



A TALENT FOR CYCLING — AND TEACHING
DISPUTE RESOLUTION — HAS TURNED
INTO A WIN-WIN SITUATION FOR KELLOGG
PROFESSOR LEIGH THOMPSON.

ON TRACK

by Anne Stein

If you asked Leigh Thompson a few years ago if she were athletic, the willowy professor would have laughed — loudly. “I lifted some weights and had nothing to show for it, and I did aerobics,” says Thompson. “I kept myself in shape, but I didn’t have goals.”

Today she’s the proud owner of the 2010 Union Cycliste Internationale world championship jersey for time trialing in her age group and a dominant force in women’s cycling locally and nationally — in addition to being a wife, mother to three teenagers, prolific author and the J. Jay Gerber Distinguished Professor of Dispute Resolution and Organizations at the Kellogg School of Management.

Her academic accolades — she’s also co-director of the Negotiation Strategies Executive Program and the Kellogg Team and Group Research Center and has won a slew of teaching awards — aren’t surprising, say colleagues.

But the athletic stuff? No one, not even Thompson, knew until recently that she had the genetic makeup and drive to be one of the fastest women when it comes to cycling’s “race of truth,” which typically covers a 20- to 40-kilometer route.

In the individual time trial, racers go off one at a time on a set course. With no teammates to depend on, it’s a lonely, painful race that pits an individual against the clock — and her or his thoughts. Thompson, 52, won the world championship in 2010 in only her third season of cycling, after winning the national championship in her age group in 2008.

Growing up in Houston and then Sugar Land, Texas, Thompson (C82, G88) was a self-described nerd, more into theater than sports at a high school where football players and cheerleaders were worshipped. “I grew up in a time when I’d literally be picked last for gym-class teams,” she says. “I was the easy out.”

Thompson’s ever-constant smile shows she’s amused by those memories now. As a gawky teen she may not have fit in, but today it’s her 6-foot-2 frame and extraordinarily long legs, along with a high pain tolerance, that make her so good on the bike.

TO NORTHWESTERN AND BACK

Thompson arrived at Northwestern as an undergrad wanting to major in theater, and eventually she earned a communication studies degree. “Around the time I was graduating, my parents were going through a divorce, and I thought, ‘I’ve got to become a marriage counselor. This shouldn’t be happening to people!’” Thompson earned a master’s in counseling psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, but realized counseling wasn’t right for her. She decided she wanted to be a researcher and returned to Northwestern to earn a PhD in psychology.

Her PhD research, she says, “was super-boring at the time, and I didn’t realize it. I was doing a hellacious study on what people remember about people in their lives whom they’re closely related to. It was boring because I didn’t have a theory.”

Her adviser suggested she meet with newly arrived Kellogg professor and negotiations expert Max H. Bazerman (now a professor at Harvard Business School) and explain her research; the two connected, and, through Bazerman, Thompson discovered one of her current specialties: how people negotiate and reach, or don’t reach, agreements.

“I’ve tried to devote my life to helping people reach win-win,” she says of her negotiation research. She’s documented, for example, the “fixed-pie perception,” to explain the biases or shortcomings people have that can hurt them when negotiating.

“People assume that whatever they want is the opposite of what the other person wants, and that’s often not true in negotiations,” she explains.

Thompson sums it up in a story that she can’t take credit for but that illustrates the principle: Two sisters are fighting over an orange. Finally they decide to divide the orange in half. One sister uses just the peel of the orange, while the other uses just the inside of her orange, to make juice. If the two had discussed what they wanted beforehand, each could have used the entire orange, rather than just half.

Thompson’s research also examines how people can avoid falling prey to the fixed-pie perception. Having a teammate or colleague at the table helps, for example, because you’ll tend to ask a lot more relevant questions.

“We have very realistic business situations in the classroom involving real-world simulations, and I score them,”

she says. “The students are usually in shock about how much undiscovered potential there is [in their negotiations]. Then we spend the rest of the class talking about what they’ll do differently next time they’re negotiating.”

One example: Instead of asking a vendor, “What’s the least amount I can pay you?” she’ll suggest asking about several issues, such as, “Out of all the issues we’re



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negotiating [quantity, price, delivery date, terms], which is most important to you? Which is second-most important?”

“Then we can craft a value-added trade-off. Rather than cut the orange in half, you get to keep all the juice, and I get to keep all the peel. The more you put on the table, the more value you and I get.”

ENCOUNTERING THE BIKE

After earning her doctorate, Thompson took her first job in academia in 1988 at the University of Washington, where she was an assistant professor of psychology. Seattle’s also where she discovered bike riding and met her husband, Bob Weeks (KSM97), a mountain-biking mechanical engineer. When the two got engaged, Weeks bought her a road bike. They spent their 1992 honeymoon on a seven-day biking trip in the San Juan Islands.

In 1995, says Thompson, “We moved to Evanston when I got a job offer from Kellogg that I couldn’t refuse. We put the bikes in the garage. Then I got pregnant.” In 2005 Thompson started riding again, initially tooling around on an old “beater bike.” But she was intrigued by groups of fast cyclists she saw on Sheridan Road and tried

BUILT TO BIKE

Leigh Thompson trains at a velodrome in Northbrook, Ill. She discovered at age 47 that she had an unusually high lactate threshold — a key indicator for successful cyclists. She started time trialing and won the 2010 world championship in only her third season of competitive cycling

to join in. She and her husband rode a tandem, and Thompson also learned group-riding skills on her own. One of the cyclists mentioned coach and former pro Robbie Ventura. Weeks arranged for the two of them to be tested by Ventura to see what their bodies were capable of doing on a bike.

