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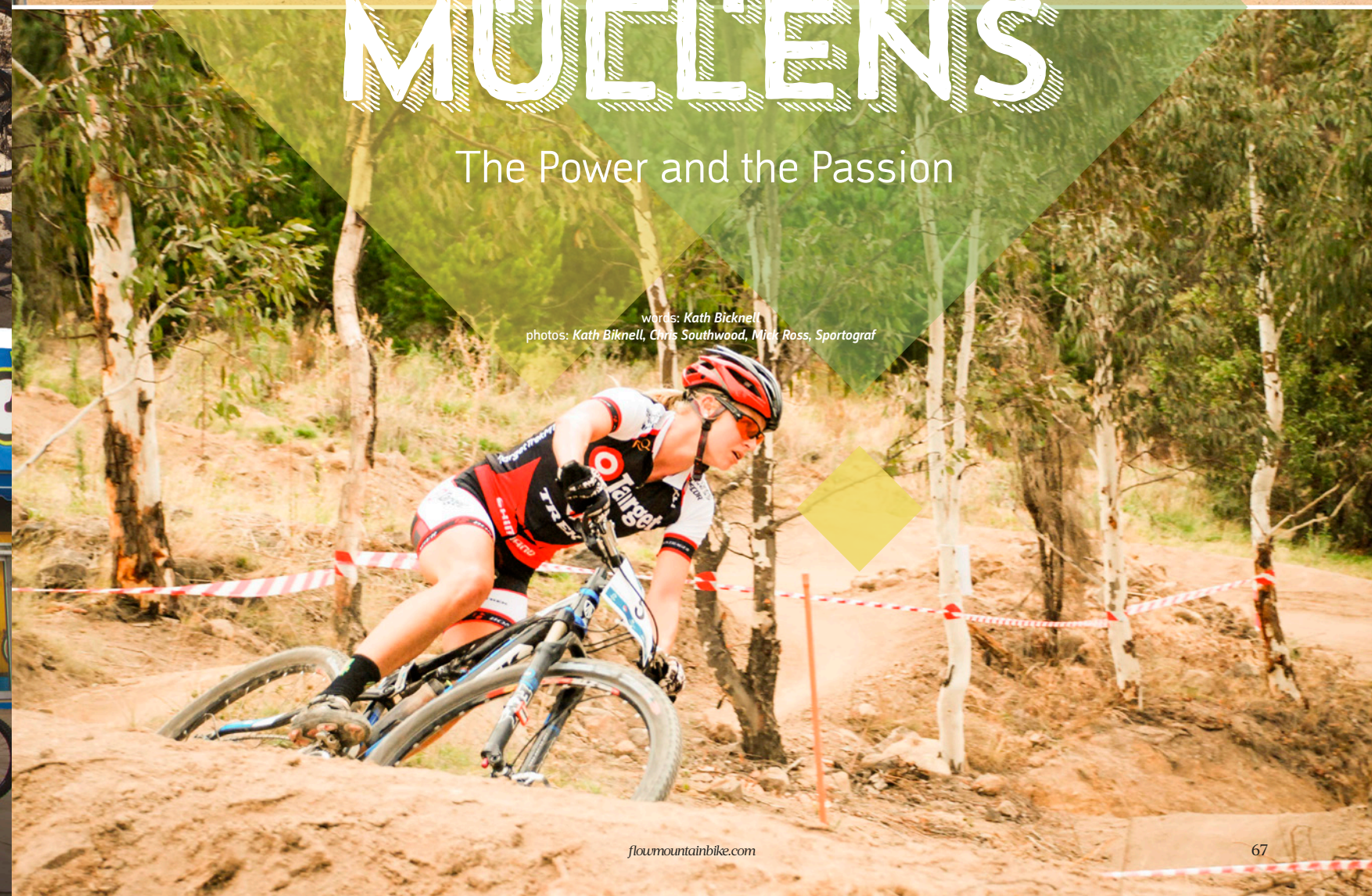
bike warehouse



MUETANS

The Power and the Passion

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‘NO ONE REMEMBERS IF YOU’VE WON A NATIONAL ROUND OR THE OCEANIAS... I DON’T WANT TO DIE WITH A MEDAL AROUND MY NECK. I WANT TO DIE WITH THE EXPERIENCES THAT I’VE HAD.’

AS WE COME TO THE END OF OUR INTERVIEW, PETA MULLENS COMES OUT WITH THESE THREE SNAPPY LINES THAT SUM UP HER ATTITUDE AND ACHIEVEMENTS WITH A CLEAR SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE.

