

# MONTANA

MAGAZINE

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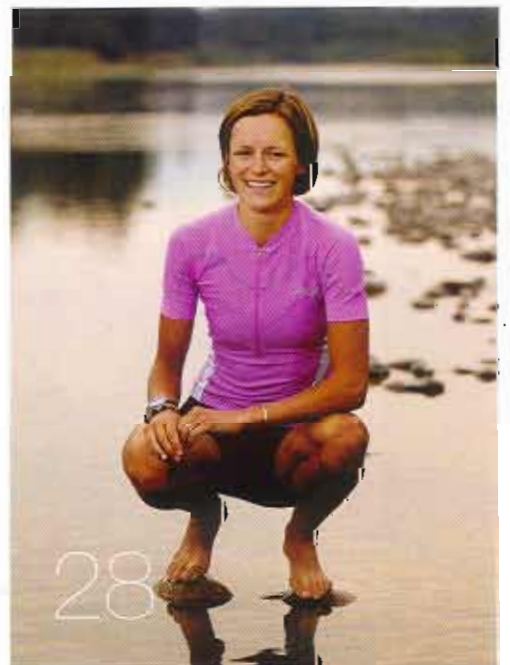
**DNA study  
could answer  
big questions**

## TRACKING GRIZZLIES



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Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation: A Montana success story • 76



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cover shot  
 Photo by Donald M. Jones



State's first female professional triathlete says Montana's winters have helped prepare her for several gritty Ironman races

# WOMAN IRON

Linsey Corbin reaches out her hand to snatch the white Montana-made cowboy hat from her husband's waiting hand as her long, lean legs eat up the last few yards of a ten-hour, 140.6-mile journey through the Adirondacks. She plops the hat on her short cap of blonde hair, smiling through layers of sweat as she crosses the finish line. This is the ninth annual Ford Ironman USA Lake Placid and the 2007 women's national championships. Corbin—smile, cowboy hat, and all—just placed fifth among the fastest and most dedicated female athletes in the nation.

Corbin, who lives in Missoula, is Montana's only professional triathlete. And, at the age of 26, she's one of the youngest female pros in the world. As a rising star on the racing circuit, it's not only her traditional finish in cowboy flare that makes Corbin distinctive—it's the fact that she's zoomed to the top in just a year.

"I think it's the running and biking in the mountains

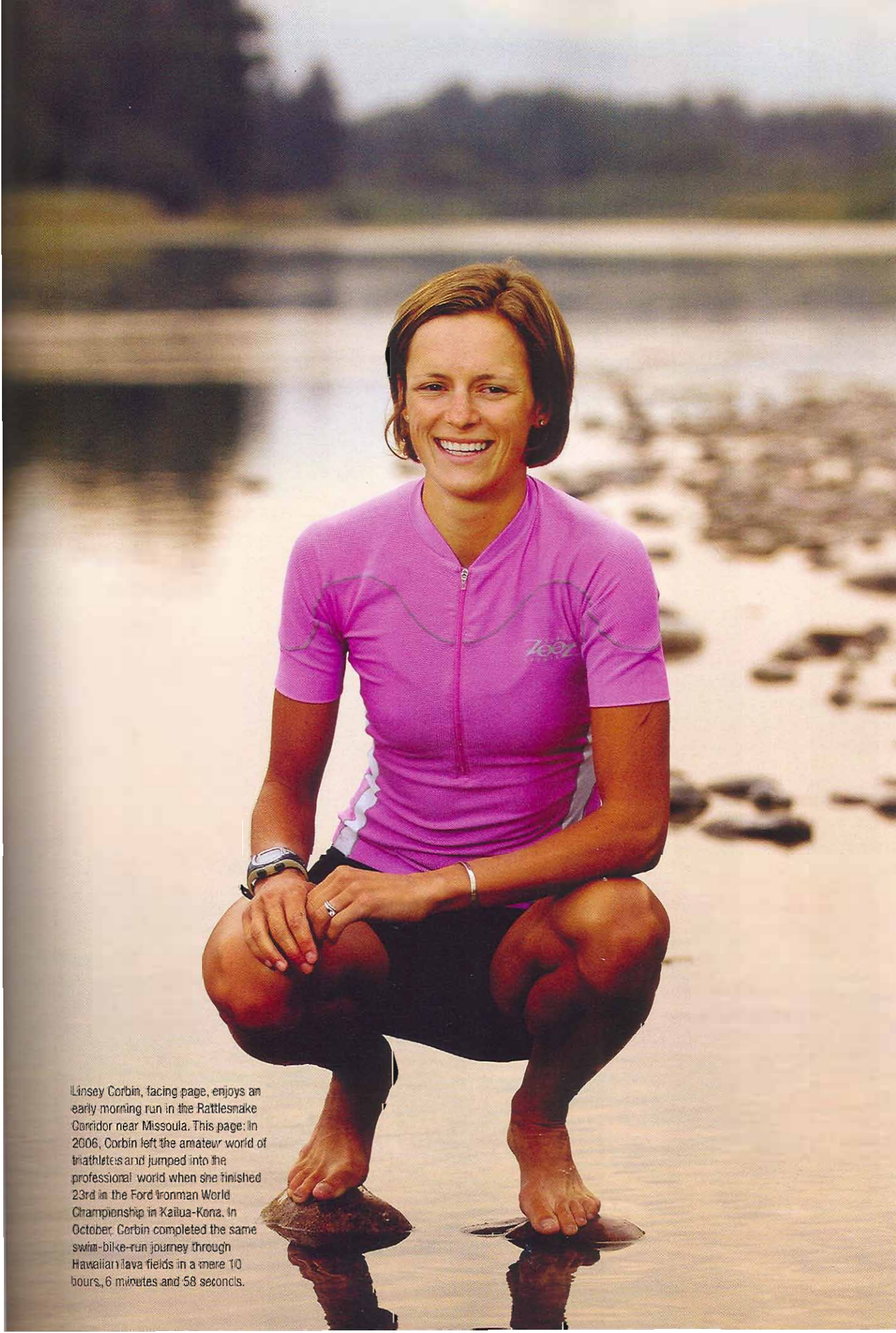
and the Montana winters that keep me tough," says Corbin.

