

Beyond the Broken Bones

After years of injuries, Miranda Miller's downhill game is on the rise



by **Tara Nolan**
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TOP
UCI mountain
bike World Cup in
Leogang, Austria,
2016



Look at a candid picture, or even a press photo, of Miranda Miller. You get a pretty good sense of the downhill rider's personality. Her sense of humour comes through. Her strength. Her love of bikes (obviously). She appears to be one of those fun-loving people who everyone wants to be friends with. Take a look at her Instagram and other social media accounts, and you think "badass," "fearless," but also "sensitive and caring." It's funny how social media can do that – it's like this weird book that can reveal a lot about a person, but then there are also pages missing.

Miller seems comfortable and at ease with herself. She's not afraid to discuss both her strengths and weaknesses, while also praising her teammates and friends.

She's one of those fortunate people (if you're into mountain biking) who grew up on the West Coast (Pemberton, B.C., then Squamish), where riding bikes is just an inherent part of life in the mountains. She didn't really set

out to race and only vaguely remembers that it was maybe her mother who suggested that Miller do a downhill race in Penticton because she was going there to visit a friend.

That need to compete caught on. Miller joined an after-school coaching and racing program. In March 2007, she headed to Fort William for her first race as a junior. Her career, though, got off to a rocky start with a series of season-ending injuries – 2007: broken collarbone; 2009: kidney failure; 2010: broken leg; 2013: broken arm and two surgeries to repair it; 2014: both arms broken and three surgeries; and 2015: broken wrist. Despite breaking her wrist (again) at the beginning of 2016, she pulled off third place at Austria's 2016 Leogang UCI mountain bike World Cup, first place at Crankworx (Garbanzo DH women) and a bunch of top-10 finishes on the World Cup and Enduro World Series circuit.

It takes a certain type of drive and fortitude to come back from injury and excel. "It's a hard mindset to be in multiple times in a row," admits Miller about her many recovery periods.

According to those who know her, Miller doesn't perceive her injuries as barriers. "She loves riding and competition and the process of improving as an athlete and as a person so much that those injuries become a part of the



process," says Miller's coach, Joel Harwood of Blueprint Athlete Development. This year marks Harwood's first season coaching Miller, but their paths had crossed a number of times – the high-performance-focused coach has been working in the Sea-to-Sky corridor for more than a decade. As Harwood explains it, finally their personalities and visions aligned. "I've always sort of rooted for Miranda," he says.

Miller had been with the same trainer for five years, but had admired the style of training her roommate and boyfriend, pro mountain biker Rémi Gauvin, and another roommate, Lee Jackson, were getting from Harwood. For the 2017 season, Harwood has created a comprehensive program for Miller. They communicate often when she's on the road and ride together when she's back in Squamish.

Prior to 2016, Miller hadn't really had the opportunity to complete a full World Cup season. "Whether mechanicals or injury, she's had to take a harder road than the others who burst onto the scene suddenly," says Harwood. "She's beaten a lot of fast women throughout the years. She didn't suddenly find a new gear: she was able to remain on that gear and build momentum she hadn't had previously."

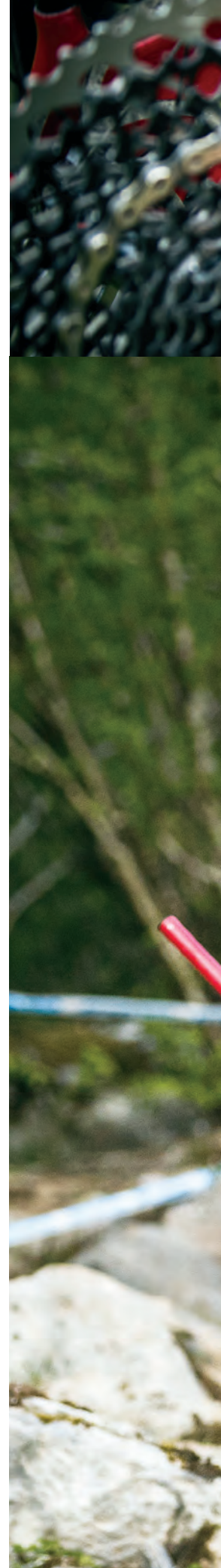
While the previous year featured a lot of on-bike success, it was also punctuated by a profound loss: the death of Stevie Smith. Miller and Smith grew up racing together since about the age of 13. Miller describes Smith as the rider most like herself, but at the same time he was that untouchable guy, a World Cup overall champion. "He proved to all of us that everything was possible and played a large role not only in my riding, but in Rémi's riding and the whole crew of Canadians." It's evident that Smith's presence is still felt strongly more than a year after his death.

