

## A Visit to the 2012 Exergy-Twenty12 Training Camp

Story and photos by Mark Johnson

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At 9:00 AM on a Tuesday in February, 12 women hang around a gas station parking lot in Mecca.

Their heads are not covered with scarves and veils, and their bodies are decisively not hidden behind baggy cloaks.

Instead, the women's muscled frames are lacquered with taut Pearl Izumi cycling kits. Their heads topped by sleek Catlike helmets. And this isn't the Mecca you are thinking of in Saudi Arabia.



Tayer Wiles leads the team on its way back to its camp base in Palm Desert, California. Photo: Mark Johnson

This Mecca is a scrubby agricultural town on the northern end of Southern California's Salton Sea. A short drive from a rented house in Palm Desert, the Exergy-Twenty12 pro cycling team have gathered at this windblown am pm gas station for an 80-mile ride during their week-long February training camp.

Leaning on their Felt F1 road bikes, clicking shoe buckles tight and generally fidgeting to get back in the saddle, the riders listen in as Kristin Armstrong, the team's managing partner and a 2008 Olympic time trial gold medalist, explains their route from here to Joshua Tree National Park and back to Palm Desert.

"It smells like Belgium," team mechanic Dave Drumm remarks from the back seat of a wheel-stuffed follow car as the team rides out of town past fields of lettuce and mounds of cow manure.

20 minutes into the ride, British director sportif Simon Cope pulls the team car up to the riders and tells them Canadian Rhae Shaw is going to have a flat. This is part of the day's drill, running through the process of mock flats and race-pace wheel changes.

A few minutes later Shaw raises her hand and pulls onto the dirt margin. Drumm leaps out of the back seat, pops a new carbon fiber Zipp wheel into her chain stay and gives Shaw a running shove down the road. The ex-triathlete who, at 35 took a leave from her job at Microsoft, became a pro cyclist, and in 2011 won stages at the Tour de Bretagne Féminin and Tour Féminin en Limousin and placed 7th at Worlds in the time trial, smoothly catches her team and pulls back into the rotation.

"Who should we have next?" Cope asks. "Heather maybe?" team founder and general manager Nicola Cranmer suggests from the shotgun seat. "She hasn't been a bike racer that long."

Cranmer refers to Heather Logan Sprenger, a 30-year-old Canadian who completed her doctorate in exercise physiology in 2011 and turned pro in 2009. Drumm points out that he has not yet removed the lawyer tabs from the front forks of Sprenger's brand new team-issue Felt, so the front wheel is not a good idea. The car pulls up to the double pace lined riders and Drumm calls out, "Heather, you are going to have a rear flat!" Cope then instructs her teammates Tayer Wiles and Alison Starnes to drop back when Sprenger "punctures" and pace her back to the field.

A few minutes later, Sprenger peels off to the right. She does not raise her hand, and she comes to a slow, tentative stop. Watching from behind, Cope observes, “They need to pull in and stop.” The reluctant braking makes it difficult for the support car to know where to halt, and for the mechanic to effectively launch out of the vehicle without getting run over.

Drumm has to shift Sprenger’s rear derailleur into the small cog before pulling the wheel off and popping in a new one. Back on her bike, Sprenger pulls up to the car and says “this one feels flat.” The car stops again and sure enough, the replacement tire is losing air. Drum repeats the procedure with another wheel and pushes Sprenger up the road to her soft-pedaling teammates Wiles and Starnes.

Approaching the point where this deserted desert road crosses the I-10 freeway, the team car and another team van pull off the road.

Cranmer, Cope and Drumm spread out for a half-kilometer on the right side of the road, each holding an armful of water bottles. The riders have been riding for less than an hour and don’t really need fresh bottles, but practicing negotiating the chaos of a feed zone handoff is also on the day’s agenda. 2002 US road and 2009 US time trial champion Jessica Van Garderen (previously Jessica Phillips until marrying BMC pro Tejay in 2011) plucks a bottle from a hand and yells out a brightly appreciative “Thanks!”