"Tough" is an understatement when describing Corbin. Her remarkable determination is evident not only from the physical scars criss-crossing her body but from the mental stamina stamped across her face while competing. She's been hit by cars and trucks, lost most of her toenails, and swam miles with a broken collarbone—all in the name of winning a race.

What drives this steely grit? Not, as one might think, a lifelong commitment to becoming a professional athlete. Corbin didn't enter her first competitive race until 2003, when a few of her friends convinced her to try the Grizzly Triathlon in Missoula. She easily beat all other contestants (on a borrowed bike, no less), and began training with Team Stampede, Missoula's "tri-community."

Just three years later, Corbin decided to "go pro" in ▶

STORY BY BRIANNA RANDALL  
PHOTOS BY JEREMY LURGIO



Linsey Corbin, facing page, enjoys an early morning run in the Rattlesnake Corridor near Missoula. This page: In 2006, Corbin left the amateur world of triathletes and jumped into the professional world when she finished 23rd in the Ford Ironman World Championship in Kailua-Kona. In October, Corbin completed the same swim-bike-run journey through Hawaiian lava fields in a mere 10 hours, 6 minutes and 58 seconds.



order to take a shot at qualifying for the annual Ford Ironman World Championships held in Kona, Hawaii. Her decision was spurred by placing first among amateurs and third among professionals in the California-based Wildflower race in May 2006. Corbin's time would have given her a nice payday but as an amateur, Corbin couldn't claim any of the cash prizes.

In June 2006, Corbin debuted with a bang in the world of professional racing: she sailed to first place at a half-Ironman in Canada, beating a former world champion and setting a new course record. A few weeks later, Corbin competed in her first-ever full Ironman—which entails a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile run—during the women's national championship in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Corbin came in seventh place among the women, qualifying her for Kona.

Then, just three days after her wedding last summer and two months before the Ironman World Championships, Corbin was hit by a SUV while biking in Bend, Oregon, her hometown. The collision mangled her road bike, snapped her collarbone in four places and left scars on the left side of her body.

Corbin didn't let a broken bone get in the way of training. While most doctors recommend immobilizing broken bones for six to eight weeks, she threw out the clavicle brace, and got right back on a bike and in the pool.

And she returned to her favorite running trails in the hills around Missoula. "I was going to do the race regardless, even if I had to swim with one arm," she says.

In October 2006, Corbin joined 1,700 international athletes competing in the world's most challenging endurance event. She sped through the sea, over sand, and across Hawaiian lava fields in a mere 10 hours, 6 minutes and 58 seconds. This time placed her 23<sup>rd</sup> among the professional women, even with a broken clavicle.

