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IN TRAIL RACES

# Trail Runner

AUGUST 2011 ▶ ISSUE 74

## THE DOMINATOR ANITA ORTIZ TOPS WOMEN'S ULTRARUNNING

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# BLOOD SPORTS

From the mountain-running circuit in the early 2000s to ultrarunning the next decade, Anita Ortiz has **DOMINATED.**

But how does a school-teaching, 47-year-old mother of four do it against much younger athletes?


By Devon O'Neil ✧ Photos by David Clifford



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Ortiz takes a break from a muddy training run on the Third Gulch Trail, near Eagle, Colorado.



Ortiz runs singletrack on the Wulfsohn Ranch Trail, Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

**I**t was not just that Tim Twietmeyer did not expect Anita Ortiz to be leading the 2009 Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run. That would have been forgivable. It was that Twietmeyer had never even heard of Anita Ortiz until she broke away.

He will be the first to admit he does not follow the sport religiously, despite winning Western States five times and finishing it 25 times. But he is still heavily involved with the event, and knows the contenders every year. Somehow, Ortiz had eluded his radar.

Twietmeyer saw Ortiz in person three times during the race, and each time his awe—and bewilderment—grew. Finally, someone relayed a short bio on the tiny blonde with the intense stare: First-

time 100-miler from the alpine desert of Eagle, Colorado. Forty-five years old. Ex-mountain runner.

Twietmeyer knows enough to expect surprises at Western States, but the 2009 women's field was stacked, and included Krissy Moehl, who had run the race in 2005 as part of the Grand Slam of Ultrarunning and paced it numerous times, three-time runner-up Bev Anderson-Abbs and defending champion, Nikki Kimball (three-time winner). Ortiz didn't care. She dropped them all.

"She made it look, I don't want to say easy, but she was pulling away from the field," Twietmeyer recalls. "We were wondering if she could keep it up."

Ortiz won by more than an hour, running the fifth-fastest women's time ever: 18:24:17. And she did it despite getting lost twice in two hours with two different pacers, adding an estimated 25 to

30 minutes to her odyssey. Moehl finished second, Anderson-Abbs took third and, ending her reign at Western States, Kimball settled for fourth. A number of people called Ortiz's win the top performance of 2009, including Kami Semick, who was named Runner of the Year by *UltraRunning* magazine that year. "You don't expect a first-timer to just roll in and dominate," says Twietmeyer.

Accordingly, Ortiz received a fair swirl of attention after the race. More people found out about her background: how she is a married mother of four and a full-time, elementary-school teacher; how she wakes up at 3 a.m. to run in frigid winter darkness; how she works out three times a day.

Feeding the hype, Ortiz kept winning races. She went into last year's Golden Gate Dirty Thirty 50K in the Rocky Mountain foothills outside of Denver, Colorado, in prime condition. But 12 miles





She is consumed by maximizing her potential, possessed by it almost. A social runner who trains every day with slower friends, she does not know what occurs on race day, only that something does. And she cannot always control her transformation. “It just happens,” she says.

I’d have to crawl back up to a standing position. The pain would just reverberate through my body, and I’d stand there for a minute until it subsided just a little bit. Then I’d be, like, OK, you can go.”

Not only did Ortiz still win the race, she set a course record, crossing the line four minutes ahead of Darcy Africa and 16 minutes ahead of defending champion Helen Cospolich.

Afterward, Ortiz had a knee-rebuilding surgery and sat out the rest of the 2010 season. When she finally started to run again this winter, she had to shorten her stride and straighten her posture to compensate for her compromised knee. She claims she will never be full again, that her “killer attitude” is gone. And yet, the darnedest thing: just like before the meniscus tear, Ortiz cannot stop winning races.

Before returning to Dirty Thirty in June, Ortiz had won four straight trail races against stout fields, including two 50-milers on back-to-back weekends in April. At the second of those, California’s Santa Barbara Endurance Race, Ortiz beat the men’s winner by more than an hour and finished in a double-take time of 6:47—an 8:08-per-mile pace on a course with 18,000 feet of climbing.

Improbably, in a sport with ever more young stars and science behind it, Ortiz appears to be getting faster despite tearing ligaments off of bones and nearing age 50. As this issue went to the printer, she was preparing for a return to Western States and a showdown with ultrarunning’s hottest star, 32-year-old Ellie Greenwood.

