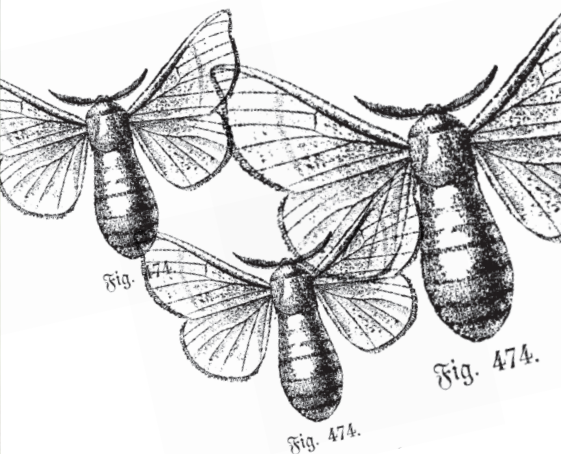






The Cocoon

by Christopher Bagg



When Alison Dunlap answers my unsolicited email, requesting an interview, she changes the subject line to read “Howdy.” Over the next few weeks, as our conversation goes from unfamiliar to affable, that laid-back confidence underwrites all of her answers. Her voice rests in that assured, measured register of athletes with nothing to prove, the register of self-evident truths. When I ask her why she’s returning to the sport after a four-year retirement, she says, **“Because I miss the feeling of winning.”**

When I finally get Dunlap on the phone, after weeks of missing each other, she’s just returned from a Monday afternoon, three-hour mountain clinic. Her voice, over the phone, pulses quietly—a tired athlete measuring out needed energy. “This,” she says, “was the first weekend we’ve spent at home in six weeks.” Other than returning to professional cycling (and professional cycling training), Dunlap runs a brisk skills clinic company, coaches 14 athletes in the amateur and professional ranks, organizes events for Luna Bar (her major sponsor), and works her border collie twice a day. “Dinner,” she acknowledges, “is usually an issue. We’d like to cook, but then we’d be eating at 10 p.m.”

Dunlap’s breakfast of cereal, bananas, and blueberries appears to be her only quiet moment of each day, although I suspect she isn’t the kind of person who craves quietude alone. An hour of training the dog usually follows her first meal, and then she spends a few hours in front of the computer, working with her athletes, answering

emails, helping Luna Bar, and planning clinics. “I prefer to train in the morning,” she says, and pauses. “But that almost never happens. I roll out after noon most days.” She’ll ride for two hours, do some Pilates and flexibility work and eat a late lunch before returning to the computer for two to three more hours. After another hour with the dog, it’s 8 p.m., and she and her husband face down the dinner issue. She tries to avoid the computer after eating and before bed but—she does have 12 national championships to her name—“I always think of that extra hour of work I could do to get ahead,” she says. “My coach goes to bed at eight every night—he wants me to be a little closer to that. But I really need more time than 24 hours every day. I need 36 if I’m going to get everything done.”

Her coach, Jay Gump of Incline Training in Greenfield, Massachusetts, repeats that the hardest workout for Alison is the “10 o’clock workout.” When I ask him for more specificity, he says: “When prescribed, she is supposed to rest from 10 p.m. to 8



a.m. No cell phone, computer or any other line of communication. TV is allowed, as is recreational reading. But not work reading. '10 p.m.' is her hardest workout. Maybe I need a nanny-cam? Would she do this workout if her rest were recorded as accurately as her power output?"

Athletes at elite levels tend to diverge on the amount of focus and balance they'd like in their lives. Some prefer the monastic life of sleeping, training, eating, and recovery. Some, like runner Georgie Clark, abhor the way that this kind of life files life down to two inevitable realities: perform or disappear. Athletes like Clark usually erect "normal" existences that complement the professional's necessary focus, and have jobs and social lives. At present, with everything outside of cycling, Dunlap has enough life for two people. "It keeps you from being burnt out on cycling," she says. "Lets you look at things with perspective, gets you out of the cocoon of professional cycling. You can be more realistic about the world, see that other things matter." Ah, I thought. She must be one of the athletes who prefer balance.

"So which is better, the cocoon or the balance?" I ask, just to make sure.

"Oh, I'd just be an athlete. No question," she states flatly. "I want to win races," she reiterates. "I'm not coming back to be pack-fill. My commitments create a problem for that."

It's such an unexpected answer, but

one that immediately makes sense. In all of Dunlap's promotional photographs, she radiates warmth. Impish, wide-eyed, and smiling, she'll remind you of your favorite cousin from when you grew up, the one who would take you miniature golfing with her high school friends when you were still in seventh grade, but then would drub you into the ground, hole after hole, not out of meanness, but out of a natural sense of competitiveness. Dunlap's racing photos bring to mind the coolly-suffering face of Danny Pate, who never showed that he was any more uncomfortable driving a four-hour breakaway than he was pushing a grocery cart; there isn't a hint, on her face, of the anguish going on in her body. Dunlap seems like someone who could be your best friend, someone who is so confident in your regard that you can't help but like her. She's also someone, clearly, who will play to win, regardless of who you might be. Her life up to this point has been tied, inextricably, with victory.