It may only take about 10 hours for Corbin to finish an Ironman race. But it takes seven weeks to complete the cycle of specialized training and recovery needed to prepare for the race: three weeks of "build-up" training for 30 hours per week, two weeks of "taper" training at 12 hours per week and two weeks of recovery after the race.

Corbin seems to be built for distance racing, and especially excels at running. She calls herself "biomechanically blessed." Her husband calls her a hummingbird.

"Linsey's heart beats twice as fast as most humans," jokes Chris Corbin. He's not far off the mark. Her heart rate averages 180-190 beats per minute while running. Only a handful of people can sustain such a high heart rate for an entire marathon, much less reach that rate even once while exercising. ▶



Facing page: Linsey Corbin's husband, Chris, rides along as she finishes the last few miles of the Garden City Triathlon in Missoula. Chris, who rode the bike portion while competing in the team competition, is a great source of support for Linsey. This page, top: Linsey finishes the last stretch of the 1.5 kilometer swim during the Garden City Triathlon. The Olympic-distance triathlon is a great training event for Corbin who went pro last year. Below: At the same triathlon, Linsey finished first among the women contenders and only 13 minutes behind the men's winner.





Dana Pickell gives her sister, Linsey Corbin, a high five while sitting down to dinner with Corbin's husband, Chris, and Pickell's boyfriend, Ryan Snyder. Chris works in sales and marketing with Big Sky Brewing in Missoula, and they often have some of the local brew with dinner. Below: Linsey feeds a special Big Dipper doggie cone to the Corbins' dog, Madison. Big Dipper ice cream is a year-round treat for them.

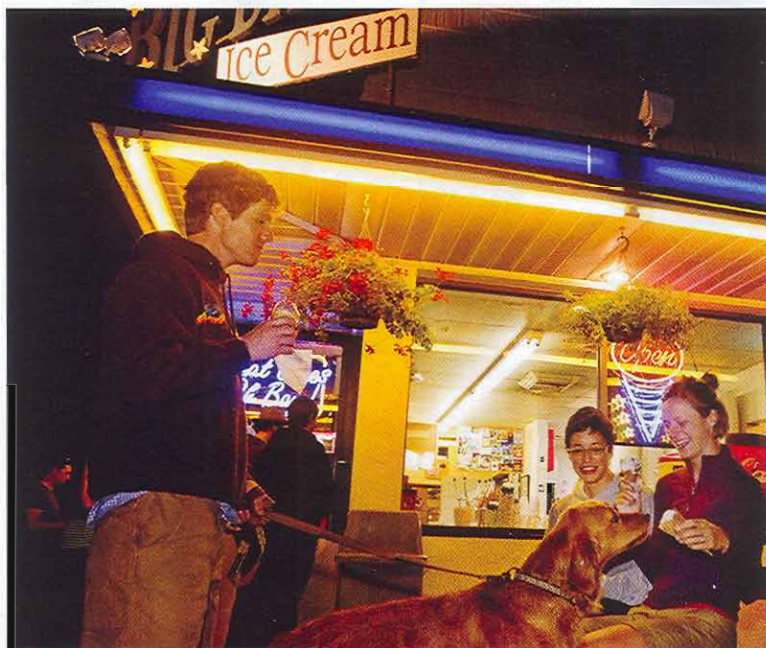
Corbin seems to heal more quickly than most, and be able to endure incredible pain. Even the most gifted athletes have to admit they're human eventually, though. Corbin, for instance, sleeps more than the average person, averaging 10 hours at night and napping often. As her husband points out, "when she stops moving, she's sleeping."

It takes more than sleep to fuel a body pumping out 180 heartbeats per minute for several hours. That's why Corbin is religious about her calorie intake and nutrition. During a full Ironman race she consumes 1,000 calories for breakfast, 3,000 calories during the bike ride and another 1,000 calories during the marathon run. The calories come in heavy-duty protein/carbohydrate mixes affectionately dubbed "sludge bottles" (1,000 calories each) and "gels" (90 calories each). She washes it all down with plenty of Gatorade.

And for dessert? Coca-Cola. "One of my little rituals is that if I get to mile 16 on the run, I get to drink a Coke," says Corbin. Since she doesn't drink caffeine for two weeks before any race, Corbin feels like the influx of caffeine—even from a little bit of flat Coke—jumpstarts her sprint to the finish line.