“I’m going back to get my butt kicked by Ellie Greenwood” is how Ortiz described her chances, and she seemed to believe that. But while her comeback, humility and super-mom lifestyle make for an inspiring tale, do not let it obscure the unvarnished rawness that defines

Ortiz: a 5-foot-3, 105-pound pit bull who intimidates her opponents and has been known to berate inferior teammates in public; who is terrified by how much pain she can inflict on her body, but enamored with her ability to inflict it; who once ran a full season with a broken hip.

Contrary to what her tendencies lead you to believe, Ortiz is not consumed by winning. She is consumed by maximizing her potential, possessed by it almost. A social runner who trains every day with slower friends, she does not know what occurs on race day, only that something does. And she cannot always control her transformation. “It just happens,” she says.

“She flips a switch,” says her husband, Mike. “I’ve told her before: ‘You treat this like a blood sport.’”

\* \* \*

**THAT HAS NOT BEEN** the case forever. Ortiz has run every day for most of her life, but she’s only been competing for a fraction of that time, less than a decade at the elite level. She grew up in Wheat Ridge, a Denver suburb, where she led her high-school cross-country team to a state championship. But she quit racing after that, opting to party at Florida State.

Left to right: Katie Mazzia, Megan Morrissey, Sue Hibbs, Ortiz and Mark Muehlethaler at the 24 Hours of Moab Run.



into the race, while navigating a precarious rock outcropping, she swung one leg out to avoid the rocks. Her other ankle twisted, “and I yanked my meniscus clean off the bone,” she says. “I heard it.”

The injury was just shy of catastrophic. But Ortiz, who counts an extremely high pain tolerance among her defining traits, did not think to stop racing—even that day. “The pain was horrible,” she says, “but I’d never had an injury that bad. So I was thinking, what could it be? Probably just a pulled muscle. Really badly pulled. And I was, like, you don’t quit for a pulled muscle!”

Literally sweating from the pain, Ortiz still ran 18 more miles. “I was lying in riverbeds to cool it off and using sticks to support me,” she says of the ordeal. “Oh, my God, it was awful. Sometimes if I did not land completely straight over my heel, I would just collapse. And then



It wasn't until her mid-30s that she got back into competition.

At the urging of Mike, who is the executive director of the Vail Recreation District and oversees most of the area's trail races, Ortiz entered the Vail Half Marathon in the mid-1990s (she and Mike cannot recall the exact year) and took second after leading much of the race. She returned the next year and won.

In 2002, she decided to try and qualify for the U.S. Mountain Running Team. After learning she needed to win one of that year's three selection races, Ortiz hedged her bets and entered all three. She turned heads when she swept them, clinching the first of three straight national titles and five appearances on the U.S. Team. "She's very hard on herself," says

longtime team manager Nancy Hobbs. "But she also loves running more than anyone I've ever met." Her mountain-running career peaked with an eighth-place finish at the 2003 world championships (with a fractured hip) and a masters world title in 2004.

Two years later, Ortiz suffered the first of two potentially career-ending injuries. She ruptured her plantar fascia less than a mile into the world-championship race and ran the rest of the way in searing pain, finishing 11<sup>th</sup>. The damage was severe enough that one doctor told her: "If you keep running, you're going to end up deformed."

Ortiz was so upset by those words that she bought a bike later that day, resigned to quit running and become a cyclist. But

a second opinion discounted the first, allowing her to keep running. She lost some of her top-end speed due to the injury, which was crucial for the quick-burst, five-mile courses on the mountain circuit. For the first time, she began to consider longer races.

\* \* \*

**ONE DAY IN EARLY** 2007, Ortiz—then known primarily as a five- to 10-mile specialist and snowshoe national champion who could climb like a Sherpa (she won the Pikes Peak Ascent four times and the Marathon once)—came home and told Mike she was going to try an ultra. She figured she could sustain her speed over a greater distance, even if there wasn't as much of it to begin with. After winning the Desert RATS 25-miler in Fruita, Colorado, she made her 50-mile debut at White River 50-Mile Endurance Run in Crystal Mountain, Washington—the USATF trail national championship—where only Kimball's course record was faster than Ortiz's debut (8:17).