This past fall, when Lance Armstrong announced he would be returning to professional cycling, his reasons for doing so begged examination. He cited cancer awareness as his justification. His voice, though, speaking in a carefully measured monotone, seemed (to this listener, at least) to belie his noble intentions. Athletes have to compete, and the world is littered with those who, after their playing days have come to

end, whittle away lives that feel rudderless. A few months ago, Dunlap gave an interview to *Velonews*, in which she said, referring to her own announcement, "This isn't a Lance comeback." I ask her what she meant by those words, since Armstrong's comeback, surely, won't be far from the minds of those who will watch as Dunlap returns to competition.

"Lance wants to win the Tour de France," she says. "I'm not going to be that full-on. I miss racing and winning. It's fun, after all. I like the challenges, the teammates, getting up on the top of the podium. All that stuff about getting around, packing bikes, going to Europe...I've done that. I want to compete here, in the U.S., and be the best here." A cynic might hear, in that utterance, the managing of expectations, but Dunlap has achieved everything she ever wanted to achieve—a simple resume check (12 national titles, collegiate titles, a world championship, The Olympics) settles the score. Her friend and riding partner, Katie Compton, resides currently in a purgatory of European competition: a full season of continental racing planned without the support of a title sponsor—five racing bikes, a road and a mountain bike, a Dodge Sprinter full of an entire constellation of componentry. When Dunlap says she's back to simply race in America and win, I believe her. Like all of us lucky enough to win a race at one point in our careers, she remembers the first clearly: a Category Four race from Victor, Colorado up



to Cripple Creek. "I rode away from the field up the climb and won a set of race wheels. You wouldn't get that today at a Cat 4 race."

Not too long after that first win, Dunlap competed at the 1992 Olympic Trials, riding for the TGIF team in support of her team leader. She was, at that point, obviously, a more than competent rider and domestique. Her manager, however, saw her differently.

"That night, after the race, he said 'I pick you to be on the '96 team.' Hearing him say that, hearing him believe in me changed my perception of life in the sport. I thought 'Wait a minute, I could follow this legitimate passion?'"

She'd planned to go on to graduate school in Utah, following the biology degree she'd earned at Colorado College. She'd always been good at school and had a fully-funded position for further study and research.

"I knew I wanted to continue cycling," she says. "But to go against tradition, that was big. It was hard to be OK with that. There was a lot of internal negotiating. I finally decided that school might wait, that this was what I wanted more than anything."

Back in the ranks of professional cycling, now she wants another national championship. She has six cyclocross titles to her name. Katie Compton has five. A Compton win this winter would even the score. A Dunlap win might put the record out of reach for her closest competitor. She wants to shut that door on Compton, saying "I want to win Nats and CrossVegas."

"Training with Katie is the best thing I

can do," Dunlap tells me. "I mean, she's the best rider in Colorado Springs, other than a few male pros, and probably in the world at 'cross. She's a good carrot to have. I can't keep up with her now, but the day that I can...well, that's gonna be a good day for me." Training with one's main competitor strikes me as odd, but in the small world of domestic cyclocross racing, Dunlap's probably right. There won't be too many people to push you at the sport's highest level, and chasing the best around the streets and trails of Colorado Springs probably provides the stimulus she needs.

Today, however, Alison Dunlap needs more hours. "We're going into a heavier base period, at the moment," she says, referring to her training. "It's been a lot of intervals and long rides up to this point." After racing professionally for longer than a decade, she's got more than a sufficient aerobic base. "But I know there's so much more work to be done before the season begins!" she wavers. I ask her which types of workouts are her favorite or most dreaded, and, fittingly, both sides of the answer have to do with some kind of pain. She loves VO2 max intervals, that range we use only in moments of great fear, drive, or desire, the kind that forces your body, not long after, to give up the ghost for the day. "They hurt like hell, but they are the most rewarding. I love the feeling of exhaustion that comes from training really hard," she says. Her most dreaded workouts are the threshold workouts that can last close to an hour, the bread and butter of 'cross racers: "They are long and very painful. It is mentally challenging to focus for 15 to 30 minutes,

when riding at your lactate threshold."

Dunlap turns 40 later this month. She started racing professionally more than 17 years ago, an earlier lifetime just after college. There are a dog, a business, a husband, and 14 athletes who rely upon her. She has those things now, and values them. She would like, too, the quiet morning with cereal and newspaper, and the simple crucible of a 'cross race's ordeal. At the moment, she would like both of these competing needs to be her first priority. She wants to transmute 24 hours into 36. ▢