By August, Corbin had already competed in six half-Ironman races and two smaller triathlons, in addition to the full Ironman at Lake Placid. She finished first in three of these races, including the official Baja 70.3 in June where she was touted as a "one of the best American long-distance triathletes" and listed as a favorite among the international participants.

"I like the 70.3 races, 'cause I know how to race them,'" says Corbin. "I'm still figuring out how to race



full-out for ten hours in a full Ironman."

Though Corbin enjoys the challenge of maintaining her drive for a full Ironman, no one can sustain intense focus for 10 hours straight. She lost hers, for instance, around mile 60 on the bike course during the July 22 Lake Placid race. "In retrospect, I could have pushed myself harder on the bike," she confesses. "I'm a perfectionist—it's what keeps me going back." Since going pro last summer, Corbin has extended her perfectionism to her training program, as well. That means she's incorporated a better stretching regime and a massage into her weekly schedule. Corbin will do three tough bike rides: a 120-mile ride, a hill ride, and a speed bike, interspersing these with "recovery" rides of two to three hours. She visits the pool five times a week, completing a 90-minute, 4,000-yard swim by 8

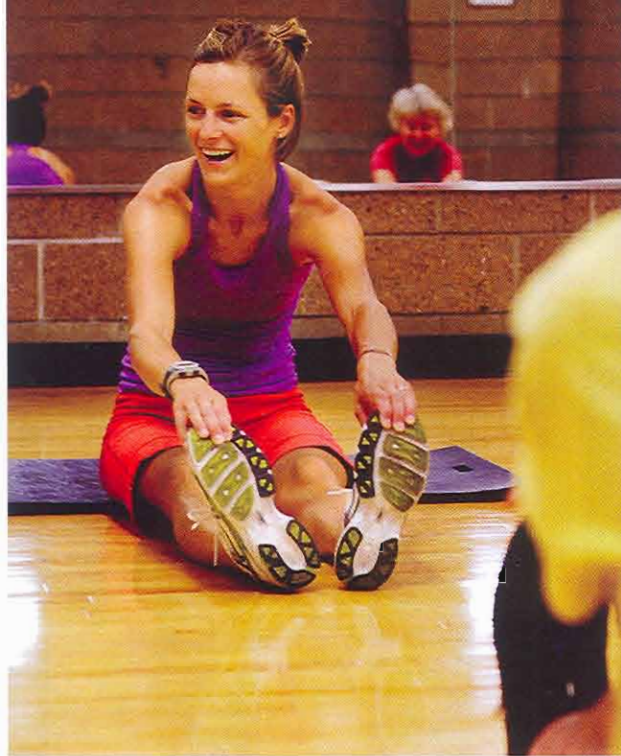
A.M. As for running, Corbin finishes one long run of 16-22 miles per week, often on Sundays, which takes about two hours. The rest of the week she intersperses one hill run, speed work on the track, and two "recovery" runs that last about 45 minutes.

Part of Missoula's draw for Corbin is the range of trails and pavement routes available for the bikes and runs. Now that she's gone pro, Corbin has the advantage of flying out to train directly on an Ironman course prior to a race, where no distractions arise. "In Missoula, I get sidetracked more easily," she says. "Someone will call and want to go to the river, or walk to the Big Dipper for ice cream."

Sponsors such as Zoot Sports, Clif Bar, Saucony and Trigger Point Technologies help cover training and travel costs. Corbin also has two local sponsors of her "Montana-made" racing, Big Sky Brewing and Missoula Bicycle Works. Alex Gallego, owner of Missoula Bicycle Works, says it's exciting to support Corbin during her rapid rise to the international level. Most professional triathletes train in Texas and California, where warmer climates are more conducive to year-round training. But Missoula has its advantages. "I'd venture to say it's like no other place on the planet," Gallego says. "I've lived in Boulder (Colorado) and San Diego, where athletes are cutthroat and adversarial. Here, there's so much camaraderie, it makes up for the climate."

Corbin echoes this point when as she talks affectionately about her friends and training partners in Team Stampede. One training partner, Matt Seeley, another professional Montana triathlete who retired last year, actually started the tradition of finishing each race with a cowboy hat on.

"It shows our love of Montana," says Corbin. "Plus, it makes me feel at home on the finish line." **M**



Linsey Corbin laughs with some of her students while teaching a class called Ease Into Exercise at the University of Montana. Since she has gone professional, Corbin has made training her full-time job, but she still teaches spinning and exercise classes.



Brianna Randall is a freelance writer based in Missoula, Montana. She works at the Clark Fork Coalition, a watershed conservation group.