It marked the start of an extraordinary stretch: Over the next four years, Ortiz entered 17 ultras and won 13 of them, finishing second in the other four. Yet very little has changed for her at home, aside from upping her mileage.

In particular, she still runs near her hometown of Eagle, Colorado, with the same group of local badassess, a tight-knit crew who have raced with or paced Ortiz at some of her biggest victories. Not only is it a fast group—most of them have finished in the top-20 percent of an ultra before—but they have also raised their kids and navigated life's trials together. Ortiz is their unquestioned leader; she pushes the pace and picks the steepest courses. She also runs through migraines and, according to them, never shows a wink of exhaustion despite getting only four hours of sleep each night.

Apparently, she is also part camel. "We all get mad at her," says Megan Morrissey, who runs with Ortiz five times a week. "Anita, you're going to be out for 30 miles; you need some water.' And she'll be, like, 'No, it's OK; I drank some before I left.'"

Ortiz's best friend, Katie Mazzia, happens to be a dietician. She plans Ortiz's race-day nutrition and runs with her almost every day. "I try to get through to her," says Mazzia. "I try to give her the science behind drinking water: 'You're really being mean to your muscles.' If I'm going out with her, she'll bring it. If I'm

GLEN DELMAN



not, she won't. But you know what? It probably makes her tougher."

Ortiz, for her part, jokingly calls Mazzia "Cautious Katie." When I ask why she doesn't believe in hydrating, Ortiz says, "I do. I mean, I drink water. I just don't think people need it as much and as often as they're led to believe. I feel like you can train yourself to need less."

And still keep your performance as high? "Well, if you're in a really hard race, you have to be smart; you have to fuel. But training and stuff? It's got to be four hours before I'm going to take water."

\* \* \*

**THE DAY I MEET ORTIZ** for a run in Eagle, it is snowing. But that's fine. She is racing the Santa Barbara 50-miler in three days, so she just wants to get out for an hour after school. We meet at the Burger King down the road from her house and carpool to the trailhead. I'd heard about her propensity to chat on the trail—she and Mazzia, who was pacing her, missed a course marker at Western States because they were so involved in their conversation—and am hoping this will lead to some candid thoughts.

The trail network in Eagle is extensive. Singletracks and dirt roads spider out in every direction, peppered with steep bursts, tight corners and more than enough roots and rocks to demand your attention. Ortiz knows the local trails better than anyone, and today she has chosen a route that climbs to a plateau overlooking the valley. Come early summer, the entire landscape is blanketed by flowers, which are only in bloom for a brief time. "Once those flowers die, I don't come here anymore," she says. "I maybe run this trail twice all summer, but at least once a day in the winter. There are a few sections where everywhere you look, you see abundant flowers. And that's what it's all about for me. Just what I see and smell."

Ortiz's father, a family physician, started running specifically to spend time with Anita when she was growing up. He and her mother instilled in Anita and her two brothers a deep appreciation of the outdoors. So when we sidle up to a junction in the trail and Ortiz sees an orange peel on the ground, she doesn't hide her disapproval. "It just makes me so angry when people trash the land," she says. "Those things take forever to biodegrade."

As it turns out, Ortiz is kind of like the garbage fairy. "Anytime we see trash, we

bring it down," she says. "One time, we were way up in the middle of God knows where, on this road called Firebox, and found one of those big plastic storage boxes. Well, we carried that thing down. It took us all summer, but we'd carry it a little ways, and then we'd leave it. And the next time we were up there, we'd carry it a little ways farther. Eventually we got it all the way down. I've carried a mattress down from up here."

Contrary to many of her peers, Ortiz almost never measures her mileage. Instead, she keeps track of time. Her goal each day is to get five hours of strenuous exercise, whether on the trail or her Stairmaster at home. The approach allows her to explore more than she would otherwise. "I love getting pleasantly lost," she says. "Where you're not really lost, because you know you'll eventually hit a road. That's how you find the new, cool trails. It's my favorite thing to do."

The one week she measures her miles is before Western States—which remains the only 100-mile race she's entered. She'll do a 35-mile day in her heaviest week (which used to be 138 miles but now is closer to 120), but, she explains, "I'll do back-to-back-to-back days of 25, 20, 20, because that's less wear and tear on my body and, for me, it's a better training effect. My legs are super tired by that last day."

