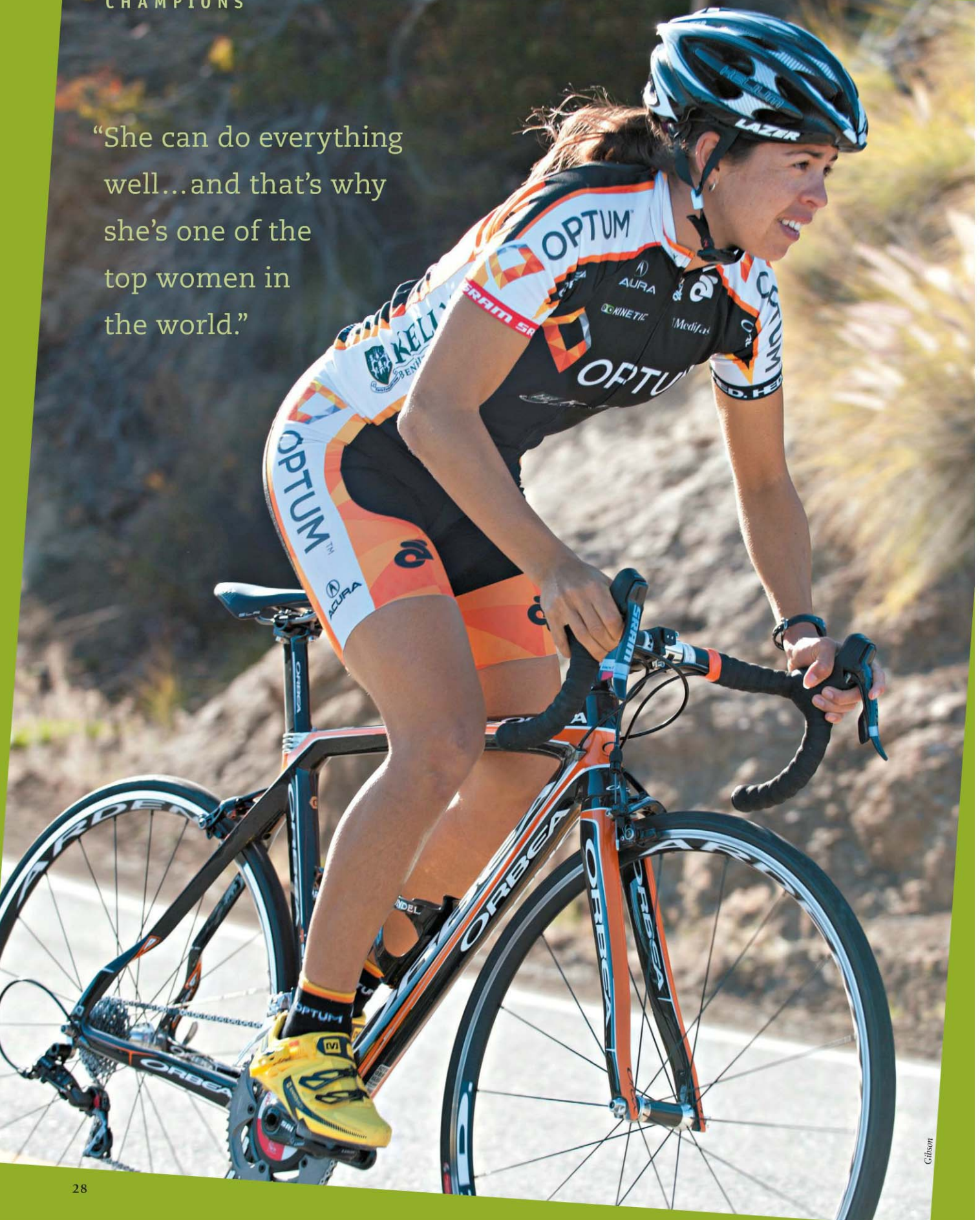


“She can do everything well...and that’s why she’s one of the top women in the world.”



Gibson



# Cyclist Small Lives Big Dreams

Pro cyclist Carmen Small has been giving her family and hometown of Durango reason to cheer for years.

And because USA Cycling named Small one of 13 women on the 2012 Olympic “long team” for women’s road cycling, the entire nation could be cheering for her soon if she becomes one of four women chosen for the final team that will compete in the Summer Olympic Games to be held in London, England.