A five-time Australian national champion – with medals in mountain running (2003), the U19 Individual Pursuit (2006), the U23 Road Titles, marathon mountain biking (2012) and cross-country mountain biking (2013) – Peta, now 25, reflects on the meaning of a medal with an uncommon casualness. I wonder if that’s something that comes from excelling in so many different disciplines.

‘I have a curse,’ she says quickly, in her upbeat, light-hearted tone. ‘I can’t win two national titles in the one sport. So I’m just going to have to move straight to cyclocross.’

Falling in love

Having reached the peak of road and track racing in Australia at such a young age, Peta has seen what it’s like at the top, and she learned quickly that, at least in the short-term, she needed more than the lifestyle that racing at that level can provide. ‘When I was road riding I was living overseas and it was sort of a job. I wanted to be normal for a while. I know “normal” sounds weird, but I wanted to come home and I wanted to party. I just felt like I was missing out on some parts of life.’

She gave the party scene a go and learned that it wasn’t really for her. But she did meet and fall for ‘a boy in Bendigo,’ Jarrod Moroni.

Also a keen cyclist, Jarrod encouraged Peta to give mountain biking a go. ‘Jarrod lent me his Merida, which was a \$10,000 bike. It was way too big for me, because he’s a large and I’m a small. But I took it and I went out. I absolutely loved it, like, absolutely loved it!’

Passion is important for Peta. With an overwhelming number of sporting experiences to choose from, passion appears to be how she sets the compass. Three weeks after her first off-road love affair, Peta returned to the same trails to compete in the Wombat 100. Hoping for the win, she instead found herself some two hours further back in the field by the final feed station, shovelling down mouthfuls of jellybeans. ‘At that point in time – four years ago now – it was the hardest thing I’d ever done. And I’d done ten-day races at the Giro d’Italia and things like that. I’d done the hardest women’s road race in the world.’

If mountain biking had come easily to her, it might not have grabbed her attention with such force. ‘I thought, “I’m not going to let this get the better of me. Surely I’m better than last,”’ she says, revealing her reaction to the race. ‘And that was it. I was hooked.’

The attraction of a challenge

If it’s passion that sets the compass for Peta, it’s challenge that determines how long she heads in the one direction. Her determination to improve in a new side of the sport, alongside the varied nature of mountain bike race tracks, has seen her excel as a result.

Despite some excellent results in shorter

racing formats, it’s marathons where the Mighty Mullens feels she’s found her niche: ‘I haven’t been bad at shorter stuff, but I’ve always enjoyed the longer stuff more. It seems to come a bit more naturally to me.’ Her toughest battles in this discipline have been against Australia’s other queen of the mountain bike marathon, Irish national Jenny Fay. Like Peta, Jenny has come to mountain biking after achieving success on the road.

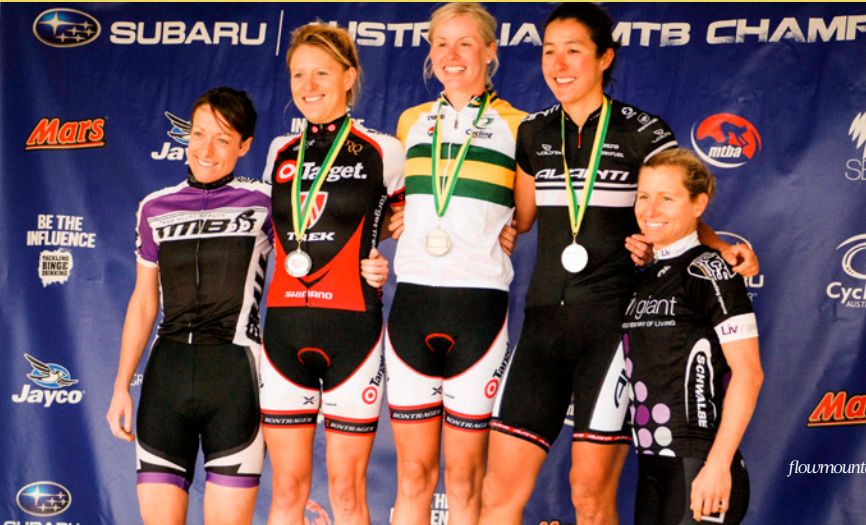
‘We have some great battles, Jenny and I. We’re unbelievably on par, but we’re completely different riders because we excel on different courses. Courses like the Wombat and the Kona Odyssey, with all the singletrack – those are my sorts of courses. Generally I top Jenny in those. And when we go to races like Atherton [near Cairns, for the 2013 Marathon Nationals], with 3000 metres of climbing, that’s more her niche. She’s a bit better at climbing and I’m better technically.’