We come upon a tiny patch of snow, and Ortiz points at it and grins. "There's my water," she says. As we run, I concentrate on Ortiz's steady but imperfect stride. Kami Semick, one of Ortiz's rivals, calls her "a scrappy runner, and I mean that as a compliment. It's not beautiful but she gets it done." Ortiz, who is sensitive to such remarks, doesn't disagree. "I'm not a stellar runner. I just work really hard, and I deal with pain well," she says. "I'm no better than anybody

**Ortiz is their unquestioned leader; she pushes the pace and picks the steepest courses. She also runs through migraines and, according to them, never shows a wink of exhaustion despite getting only four hours of sleep each night.**

**LEFT TO RIGHT:**

Ortiz en route to victory at the 2011 Desert RATS Trail Running Festival 50-miler, Fruita, Colorado.

The Ortiz clan: Mike, Amelia, Mandy, Anita, Acacia and David.

Ortiz emerging from the Rucky Chucky river crossing, mile 78, in the 2009 Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run, California.



else. I'm not particularly strong or—I guess what I mean is, I don't have natural talent. That's what it is. I shouldn't have said I'm not a strong runner.”

I watch Ortiz bound and dart over large rocks and around tricky bends in the trail like a rabbit. It's hard to believe she does not consider herself gifted, especially given her age and the punishment she inflicts on her muscles and joints. “Seriously, I feel like I'm 25,” she says. “I just don't feel like I thought I'd feel when I was 46 [she turned 47 on June 9]. I thought I'd feel old and rickety and worn out and tired. And I don't. I never thought I'd be able to run like this.”

During a switchbacking descent near the end of the loop, I ask Ortiz how important it is to be the best. She replies: “Not very important. Because I'm not,

and I never can be.” Then who is? “Oh, gosh. There's a whole handful of people who strive for that spot. I mean, Ellie Greenwood? Oh, my gosh, nobody's going to stop her this year. You've got Kami Semick, good luck ever beating her. Darcy Africa ...” But you just beat Darcy in Fruita, I say. “I know, but it's a lucky day when I do. There are just so many young people coming in.”

I ask Ortiz whether she's ever beaten Semick. “No. I came in about three minutes behind her in a 100K [Miwok, where she qualified for Western States] two years ago; that's the closest I've come. I led until the last five miles, and talk about hitting the wall. She went past me like I was sitting in a bathtub reading my book. She was really nice about it. She could see that I was suffering *really* badly. I was cramp-

ing, holding my legs, practically *lifting* my legs up this hill. And she had a pacer, and I didn't. She told her pacer to stay with me. She could see that I was in a bad spot. It was really nice. But I made her pacer go. I wanted to suffer by myself.”

\* \* \*

**TWO WEEKS AFTER OUR RUN,** I arrive at Ortiz's house to barking dogs and a kitchen full of teenagers doing homework. Anita and Mike are in the middle of their nightly game of musical parents, figuring out how their kids will get home from after-school sports the following day. It's almost absurd that they are able to keep track of all four children in light of their own schedules. Not only does Mike, a surfer from California who played college basketball at Oklahoma State, run the rec district, he also works four overnight shifts a week as a hotel security guard. “We need every penny,” Anita says, an ode to sending their kids to the prestigious Vail Mountain School 30 minutes upvalley.

The Ortizes are strict with their kids, and it shows in the teenagers' manners. Amelia, the oldest at 18, has just gotten into Williams. She is captain of the high-school track team and is baking cookies for their regional meet the next day which Mandy, 16, is also running. David, twin brother to Acacia, 14, is trying to buy some time following tomorrow's soccer practice before he gets picked up. Anita sees through his ploy immediately and mouths to me in the living room: “He wants to hang out with his girlfriend.” But instead of calling his bluff, she plays along with a huge grin on her face until David is forced to either admit his intentions or concede and catch an earlier ride. He concedes. Victory: parents.

Before I'd arrived, Mike had told me on the phone that running is only what Anita does third best, after being a mother and wife. “We have four kids, three dogs, three cats, a bird—there's so much going on at our house, and everyone's really happy,” Mike said. “And that's because of Anita. She's the glue.”

