

Believe You Belong

Selena Yeager June 7th, 2011

Those are the three words I scrawled on my home office whiteboard two weeks out from Trans-Sylvania. There'd been a ton of hype about the women's field going into the race. I kept seeing my name listed among all these super fast pro and elite women racers and thinking, "Holy **** I don't belong here." My friends would ask if I was ready to "crush it." And I'd think, "Um. Well...about that 'crushing...'"

Finally, I broke down and did what I never do. I asked my coach for a pep talk:



This is sort of hard for me to admit, but when it comes to racing, I feel like a fraud/hack....I don't know. I've never really been a pro. I don't seem to have the same mindset as a lot of racers around me. So I feel very "fish out of water" sometimes. I've been having some mental trouble regarding TSE.

As I'm sure you know the field is stacked. And I have a hard time believing or convincing myself that I can beat those girls, many of whom are 100% professional bike racers. That's not good, because I don't race well rattled. So somehow I have to convince myself that I'm every bit as good and that I belong on that line and I can do it. Any thoughts you have sure would be helpful.

His reply:

Trust me, the other girls are all worried about YOU. You won the race last year. Many girls will be nervous about the course, the duration, the humidity and the terrain. You are not worried about those things and you know you can handle them.

Humility is good to have, but temper it with some confidence, or at least self assurance.

You know you can handle everything the TSE will throw at you. If you can find the extra desire from within, and if things go your way, you CAN win this race, even against the stacked field.

Nobody knows who WILL win, but you know how to handle the race. Be confident in that, and the rest will fall into place.

And you know what? Just when I thought I'd learned about everything I can from this game, I came out a little wiser following this advice. I really wanted an overall podium spot and I really wanted a stage win. But I made it my goal to worry about neither and just race smart, calm, and confident. I lined up each day with a healthy dose of nervous excitement, with the emphasis on healthy. I honed my focus on what I know I do well: I'm a strong starter. I recover well. And I can ride the rocks and technical trail with the best of them. I was prepared and I knew what to do. So I'd play to my strengths whenever possible and hang on best as I could when the going got rough.

And guess what? It worked. The week kicked off with a 12.5 mile time trial prologue in sauna-like conditions. Having won last year, I had the advantage of going last. Lots of bodies to chase. No one to run me down. I was antsy, but happy. I charged hard on the road, stayed loose and relaxed over the rocks, and flowed through the honeysuckle lined trail, soaking it all in with as much speed as I could muster. I'd later learn that I finished 2nd behind Karen Potter, last year's second place finisher, who is racing her brains out right now and just ahead of Amanda Carey, last year's NUE (National Ultra Endurance) Series winner, who was a strong favorite to win this thing. I was thrilled.

The next day was more of the same. I hung with the front pack of women until I wrapped a slim stick around my rear cassette and had to stop to unravel it. I eventually reeled them back and nearly caught Amanda, who at this point was far out front. Another second place finish in a tight race.

The next day was a mostly road stage. Nearly 50 miles and brutally hot, well into the 90s. I learned a couple of things that day. One, Amanda is a freight train on the road. Two, she is very well supported. Though I could catch her and even gap her on the more technical singletrack, she would drop me like I was tied to a tree on the open road.

While I had to stop and refill at aid stations, her husband stood roadside handing out ice cold bottles for her to take on the fly. I don't hold the latter against her. She's a strong fulltime pro with a bright future. She has support and she uses it wisely. That's just good racing. But it's very difficult to compete with. I lost a lot of time that day.



It wasn't looking promising for an overall win. But I still wanted to go for a stage and wasn't going to go down without a fight. I knew I didn't have a prayer at Raystown Lake, Stage 4, which is a smooth, fast racetrack and simply not my strength (I took 4th behind Amanda, Susan Haywood, and Rebecca Rusch that day). But I eyed up Stage 5, the mini XC day. It featured four small stages with all the things I'm good at and love—hard uphill starts, gnarly

rock riddled descents and it's all over before I start feeling existential. I made up my mind to go for broke.

Thursday morning, I awoke buzzing with energy. I knew the others would ride somewhat conservatively, concerned about crashing, flatting, or both. I cut my teeth in this sport on rock gardens. There's a stream of boulders we affectionately call 'trail' in my backyard. I love rocks. And I had nothing to lose. Four heats. Four wins. It was a small stage victory, but it was mine. And I'd managed to reel back some time on Amanda and gain a few minutes on the rest of the field.

Two stages left, the biggest being Friday, the “Queen” stage with lots and lots of rocks and a big trip-up and across Tussey Mountain Ridge. The week had taken its toll on the field. Vicki Barclay, who was sitting solidly in 3rd place, suffered a few hard crashes that left her nursing a rib injury; Karen fell ill; pollen, allergies, and heat had shelled more than a few. Amanda had between 10 and 15 minutes on me at this point. I would need the ride of my life and she one of the worst of hers to close that gap. But it was going to be fun to try.

And it was. The stage started locomotive fast and Amanda, Vicki and I hung on tight to a small pack of men who were barreling down sketchy fire roads and into the woods. By the time we reached the first long singletrack climb and descent, Vicki had fallen back and it was just Amanda and me. Predictably, on the first long road section, I lost her. As I rolled along, volunteers and other racers would give me reports. “She’s 30 seconds up.” “She’s 2 minutes up.” “She’s right up there.” After a long stretch of very technical trail, we hit the ridge; I looked up, and I saw her.

As I rolled over the rocks, I closed in and eventually caught and passed her. She held tight through the most technical terrain PA has to offer, eventually falling back a few seconds. But all good things must come to an end and before too long we popped out onto the final stretch of road. I knew I couldn’t hold her. And honestly, I probably didn’t try as hard as I could have or should have. I’d fought my fight. I wasn’t going to make up more than 10 minutes. I rode hard and when she surged, I had little in response. She built her lead by a couple of minutes by day’s end. But so had I.



With the GC locked up, It was time for a parade. After Stage 6, I asked Vicki if she’d like to just ride for fun the next day. Her beaming eyes answered before she could even reply aloud. Sue Haywood, Rebecca, Sonya Looney, and the rest of the women who rolled through were in. I just had to ask Amanda, who’d already disappeared for the day. So at dinner, I asked if she liked parades and she assured me that she did indeed.

The following morning, we rolled out as a group, chatting and laughing and getting to know one another a little better. During one of those moments only women can have, Vicki was sharing her struggles with confidence and belief that she can line up in the front and race hard with the lead women (which clearly she can). Amanda was adamant that next time she saw Vicki at a race, she was dragging her up to the front. “The mental part is the hardest,” I tossed out to both of them. “You just have to believe you belong. The rest will take care of itself. Of this, I have no doubt.”