

Colavita-Sutter Home Pro Cycling

Story & Photo by Mark Johnson



You can't get much more international than Sebastian Alexandre and Iona Wynter-Parks, directors of the Colavita-Sutter Home presented by *Cooking Light* men's and women's professional cycling teams. Alexandre, or "Seba," as he is known in the peloton, comes from a long line of Argentinean cyclists. His brother, father and grandfather are prestigious cycling figures in his South American homeland, and he is a nine-time Argentinean track champion.

Contrary to the Colorado tenor of her name, Wynter-Parks is from Jamaica. After representing her Caribbean nation as a triathlete in the 2000 Olympics, Wynter-Parks turned to professional road cycling. Like Seba, Iona rode for the U.S.-based Colavita-Sutter Home team—sponsored by a New Jersey olive oil manufacturer, a Napa Valley winery and a cooking magazine—for nearly five years before becoming its director last year.

In 2008 the men's team had more National Racing Calendar victories than any other domestic pro squad. In 2009, the team is carrying on that tradition. Capitalizing on fitness gained from racing the Amgen Tour of California in February, the team took both the final stage of the March 2009 Redlands Classic stage race and the overall sprint competition. In the same four-day stage race on hilly terrain surrounding Redlands, California, Colavita-Sutter Home rider Tiffany Cromwell took the Queen of the Mountain competition, and veteran teammate Tina Pic took second in two stages.

Seba still calls Buenos Aires home, and he has drawn upon his

connections to bring four Argentinean riders onto the team. Lucas Sebastian Haedo is a sprinter who took nine wins in 2008. His brother Juan Jose Haedo also started his professional career with the Colavita team and has since gone on to thrive on the European Pro Tour as a rider for Saxo Bank.

Even though the Andes Mountains run the length of Argentina, Seba points out that the country traditionally breeds sprinters, not climbers.

That's because most of the population lives and races in flat, coastal Buenos Aires. Colavita riders and brothers Anibal and Alejandro Borrajo both started racing along with their childhood friend Seba on the velodrome in the leafy Palermo neighborhood of Buenos Aires. That track time honed their sprinting skills, making them two of the quickest finishers on the U.S. circuit today.

Wynter-Parks says the men's and women's teams work together, sharing equipment and training theories. She also points out that Seba runs a tight ship. "He lays down the law. What he says goes. He knows everybody's fathers—the Haedos and the Barrajos. The fathers went to the Olympics together for Argentina. They don't want to hear that their sons are misbehaving, even though they are

grown men! He keeps them working together."

As far as how the men's team interacts with the women's, Wynter-Parks says they work together to share resources such as equipment and trucks, and they also help one another with logistical issues like organizing lodging at races. "He has always said that we are the same team, and we need to

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Wynter-Parks says Columbia-High Road is Colavita-Sutter Home's stiffest competitor in North America. "They are the standard. They have a cohesion as well as an expertise that makes them very hard to beat. They are more than just a roster of really talented individuals. That's what I would like our team to develop into in terms of cohesion. You can throw money at talented people, but that doesn't necessarily make you a cohesive team."

One striking feature of the women's team is how highly educated the riders are. Wynter-Parks has a master's degree in French literature and has taught the subject at Georgia State University. Two riders are finishing their doctoral degrees and one has a law degree. Tina Pic, a North American cycling legend who was the top-ranked NRC rider in 2008 and is racing her final year as a pro, studied pre-med.

Team rider Kelly Benjamin has been with the team for a year. She theorizes that a disproportionate number of highly educated women are on the team and in pro cycling in general because athletes can enter cycling in their 20s and early 30s. "They just fall into it later in life. People are pretty well established and they have jobs or careers and then suddenly they realize they like riding their bikes. Plus I think you get a lot of PhD students in exercise physiology and stuff like that because they are all into their bodies. So they get into sports and they analyze how their bodies accept training. It's kind of like they are doing experiments on themselves."

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Benjamin speaks from experience. She was a full-time firefighter in Missouri for seven years before becoming a professional cyclist. While a firefighter, she explains, "I started doing triathlons to stay in shape." When her knees gave out, doctors advised her to take up cycling. "So I started riding. And it was one of those things where you start with your first race and get dropped and lapped 18 times and you still thought it was the coolest thing you ever did. And from there I just kind of went crazy." After two years of racing while working full-time, Benjamin quit her job and became a professional cyclist.

Benjamin hasn't lost her professional, instinctive response to stop and aid those in distress. "Every time I see a wreck in a race, my first thought is jumping off," she says. "Unfortunately, in cycling people crash a lot. I've given my own team stitches before. I carry a suture kit with me. And I've definitely stitched myself on several occasions."

Asked about the men's team's experiences at the Amgen Tour of California, where they raced against the best riders in the world, Seba does not mince words. "California was a very, very hard race. The course, the level of the riders. You see the names and they are all Tour de France riders. The best riders in the world came for this race. They made the race harder. And the weather was awful. Very, very painful."

But despite going against the best riders on earth, Colavita-Sutter Home rider Sebastian Haedo took home three top-10 finishes at the Tour of California. Seba is satisfied with the team's efforts at the grueling February event and looks forward to the results continuing through 2009. "We had a tremendous year last year. It was just amazing. On the American pro cycling tour, the NRC, we had more than 20 victories. If we can match that, that's enough for me." ■