Thompson’s most telling result: Her lactate threshold (a key indicator for successful cyclists) was off the charts. “Robbie said, ‘You could be a national champion, Leigh.’ So I thought, ‘I better start training, tonight!’” She was 47 years old.

“We’ve had athletes from different sports come into our program,” says Thompson’s current coach, John Hughes, who works with Ventura, “but I’ve never had someone go from recreational cyclist to world champion. She was apprehensive about riding in a group setting and being in a competitive situation ... but Robbie and I saw this tremendous amount of talent and dedication and will in Leigh.

“She can ride longer and harder than other riders in the race. When you’re time trialing, you’re alone with your thoughts and pain, and she has the ability to handle that much better than the competition,” explains Hughes. “But she can’t just wake up and not train and beat everybody. She puts a lot of work into it.” Depending on the time of year, Thompson trains nine to 15 hours a week; two days are long road rides, around 55 miles in the flats of Illinois, and two are intense efforts at the Northbrook, Ill., velodrome.

She brings that same intensity to her scholarship, says colleague Jeanne Brett, DeWitt W. Buchanan Jr. Distinguished Professor of Dispute Resolution and Organization. “She has a depth of knowledge in her field of organizational behavior and negotiating that’s incredible, and I think she attacked the task of being a cyclist in the same way. She’s smart and wants to understand how things work and she’s willing to work very, very hard to be successful as a scholar and as a cyclist.”

CYCLING AND THE SUCCESSFUL SCHOLAR

Thompson says cycling has made her sharper and even more focused than before. “When I’m on, I’m on. With whatever task, I’m 100 percent, and that’s the key, to have that total focus.

“Jack Groppe [a former adjunct professor at Kellogg and expert on the science of human performance] turned me on to the book *Spark* [by Harvard psychiatry professor John J. Ratey]. The idea is that training the aerobic system with intensity helps you solve problems and think. I thought that was pretty interesting research. And I love having a passion.”

Thompson’s so intrigued by the role of passionate pursuit that she and several colleagues are developing a course on the subject. “Most people don’t just go to work — there’s something else going on in their lives,” she explains. “Whether you ride a bike or swim or love gourmet cooking, there’s some other focus, and when I ask students about their passion, it resonates with them.

“We plan to research passion, intensity and balance, then develop methods to get people to connect that to how they would lead and manage people.” The idea, explains Thompson, is to connect what we do outside of work with our work lives and figure out who we might want to hire — the person who sleeps in his or her office

and never takes a vacation, or the person who understands that it’s important to focus on home life or a passion and who will bring that energy to work?”

She also just finished a new book called *The Creative Conspiracy: The New Rules of Breakthrough Collaboration* that will be published by the Harvard Business Review Press in January. “A lot of what people are doing in the business world to enhance creativity isn’t working,” says Thompson. “There are a lot of very practical, inexpensive things people could be doing to make their teams a lot more innovative.”

Telling people to not have any rules at all doesn’t work when it comes to brainstorming, says Thompson. It’s also more effective to have people do solo thinking, then get together with others to brainstorm.

“Having large groups isn’t nearly as effective as having smaller groups for brainstorming. There’s too much self-censoring, it’s hard to talk, and some people dominate the conversation.”

Practical, inexpensive things teams can use to stimulate creativity include following rules, such as a “no criticism” rule — even if the comment is “that’s good.” Other rules include coming up with ideas that you think could get the team fired. “Tell people to take 10 minutes to think of totally inappropriate things.

“We also found that if people do a warm-up exercise that involves revealing an extremely embarrassing moment, the group will be more creative than if people talk about a moment of pride.”

So how does Thompson balance a full professorship, three kids, training, marriage and writing? “To me, balance doesn’t mean I do everything evenly. There are so many things I don’t do well.

“I don’t do cooking well, I don’t do food or clothes shopping well,” she says with a laugh. “I don’t clean very well, and I don’t sit around and shoot the breeze very well. I’m very purpose driven and goal driven with my time. And my nails look like hell.”

Instead, Thompson says, “I want to do three things really well: I want to be a good mom, I want to train, and I want to do my work. I put those three things first. We have dinner together as a family every night at 6:30. I want to have that time. I don’t go out to dinner with my husband — our dates are on the bike.” She’s also the mom who talks to her two sons, who are high school rowers, about what it’s like to train so intensely that you get physically sick after working out so hard. “They get what I’m doing, and I kind of get what they’re doing. I know what it’s like to have a really hard practice.”

At this point in life, she wouldn’t change a thing. She loves her job and she loves training. “I feel so lucky — I could have lived my whole life not knowing that I had this [talent for cycling].”

Cycling, she says, has given her a new mission and purpose. “I’m having a ball,” she says. “Life would be complete if I could be 75 years old and pumping up my tires at 7 a.m. on a Saturday at a race. Sign me up for that!”

Anne Stein is an Evanston-based journalist whose features have appeared in the Los Angeles Times, ESPN the Magazine, the Christian Science Monitor and People.