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JOY OF COMPETITION PROPELS KATTOUF TO DUATHLON WORLD TITLE

GAIL PENNACHIO KATTOUF '95 says she has reached the point in her life where she isn't thinking about results when she races. No wonder, her competitors might retort. What's there to ponder when you're first all the time?

The former Furman distance-running standout, who completed her collegiate career with more than two dozen All-Southern Conference honors, filled the only empty spot in her trophy case in September when she won the 2011 International Triathlon

Union Duathlon World Championship in Dijon, Spain, leaving no doubt that she is the best the United States has to offer.

Kattouf finished three minutes ahead of her closest competitor to easily capture the 35-39 age division, which is impressive enough by itself but only a fraction of her true dominance. Her time of two hours, four minutes, 38 seconds in the 10-kilometer run/38.4K bike ride/5K run event was the fastest by any amateur woman, regardless of age or nationality, and would have placed her seventh among the "elites," or pros.

Nice, Kattouf admits, but not the point. "Any time you put your whole self into something, the reward is so personal," she says. "Most people don't realize that the personal satisfaction is what keeps me in it. It's definitely not the accolades."

While it's true that duathlon doesn't get much attention in a country ruled by triathlon, Kattouf could help change that. Her world championship comes on the heels of an amazing season in which she captured the U.S. short- and long-course championships in equally overwhelming fashion.

At the short-course nationals April 30 in Oro Valley, Ariz., her time of 1:37.00 over a 5K/35K/5K course turned heads because she finished more than two minutes ahead of any amateur in any division, and among the elite women only Germany's Angela Axmann (1:34.10) and U.S. star Nicole LaSelle (1:36.08) bested her. The story was similar a month earlier at the long-course national championships in Pelham, Ala. There, Kattouf dominated the 10K/47K/10K race in 3:14.42, crushing her nearest amateur competitor by nearly 10 minutes and finishing behind only two elites. (She elected not to compete in the long-course worlds, also held in September.)

She credits her husband, Rick, with reinvigorating her competitive fire when they met a few years ago. An accomplished triathlete and duathlete himself, Rick suggested she try cycling, and he was immediately amazed at her natural ability. In fact, so proficient has Gail become on the bike that it is now the key to her success, as evidenced by her unmatched 1:01:15 bike split in Spain. Other competitors simply can't make up the time during the runs. "When you get an individual that's that small but that powerful, it's like this light-weight Corvette with 700 horsepower," Rick says.

Of course, Gail's dominance begs the question: Why not go pro? Her time at the worlds was a minute faster than the top American elite competitor, who finished ninth overall, but the decision is not that simple. On a practical level, in the elite division drafting is allowed during the cycling leg, which would erase much of her edge. And there are compelling personal reasons as well.

"I'm 38," she says. "I have a partially torn Achilles, which is a limiter, and if I stepped up to the pros I'd want to take my training up a notch, which I might not be able to do with the injury. Prize money would be really nice, but I think my motivation is correct at this point in my life."

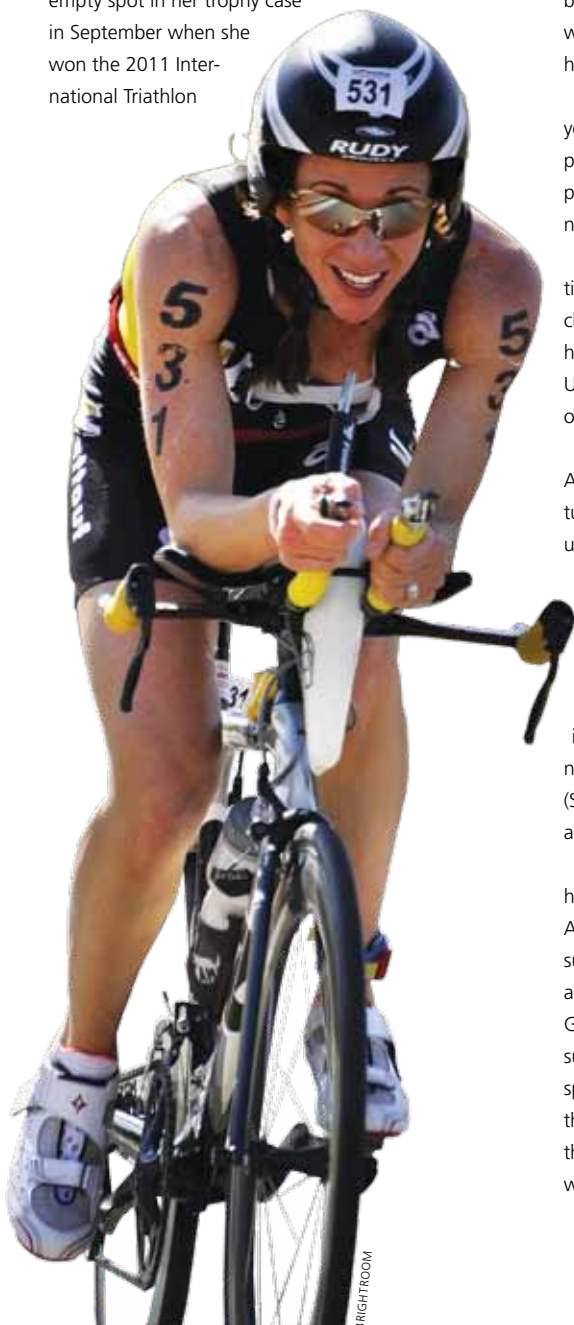
"I don't want that pressure. I ran competitively in college. I want to be able to enjoy it for what it is. If I don't feel like going on a training run on a given day, that's fine. There's not an expectation. Don't get me wrong — it would be really cool to be a pro athlete, but I'm pretty happy with where I am and what I've achieved."

Gail works part time as a nurse at North Greenville Hospital in Travelers Rest while also helping Rick with his online personal-training business, Team Kattouf (<http://teamkattouf.com>). Both jobs are rewarding, but Gail has no plans to give up her rather intense hobby. After all, she and Rick worry — mostly in jest — about what she would do with what he has called her "freaky" competitive side.

"Why am I so physically motivated? Maybe it's because I haven't learned another way. Maybe I should join a book club and outread everybody," she says with a laugh. "The sport is so small, it's like a family, and I love the idea that you can do it for life. My family members were like, how much longer are you going to try and race? And now my response is, as long as possible — as long as my body will allow me to race."

— RON WAGNER

The author, a 1993 graduate, is a freelance writer in Hendersonville, N.C.



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