When I ask Anita if she was a big partier at Florida State, she glances over to see if her kids are listening. All four heads are buried in books. “Yeah,” she whispers. Amelia, discretely eavesdropping, calls her out right away: “Mooooommm! It's



Ortiz in spring training for this summer's Western States 100.



not like we don't know!" Anita rolls her eyes and laughs, sheepishly proud of her daughter for demanding transparency. Then she realizes she's forgotten to tend to the pasta. "Hey, will someone drain that spaghetti!" she shouts to the kitchen.

"We were already doing that!" Mandy and Amelia yell back.

"You're so wonderful," Anita coos.

She does almost all the cooking, but she doesn't mind. The reward comes when the six of them gather at the dinner table every night. "I'm a stickler for family meals," she says. "We talk about our days; it's where we connect. So many families don't do that."

After the seven of us wolf down a feast of spaghetti, Caesar salad and garlic bread, Anita, Amelia and Mandy break into a conversation about strategy for regionals. Soon they're rattling off splits and debating how much Mandy can realistically shave off her time in the mile. "See?" Mike says, chuckling. "This is what I mean when I say I live with running nerds."

Truth be told, Mike is the biggest supporter of his family's running habit and has been Anita's most ardent fan since she returned to racing in the mid-'90s. Yet it wasn't until just before the 2002 Mountain Running World Championships in Igls, Austria, that he fully comprehended his wife's athletic will. "She's sitting on the bed, shaking like a leaf," he recalls, "so I'm, like, 'Don't worry. You're going to be fine.' And she goes, 'You dummy. I'm not worried about how I'm gonna do. I'm worried about how bad this is gonna hurt. Because if it doesn't hurt, it means I haven't run my best.' And that really helped our marriage. It helped everything. Because then I understood her."

\* \* \*

**HOWEVER, NOT EVERYONE** understands Ortiz. Some of her competitors wonder why she makes self-deprecating statements before she dominates them. "It's hard to hear that because everyone knows how fast she is," said one female ultrarunner who asked not to be named. "But literally every race, she'll line up and say, 'Oh, I have this injury, I'm not feeling well, I don't even know if I'll finish.' And then she goes out and sets a course record."

Never mind her tiny stature or pretty face. "She intimidates people," says Adam Chase, team captain of Salomon, which began sponsoring Ortiz three years ago. "I saw her at mile 80 of Western States, and she looked kind of like she



always does, which is just *tough*. She has a 'bring it' look to her. She's feisty. I'm glad I never have to race against her."

Later that summer, Kami Semick witnessed a disturbing scene involving Ortiz. Coming off her Western States win, Ortiz was trying to repeat as women's masters team champion at the Gore-Tex TransRockies Run in Colorado, where she was paired with reigning 100K national champion Prudence L'Heureux. Despite having never met, the women took a

Unwilling to continue racing with Ortiz, L'Heureux flew home after three stages. Ortiz ran the final three days alone, crossing the line first each day despite having been disqualified from the team standings. In retrospect, Ortiz says, "I was probably too hard on her. But I could do that to Katie [Mazzia], and she'd go with it. The main thing was, we should have been more clear about what we both wanted out of the race."

For Ortiz, it came down to the same

**"I'm not worried about how I'm gonna do. I'm worried about how bad this is gonna hurt. Because if it doesn't hurt, it means I haven't run my best."**

commanding lead in their division. But L'Heureux had serious trouble breathing, which prevented them from opening an even larger deficit. Ortiz spent much of her days screaming at L'Heureux to move faster, Semick recalls. "Even when they were that far ahead, Anita couldn't turn it off. She had her hands on her hips and was yelling, 'Get your ass up the hill!' And Prudence couldn't breathe."

"We'd cross the line after the first three stages, and she wouldn't even look at me," L'Heureux says. "She'd stomp off and go talk to her friends. She just treated me like a bad person. I've never had anyone treat me that way. She didn't seem to have any compassion or human side. She didn't care. And Anita was one of my idols."

thing it always does: satisfying "the need to do the absolute best that I can do." That's how she explained it in her kitchen the last time I saw her—as a need. But she was worried about how she'd be judged in light of the TransRockies episode showing up in public. She is a mother, wife and elementary-school teacher, after all, "an example for all women," as Chase put it.

But she is also one of the world's best runners. And when it comes to that, Ortiz's philosophy is simple. "I think you have to have some fierceness in you."

*Devon O'Neil is a writer in Breckenridge, Colorado. His work can be viewed at [www.devononeil.com](http://www.devononeil.com).*