Olympic gold medalist and team partner and rider Kristin Armstrong. Photo: Mark Johnson

10 minutes after passing the feed zone, Armstrong drops back to Cope’s window and tells him she has to pee. But, she adds, “I don’t want to tell the girls.” Armstrong, a tough, no-nonsense rider, explains that “Usually when someone says they need to stop and pee, I tell them to start racing their bikes and they will forget about it.” Today, the uber-experienced Armstrong tells Cope, she doesn’t want to “set a precedent as a pee breaker.” She disappears into the desert scrub for a minute, reappears and we motorpace her back to the field.

Beyond the freeway, the road enters the otherworldly landscapes of Box Canyon. Copper, turquoise, white and brown fins of earth jut toward the sky like the backs of prehistoric dragons. Seen from the canyon walls above, the riders look like tiny figures in a natural history museum display. The earthen ledges amplify the whirl of chain over sprockets.

At 10:30, Cope asks, “Shall we have a double puncture for Coryn?” The car sidles up to the riders and Drumm informs them. They hoot with delight.

Five minutes later, Coryn Rivera, at 19 one of the younger riders on the squad, but with 40 national titles to her name also one of the most experienced, holds up her right arm, drops back and stops smartly on the right of the road.

She gets off her bike, shifts into the smallest rear cog and is already pulling her rear wheel off when Drumm appears with a wheel in each hand. She has done this before—many times—and knows exactly what to do to make both her and her mechanic’s life easier. “Who would have thought!?” she exclaims in mock surprise of her double puncture.

Inside the Joshua Tree National Park boundary, the road climbs steadily up a sandy wash through the Cottonwood Mountains. A sign on the side of the desperately dry desert reads “Vegetation Gathering Prohibited.” Splashes of early-blooming yellow wildflowers dot the landscape, but the riders aren’t paying heed, since the pace has settled into a steady 20 mph. Though the tempo splits the group on the climb,

Armstrong drops back to the car and tells Cope that the lead group is “just cruising.” It’s time for some effort.

Cope waves Rhae Shaw over to the car. The final three miles of the road leading to the park gate where the riders will turn around steepens. He instructs her to apply pressure as the team ascends to the 3,000-foot-high Cottonwood Visitor Center. “Attack?” Shaw asks. No, he clarifies. Just steadily torque up the pace. Shaw returns effortlessly to the lead riders, goes to the front and notches up the velocity a couple of MPH.

5’2” Rivera gets dropped. “In actual fact, I think Coryn is tired,” Cope notes. He drives next to her waves his hand forward. “Come on, Coryn,” he urges. Rivera, who just returned from the Tour of Qatar, looks fatigued from racing and hours of air travel from the Middle East, but she bears down in an effort to rejoin the group. “It’s good for her,” Cranmer observes.

Alison Starnes and Tayler Wiles have also been dropped. They are going 19 MPH up hill. “Come on you guys,” Cranmer encourages from the passenger seat. “Big effort to get there. You are doing well.” It’s 11 AM, and the manager pushes the trio to work together to bridge the gap. Meanwhile, in the advance group, Armstrong is tapping out a seemingly effortless pace at the front; the steeper it gets, the faster the 39-year old mother of a two-year-old son goes.

At the top of the climb, the riders grab Clif Bloks and bars from the back of the team car and pull on jackets and vests against the 56-degree chill. Armstrong’s husband, Joe Savola, who has been discretely riding behind the team caravan with a couple of friends all morning, turns on GoPro cameras mounted to the front and back of his wife’s bike. One by one the riders bomb back down the hill, passing a photographer who waits on a scenic curve to shoot action photos for team sponsor, Felt Bicycles.



Kristin Armstrong poses for team headshots with photographer Brian Hodes. Photo: Mark Johnson

On the ride back to Palm Desert, Cope discretely instructs the riders to rope-a-dope Armstrong. He calls Jackie Crowell to the car. “Attack before the end of this road,” he tells her. During a week that will have the riders put in nearly 30 hours of road time, he empathizes, but is firm: “I know you are hurting, but attack.”

Crowell launches as the road slices through a grove of grapefruit trees. She swings well wide of the group and accelerates decisively, allowing neither space nor time for anyone to slip into her draft. Cope nods appreciatively: “That’s how you do it.”