In late March, she moved one step closer to the official cycling berth by winning the prestigious 2012 Classica Citta di Padova women’s bicycle race. Corey Hart, Small’s coach since she became a professional cyclist in 2007, says he’s not surprised Small was named to the Olympic long team because she works hard and excels under any racing condition, whether climbing, sprinting or supporting other riders.

“She’s an all-rounder,” Hart says. “She can do everything well... and that’s why she’s one of the top women in the world.”

The gifted athlete — who competed throughout her school years in gymnastics, kayaking, Nordic skiing and volleyball — achieved fifth place overall in U.S. Nordic skiing as a high-school senior, and led her Durango High School volleyball team to the state championships in 1996. After high school, Small went on to play volleyball on a full scholarship at the College of Southern Idaho before transferring to Colorado State University, where she competed as a triathlete in bicycling, swimming and running, and finished eighth overall at the 2003 national collegiate championships.

After graduating with a degree in mathematics, Small became a professional triathlete before she was encouraged to shift gears to cycling with a strong performance at the 2005 USA Cycling Talent Identification Camp. In 2007, she went pro by signing with the Aaron’s Corporate Furnishings team, and in 2008 she started with USA Cycling’s women’s national team.

“I really like cycling because it’s a team sport,” Small says. “You’re dedicating your efforts for the good of the team, whether it’s winning or being a support rider. I have formed some absolutely wonderful friendships through this sport, people who will be life-long friends.”

She’s raced with those friends all over the world as part of the national team, as well as with top trade teams like Colavita (2009 and 2010), Team TIBCO (2011) and now Optum Pro Cycling, presented by Kelly Benefit Strategies.

“I’ve been everywhere — Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Japan, Qatar, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Poland, the Czech Republic...it’s been great! It’s a huge honor to be able to race for the national team,” she says.

The honor is not without sacrifice. Small misses her family in

Durango “all the time.” Last year, she married Ben Sonntag, also a top pro cyclist. In fact, they were married the day before Durango’s annual Iron Horse Bicycle Classic and spent their honeymoon racing. Perhaps the newlywed glow helped propel Small to victory — she was awarded 2011 Queen of the Mountain for the best combined time for the road and mountain-bike races.

“That Friday we were in the courthouse getting married, then we raced all weekend. It was wonderful — we love it,” Small says.

She credits her upbringing in Durango with helping mold her into a professional athlete, because the town has such an active culture. In fact, Kristin McGrath, another native Durangoan, was also named to the Olympic long team for road cycling. McGrath, also a former top DHS athlete and a former college swim and soccer star, races for pro team Exergy Twenty12.

In addition to her hometown, Small credits “good genes” and supportive parents for her successes.

Her father, Allen P. Small, speculates that Carmen, a fourth-generation Durangoan who was born in 1980, comes by her tenacity and grit naturally. Her heritage includes ancestors who were Basque Country shepherders who immigrated to New Mexico. Her great-grandparents, Jose Vigil and Bernadette de la Cruz, traveled by covered wagon to the Arboles area south of Durango. “Our folks — all American settlers and pioneers really — were the epitome of tough,” says the senior Small, himself a national competitor who earned spots on the U.S. Biathlon Team from 1964 to 1967 and the U.S. Cross-country Ski Team from 1968 to 1970.

“Carmen was always really active, just naturally gifted — she could watch something and just do it ... and she always wanted to win,” he says.

Her mother, Donna Nazario, a former competitive body builder in the 1980s, says Carmen has sacrificed a lot to get where she is today — constantly training, traveling, eating a special diet and staying fit, and often studying late into the night to maintain a high GPA.

“She just took care of her life — I never had to worry about this kid,” Nazario says.

Regardless of whether or not Small ends up racing in the 2012 Olympics, she plans to retire after this year so that she and her husband can begin an exciting new chapter: starting their own family here in Durango. So the legacy will live on, and soon there may be another generation of elite athletes to keep Durango cheering. ■

*Jen Reeder, who has traveled the world as a freelance journalist, lives and works from Durango.*



Carmen, about seven in this snapshot, works with a gymnastics coach. Nazario

by Jen Reeder