

BEC & DAN

THE ICING ON THE CAKE

BEC HENDERSON AND DAN MCCONNELL DINE OUT ON THE LONDON OLYMPICS. A RACING EXPERIENCE LIKE NO OTHER

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MY POST-OLYMPICS CHAT WITH AUSTRALIAN MOUNTAIN BIKE REPRESENTATIVES REBECCA HENDERSON AND DANIEL MCCONNELL, JUST TWO WEEKS AFTER THE BIG EVENT, REVEALED AS MUCH ABOUT THEIR COMMITMENT TO THE SPORT AS IT DID ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES IN LONDON.

As I listened to Bec and Dan's tales about training and racing overseas, I was struck time and again by their relaxed, optimistic attitudes about the lifestyle and experiences that are part of racing at the apex of our sport. After a year-long diet of hard work and standout race performances, it's nice to see them sitting down to helpings of dessert.

It's been two weeks since the Olympics in London finished, but Bec is still coming to terms with the scale of the event. 'Seeing all those people was when it really hit me that I was racing at the Olympics,' she says. 'You couldn't hear yourself breathing. It actually made it tough to gauge when I was going a little too hard. I couldn't hear the competitors behind me or my tyres on the track, or anything.'

A career-best season has seen Bec, an eight-times National Cross Country Champion (U15-U23), land multiple podiums at the U23 World Cups this year. These events have taught

her how to push hard, while the Swiss national races have helped her to prepare her body for the longer elite-level distance such as that of the Games. But riding in front of a crowd of 20,000? Not much can prepare you for that.

Bec says she paced herself for the early laps and used the trackside noise to push through the hurt at the end. 'I came into the finish loop and the crowd was about 20 deep. Everybody was just going crazy. That was probably the best part.' Finishing 10 minutes and 43 seconds behind winner, France's Julie Bresset (1:30:52), must have felt pretty incredible too.

While Bec's stand out memory was hitting the finishing straight, the high-point for her boyfriend, Anytime Fitness team mate Dan – D-Mac or Macca – was the start. 'We were in our little marquees, on top of the hill, with the start line a little bit the down hill, says Dan. There was so much excitement, seeing so many people –that was the highlight for me.'

The conversation turns, at last, to the track. 'It's such a hard course,' says D-Mac. 'It's very pedally, and there's pretty much no recovery.' He describes the loose corners and the challenge of practising multiple lines through steep, chunky rockgardens. With nowhere to hide, a fast start was critical. D-Mac's game plan for the rest of the race was to settle into a more conservative pace. Conservative worked. He finished in 21st position, a tight four

minutes and 15 seconds behind gold medallist Jaroslav Kulhavy (1:29:07) from the Czech Republic, and a result that was 18 places ahead of Dan's Olympic debut in Beijing. The more I hear of Dan reflecting on his London Olympics experience, the more aware I become of his feelings of satisfaction and relieve that his years of training have paid off.

Building on Beijing

Results at the Olympics are the fruit of more than just training. Participation alone offers an experience like no other, and being able to maintain focus while being a part of the spectacle is as important as the competition itself. D-Mac's Beijing experience helped both racers to find a healthy balance in London.

D-Mac's other racing thrills in the lead-up to the Games include cracking the top twenty at the Mont-Sainte-Anne World Cup, and catching a flying fox to a podium in the Swiss National Series. Dan says, 'Having had the previous Olympic experience in Beijing helped me for sure. In Beijing I was very nervous. You've got so many emotions, it's hard to stay focused on why you're actually there. But at the end of the day it's another race, so you still need to perform.

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Dan: 'I just tried to ride constant lap times. You could see from the women's race the day before, in the last lap or two the people who went out too hard were losing over a minute a lap.' There was more elevation in the Olympic course than the TV suggested - it was easy to overcook it, especially with 20,000-odd screaming fans tricking your legs into biting off more than they could chew. Dan rode a smart race, finishing in 21st, only a four minutes off the pace.

<< 'In Beijing, the village was so big. You could easily go for a walk and find the arcade centre or a big socialising network. You could almost forget about training. This year, I still had the Olympic experience, but at the same time I was there to have as good a race as I could.'

The mental preparation D-Mac took away from the Beijing Games helped Bec to prepare as well. 'It's good to know that you probably will get caught up in a bit of it,' she says. 'We made sure we did all the activities we could early in the week. Then a couple of days out from the race we started to focus more and stayed off our feet.'

The duo missed the Opening Ceremony because they were racing the final World Cup round in La Bresse, France, and arrived at the village once the Games were in full swing. Entering the food hall for the first time, and finding dishes catering for multiple countries and thousands of hungry athletes ready to dig in signalled they were part of something big.

