

## Turning Pro

BY JOAN WESTLAKE

Five years ago, **Nikki Garza**, 26, Tucson, got her first mountain bike from her ex-fiance who was racing at that time. Three months later, she entered her first competition and said she did so well, she decided to give the sport a serious try. This year she is racing as a pro.

Garza said she came to Tucson 23 years ago because her Mom wanted to get away from the cold in Michigan. She commented that it was a good move, Mom.

Currently, she works part time as a computer systems analyst at the University of Arizona. She graduated from the school two years ago with a degree in exercise physiology. But, she works the computer position so she can be serious about her mountain biking.

She said, "Desktop support was my student job. When I graduated, they offered me a position and said they'd be flexible enough so I could train and race pro. Plus, I have benefits."

As far as being a mountain bike competitor, Garza said, "People who know me aren't surprised because they've seen me start out as a beginner and work my way up through the ranks through expert and pro. Everyone locally knows I've made a lot of sacrifices and stuck it out. When I tell those people, 'Hey, I just signed a factory contract with a bike company,' they aren't surprised because that was the direction I was going."

About the sport itself, she said, "It is a little scary at times, but it comes with the territory. That adrenaline rush is part of what it is all about – the challenge of trying to clean a technical downhill."

She added that she's been lucky to be relatively injury-free. She cites her worse scars as being from when she was a beginner racer and took a very bad spill, while pre-riding a race course in Phoenix. She tore a pretty big chunk out of her knee.

"It seems that since then, whenever I have a crash, it is always right on that same knee. The scars gets wiped off and it keeps replacing itself," she laughed.

Braving the perils of cross country has paid off for Garza. She won the Arizona State Champion title twice in the Mountain Bike Association of Arizona series. She pointed out that she plans to do some MBAA races and some Arizona road races this year to support local racing, however, her focus will be on national and World Cup races.

Sponsorship is important. Recently, she sign with Soulcraft Bicycles, Calif., and also has some local support including Xoom Juice Smoothies, Tucson Web Solutions and Hillenbrand racing (Broadway Bicycles).

Garza says her training support comes from Coach Jim Lehman from Carmichael Training Systems in Colorado. CTS also coaches Lance Armstrong and the U.S. Postal Team. Over the past three years, biker and

coach have developed a system so he knows everything from her sleep patterns to energy levels. Monthly, he sends a day-by-day training schedule that is detailed down to what her heart rate should be for a x-amount of minutes during an exercise.

"He's been a big part of my success," Garza asserted. "When I started working with him, I saw results."

During season, she says she does hard interval rides twice a week and long rides on the weekend. She has one rest day a week. Garza added that she trains on her mountain bike once a week, the rest of the time she uses her road bike. Yoga twice a week has been added to her regime to help keep her limber.

In the off season, she did strength training October through December with the main focus on her legs.

In October, she also started with Jackie Elder of Performance Nutrition in Tucson. Garza said she started eating more complex carbs and eating more often. She added that her performance picked up with the new diet.

Garza pointed out that her rides are a lot smoother now thanks to her newest sponsor, Soulcraft. She added that after years of riding an aluminum bike, she found the steel incredible in terms of ride and durability.

"Normally, a new bike takes days and days to get used to. With the steel Soulcraft bike, it fit like second skin the first time I raced it, which was the day after it arrived."

In the middle of training and racing, Garza also is mentoring four junior expert girls who race for Team Nova, an Arizona juniors mountain bike racing team.

Garza said, "I think it is important that young racers see my story and realize that it's possible to make your dreams come true. My dedication and focus are responsible for my success."

Her advice to young mountain bikers, "Be more patient than I was. I was so driven to be at the top so fast that I did not stop to enjoy it. Go out and have fun." ●

