to walk, let alone

compete. After a long rehabilitation process, he is racing again, but not yet at his former level. And because he became a sponsored pro triathlete, Verzbicas' NCAA eligibility is over; he can no longer go back and compete in college, nor can he accept a scholarship like the one that once brought him to Oregon.

Andrew Yoder has a similar story. Yoder began his triathlon career at age 13 and would go on to compete in his first pro race in 2007 between his junior and senior year in high school. Hailed as a good swimmer, an incredible biker and a decent runner, Yoder enrolled in classes at Penn State University, but balked at the impending strain of becoming a club student-athlete. "I decided to pull out of Penn State and focus entirely on training and racing," says Yoder. "I believed I had the physical ability to make it as a true professional and that it needed my full attention."

Since then, Yoder has had some very good results—winning the once-prestigious Columbia Triathlon twice and Syracuse 70.3—but he

still looks back at his choice to forego college with regret. "In my case, it was the wrong decision," admits Yoder. "I was not prepared for the psychological demands of professional racing, nor did I conduct myself in a professional manner. College would have allowed me to mature physically, mentally and emotionally, all while earning a degree and setting myself up for life after sport."

Today, Yoder is making up for lost time and is enrolled at Millersville University. "[I've] yet to determine a major," says Yoder. "At the moment, I'm getting reacquainted with classes after being away for seven years." As the importance of a college education grows, it's clear that, despite any early stumbles, the NCAA program is a necessary step. If the U.S. wants to remain competitive on the world stage, it's necessary that college-aged triathletes are given the option to develop and compete while earning their college degree now, rather than seven years down the line. At least now young triathletes can dream of being a varsity college competitor. 



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