The recipe for selection

The size of the Games – and the numbers of competitors involved – is huge, but the fact that Australia had two mountain bike athletes in the mix was a very big deal. The start line

rollcall for mountain biking at the Olympics is limited to just 30 in the women's event and 50 in the men's. The selection process is a complicated formula involving each country's international ranking, individual rider performances and – when crashes, mechanicals and singletrack traffic comes into play – something we might call luck.

The first four World Cup races of 2012, held in South Africa, Belgium, the Czech Republic and France, formed the main qualifying contests for individual spots. The focus, enjoyment and sense of perspective these two riders demonstrate in relation to the Games was one of the key ingredients that helped them perform at these qualifying events too. Our conversation shifts to the lifestyle choices and preparation that helped them get there.

'There are so many other races in the season, so it's not like you just have this one race that's two years away, that you're constantly reminded of,' says D-Mac. 'As much as I wanted to go to the Olympics, the goal was more to be able to improve in my World Cup results. And if Olympic selection happened, well that would be the icing on the cake.'

D-Mac's response carefully positions the Games against a much broader experience of racing. Between the lines of his response I hear the commitment he and Bec have demonstrated in making this process a reality.

This is Macca's 11th year in a row of racing overseas, and the third year that he and Bec have navigated this journey together.

Both riders are quick to mention the support they've had, which has helped them to achieve such high results – the Anytime Fitness team, their families and their local bike clubs being the top three. Difficulties in previous years have also helped them adjust the compass for 2012. A permanent residence in Germany for six months gave them a base to train from and eased the logistics. They have also been careful to balance racing with resting, to troubleshoot crashes in form that often plague Australian riders when they try to manage a hefty overseas race schedule.

'We are pretty careful with how much we're spending, obviously, but the support has always been enough that we don't have to go without anything,' explains Bec, hinting at the difficult balancing act of finding accommodation, sourcing healthy food and driving long distances to events.

Rising up the ranks

'I think the next step for us, if we want to continue to improve at the rate we did this year, is larger scale team support,' says Bec. >>



Bec on the other women at the start line. 'There was only 30 girls racing, so it was hard not to run into pretty much everyone. You get different vibes from different athletes. Some are already nervous early in the week, and others are super-relaxed and just enjoying it. I wasn't too nervous because I didn't have that pressure to get an amazing result. Everyone's always telling me just make the most of the experience as much as I can.'

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Gardens of rock. 'The course was pretty much 100% man-made, which it got a fair bit of criticism for early on. But as far as a race track goes, it's probably one of the best ones you can have. Everything's really close, spectators don't have to walk too far and because you can see a lot of the track, it's good for TV and spectators.'

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'Every Euro rider, whether they're good or not, has a team behind them to take care of all the travel and the accommodation, and at the races, they have a mechanic and a physio. We do quite a bit more work than the rest of the athletes, but I think that's part of earning your spot on a team. Then you really appreciate it.'

Most riders dream of riding in the places where these two have been training and racing, which can make the idea of funding their endeavours seem like a big ask. And the gap between success in Australia and success overseas is a hard one to describe, let alone bridge on a bike. While physiology certainly plays a role in any athlete's success, team support, experience on the serious race circuit and being able to train on big mountains are also part of the recipe.

'If you look at all the sports that Australia excels in, we have good athletes at the top,' Bec continues. 'I think that's something that mountain biking is missing. We don't have any

real idols or know anyone racing that's really at the pointy end. Obviously you can't do that without the funding. I think if we have riders who can be at the top at the World Cup level, I reckon that would certainly help the juniors. I think you see that in most sports.'

I find myself wondering what the sport would be like if people like Mary Grigson and Cadel Evans, our idols from the 2000 Sydney Games, were still roosting around the trails at the occasional local event. Then I think about what it's like sharing the track with people like Bec and Dan when they're back on Aussie soil, racing and training at home for half the year.

Bec and D-Mac's achievements on the bike are drawing closer to that elusive elite top ten, and that is huge motivation for them to keep chasing results. But it's their keen focus, which drives them to manage the travel and to train methodically to bridge the gaps to their competitors, that gives them qualities most of us can relate to. Bec and Dan may not yet have that aura that surrounds some of our

sport's biggest idols, but these two Olympians do inspire other riders. Their focus and their achievements reinforce in our minds the idea that, with hard work, the rest of us can achieve our goals on the bike too.

Over the next couple of years, this Olympic pair will work toward improving their World Cup performances and qualifying for the Commonwealth Games in 2014. On top of that, they hope their results will help them to fund their way so they can keep the process enjoyable too.

A final question for Bec – is it still fun now?

'Yeah, definitely,' she grins. 'With the Olympics I thought the best part of the experience would be hanging out in the village or getting my team kit, but by far the best part of the whole thing was actually the race. It was really, really fun – the most fun I've had on a bike.'

It's like D-Mac said, it's the icing on the cake. 🍌

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