Later that afternoon, back at the team’s rented house in Palm Desert, Alison Starnes opens the refrigerator, pulls out an eggplant, and begins dicing it into a wok for her lunch. Women’s pro cycling teams are remarkably lean financial operations, and each rider is responsible for supplying her own food at camp.

The floor is lined with grocery bags. At the granite kitchen counter, Tayler Wiles eats egg and tomato tacos from a plate dressed with arugula and three carrots.

Meanwhile, Pearl Izumi product manager Ron Rod sets up camp in an adjoining dining room that also serves as Swiss rider Pascale Schneider’s bedroom. With a tailor’s measuring tape around his neck, Rod takes detailed rider dimensions—waist, inseam, thigh circumference, neck, bicep extended and flexed—and plugs them into a tiny laptop. He then uses these both to ensure that the riders get the appropriately sized clothing, and for Pearl Izumi “to use the as a base” for the development of future products.

When Andrea Dvorak walks into the room in her skin suit, she comments that it does not feel comfortable. Smiling, Rod says the speed suit is only designed to fit when in a time trial position, not when walking. “When you get down into this position,” he bends forward with his arms extended like he is on a TT bike,

“all this wrinkling here will go away.” He plucks at wrinkles gathered on Dvorak’s shoulders. Sure enough, when she bends into a TT position they vanish.

The next day, Wednesday, is a rest day. While some riders take a short spin in the morning, most lounge by the backyard pool and sprawl across a living room couch. One by one they go outside to pose for team headshot photos.

At 11 am, the riders pile onto living room chairs and couches to hear Rod talk about the Pearl Izumi products they will wear in 2012 and to solicit their input for product improvements. Two requests are wind vests with back pockets and bib shorts that allow the riders to go to the bathroom without having to pull off the suspenders—a real issue for women, especially in time-critical race situations.

Next the team’s doctors take the floor. Team Physician Kristin Wingfield explains how in 2012 she will be working with clinical neuropsychologist Eric Freitag to take baseline neurological assessments of each rider.

Freitag explains brain physiology to the team, then points out that if one of them were to crash and hit their head, it can result in “a metabolic injury.” That is, a harmful change to the way the brain processes energy.

To help manage any potential head injuries in 2012, Freitag explains that after lunch each rider will take a 30 minute neurological exam—the same exam NFL players now take at the beginning of their football season. Then, should any of the riders have the misfortune to crash during the season, he will be able to use those data points to assess when the rider has returned to their normative state and is well enough to safely start training and racing again.

“My goal in the treatment of this” he tells the riders, “is not to take you off the bike every time you get a bump on the head, but it’s actually to shorten the duration of the recovery. And we can do that if we manage it right out of the gate.”

And then the riders break for lunch, fuel for another day in the busy training week of the Exergy-Twenty12 pro cycling team.

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Pearl Izumi product manager Ron Rod sizes Andrea Dvorak for a skin suit. Photo: Mark Johnson



Exergy-Twenty12 rider Jackie Crowell demonstrates the proper way to wear a Pearl Izumi speed suit. Photo: Mark Johnson



Team mechanic Dave Drumm changes a wheel for Rhea Shaw. Photo: Mark Johnson



Jessica Van Garderen also organizes the Aspen/Snowmass Women's Pro Stage Race that runs along with Colorado's USA Pro Cycling Challenge. Photo: Mark Johnson



Director sportif Simon Cope gives Rhae Shaw the word: put the screws down then the road starts to climb. Photo: Mark Johnson



Alison Starnes, Rhae Shaw and Kristin Armstrong (L-R) at the ride turnaround point in Joshua Tree National Park. Photo: Mark Johnson



After a wheel change mechanic Dave Drumm Rhae Shaw back up the road into Joshua Tree National Park. Photo: Mark Johnson



Alison Starnes takes a bottle hand up from Exergy-Twenty12 general manager and team founder Nicola Cranmer. Photo: Mark Johnson



Exergy-Twenty12 riders in Box Canyon in Joshua Tree national park. Photo: Mark Johnson



Director sportif Simon Cope gives the riders the days marching orders in Mecca. Photo: Mark Johnson