The most exciting races for Peta, therefore, have a mix of both: ‘I think it’s the best possible thing for female marathon racing in Australia to have a couple of girls at the top who put on a good show every single time. I think it would be boring if one person won every race.’ It’s clear that Peta has great respect for her competitors and other riders. She is quick to point out that with women like former national cross-country champions Rowena Fry, Jenni King and Tory Thomas racing more domestic marathons and stage races this year, the depth of competition is more exciting still.

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Clockwise from top left. Choking back the tears after winning the 2013 Subaru Australian Mountain Bike Championships; Peta stamped her authority on the technically challenging Stromlo Forest Park course to become National Champion; Mixing it up with the elite males in the Highland Fling; TORQ Nutrition keeps Peta juiced up and ready for action; the elite women's podium, flanked by riders with vast amounts of mountain bike experience; leading partner Jarrod Moroni in South Africa.





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Strength in numbers

Tory and Jenni are also Peta's team mates with the Target Trek team. The way Peta talks about racing with and for her team mates indicates this is something she misses from the road.

The Target Trek team is unusual in that it includes so many women who are at the top of the sport in Australia. 'If anyone's really pushed it, it's been Bec Henderson,' says Peta. 'I think she really wants to find some good competition within Australia in the next couple of years – to push her when she goes overseas for things like the Olympics.'

The Target Trek team suits Peta well. It has helped her develop into one of Australia's top cross-country athletes, but not at the expense of exploring other types of riding as well. Peta wasn't joking earlier when she talked about taking up cyclocross. This year this retail manager who calls Bendigo home also has plans to race the National Road Series and the Marathon World Champs, and has just recently returned from South Africa's ABSA Cape Epic.

Her toughest ride yet

South Africa's infamous eight-day stage race offered Peta the chance to discover a new place, and to race as a team with her partner Jarrod, against the top marathon riders in the world. 'I knew that it would be tough because I wasn't completely prepared for it. But I felt that I was

prepared mentally, and I just wasn't. I don't think you can be.'

After 706 kilometres of riding, with almost 16,000 metres of climbing, team Target Trek – Moronis Bikes' time was just over thirty-seven hours. This placed them second in the mixed category. With three days to go, the margin between second and third was just seven seconds, meaning every day was a race, no matter how much it hurt.

The Moroni-Mullens pair worked together to ride within their limits, avoid mechanicals and keep their spirits in check in a race that saw an attrition rate of more than 50 percent. 'The last three days I just had to sneak into town with Jarrod and eat McDonalds and fish and chips, because I was in such deprivation for all those little things that I missed at home!'

Seen in light of her achievements, the casual way Peta presents herself gives the impression that she simply loves riding. But she's not going to get bogged down worrying about all the one percenters that'll take her to the next level. And given that her fitness allows her to have the type of experiences she's after, she doesn't need to – she's already there.


Peta and Jarrod's Cape Epic result a huge achievement and, given the current depth of field in marathon racing back home, it's a powerful indication of how other Australian athletes could place on the world scene as well. Peta's experience in South Africa also points towards the tactics and race regulations

that distinguish the Cape Epic and events like it from the Australian mountain bike scene. 'The mixed competition is a hard one to use for gauging my performance against the other girls,' Peta elaborates. 'You have a partner and he pushes you – you know, physically, on the bum and everything. They push you up the climbs and they tow you along on the flats. I wasn't used to that and I didn't like it at all.'

'Usually when I race with men, I get such a kick – I'm proud of myself for being able to keep with them. So having to be pushed back onto a wheel is, in a way, a little bit demoralising. But in the end I just had to accept it and live with it.' It's what you have to do to be competitive in that event.

Looking ahead

Individual medals might not mean that much to Peta in the long run, but they have a way of setting the bar for the challenges she seeks to complete. She is obviously well suited to sport physically, yet it's her adaptability and her attitude that make her such a well-rounded competitor – not just in one type of event, but in a several. The skill sets she brings from one discipline to another makes her an interesting athlete to learn from, too.

'I just take it as it comes and whatever I'm in love with at the time is what I'm going to be doing,' she says. With so much packed into her first twenty-five years, we're looking forward to seeing where Peta's powerful heart leads her next. 

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