

SPIN

people,
places,
vibes,
things

ACTION FIGURE

DOUBLE TROUBLE

PARALYMPIC TEAM KATIE COMPTON AND KARISSA WHITSELL DISH ON 60-MPH DOWNHILLS, COMPETING WITH MEN AND THE DARK SIDE OF RACING A BICYCLE BUILT FOR 2.

Four years ago, pro racer Katie Compton, suffering from chronic leg cramps, was ready to hang up her racing wheels for good. Then blind cycling sensation Karissa Whitsell came calling in search of a pilot for elite tandem racing. Compton climbed aboard and the two took flight, setting two world records at the 2002 Paralympic World Cycling Championships, then winning five medals at the 2004 Paralympics in Athens. On her own, Compton scored U.S. cyclocross national championship wins in '04 and '05. **BICYCLING** caught up with Compton, 27, and Whitsell, 25, at the Paralympic National Championships in Trexlertown, Pennsylvania, last July. They'll be in France for the Paralympic World Championships in September.

HOW HAVE NATIONALS BEEN SO FAR?

Compton: We qualified for Worlds in the road time trial, but our track times are off. We're not in sync. Because we live in different states [Compton in Colorado and Whitsell in Oregon], we don't train together as often as we'd like, but we've always had very similar riding styles—pushing bigger gears at the same cadence. Recently, however, I've been doing a lot of high-cadence work and spinning faster. **Whitsell:** And I've been training on a single bike, trying to understand my strengths and weaknesses. I've developed my own rhythm.

YOU RIDE ALONE?

Whitsell: I can see the white line on the

road, colors and shapes, and things about 5 feet in front of me. I have macular dystrophy, so I can't see directly ahead, but I have some peripheral vision. I train with a guide to be safe, but I'll do our local time trial solo if he doesn't want to race that day. I have the route memorized, so I can max out without worrying. I think my solo

it down for us. But it's more psychology than physiology at this point.

Whitsell: We need to learn how to train solo, yet still be productive on the tandem.

KEEPING A LONG-DISTANCE TANDEM TEAM TOGETHER IS A LOT OF WORK AND SACRIFICE. WHAT MAKES IT WORTH IT?

Whitsell: It's such a rush! Once you get going, it's amazing how much speed you can hold. There's nothing like it.

Compton: We can go 25 mph on the road without even trying. On downhill, we'll hit 40 to 60. Driving those big bikes also makes me really strong for 'cross.

WHICH IS COOLER, WEARING THE NATIONAL CHAMPION'S STARS-AND-STRIPES JERSEY OR HANGING THAT GOLD MEDAL AROUND YOUR NECK?

Compton: Oh, I wouldn't trade one for the other. Tandem racing is so challenging—trying to get two people working together perfectly—that it feels amazing when you win. But I think 'cross Nationals was just a little more satisfying, because it was just me and my effort.

training will benefit us in the long run. But now I've gotten used to my own pedal stroke, and it's frustrating, because we used to be so good together and now we're not as compatible.

SOUNDS LIKE A MARRIAGE...

Compton: That's the perfect way to describe it!

Whitsell: I was so excited to get together again. I was stronger than I'd ever been. Then we got on the bike, and I thought, "What happened to us?"

HOW WILL YOU GET BACK IN SYNC?

Compton: Our coach [Craig Griffin of Carmichael Training Systems] is breaking

SPEAKING OF 'CROSS, TO MAINTAIN YOUR ELIGIBILITY FOR THE PARALYMPICS YOU HAVE TO LIMIT YOUR RACE SCHEDULE, AND BECAUSE OF THAT YOU HAD TO START NEAR THE BACK OF THE PACK AT NATIONALS. WERE YOU SURPRISED THAT YOU WERE ABLE TO PULL OFF THE UPSET?

Compton: Not so much. I've been racing with the men in Colorado and the scene is really strong. I also got some tips from [former world mountain bike champ] Alison Dunlap. She said, "Do both the women's and men's races, and you'll be primed for Nationals." At first, I'd finish one and think, "Oh my God, I cannot go again." Now it's not as bad. That's how I know I'm in good form.—*Selene Yeager*

INSIDE SPIN

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Whitsell (left) and Compton have their sights set on victory in September's Paralympic World Championships—and the Beijing Paralympics in 2008.



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PHOTOGRAPHED BY RYAN DONNELL