For 2017, Miller has left behind racing as a privateer to ride on the Specialized Gravity Team for the World Cup Series and a few Enduro World Series events, which she enjoys because of the strategy they involve throughout a few days of riding.

Being on a team elevates her game. Gone are the days of making her way to a race any way she could, sharing costs with other racers. Specialized takes care

ABOVE
Miller is no stranger to riding through injury. Here she gets taped up before the World Cup at Lourdes, France, 2017.

OPPOSITE
Lourdes World Cup, 2017



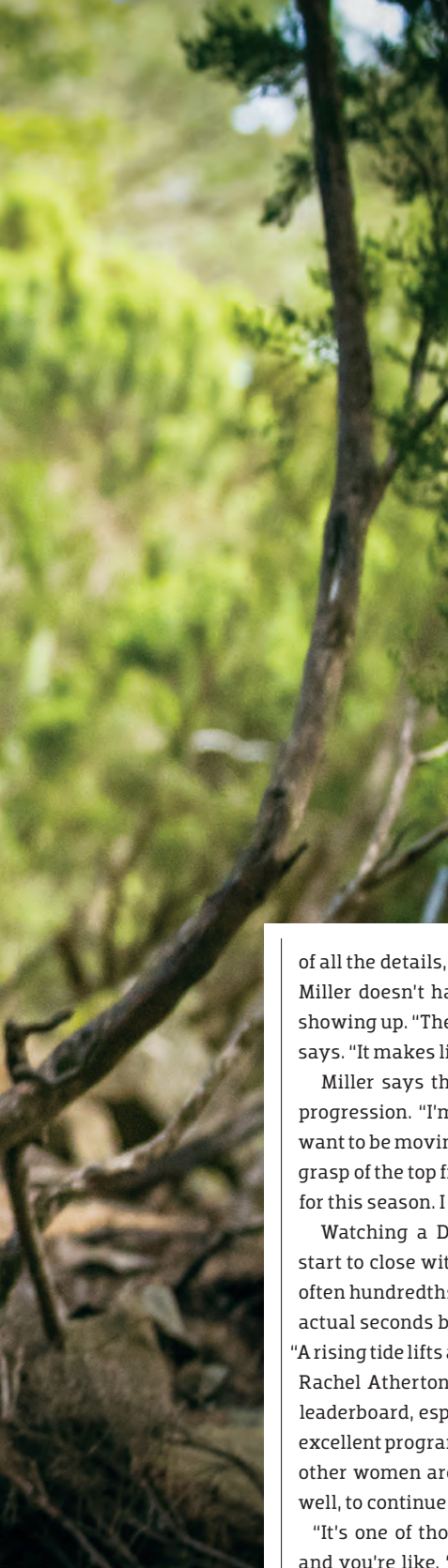




"Racing is a pretty
addicting thing."

ABOVE
Enduro World
Series, Madeira,
Portugal, 2017

OPPOSITE
Loïc Bruni (left),
Miller and Finn
Iles (right, with
camera) walk the
World Cup course
in Lourdes



of all the details, such as flights and transporting her bike. Miller doesn't have to worry about anything other than showing up. "They have us all dialed in at every race," she says. "It makes life considerably easier."

Miller says this year her focus is on consistency and progression. "I'm not putting much of a number to it – I want to be moving forward at each round. If I can be within grasp of the top five in downhills, that's where I want to be for this season. I think that's a realistic spot to be."

Watching a DH race, it's interesting to see the gaps start to close with the women's times. While the men are often hundredths of a second apart, there have been more actual seconds between many of the women competitors. "A rising tide lifts all boats," says Harwood, describing racer Rachel Atherton's dominance at the top of the women's leaderboard, especially in 2016. "The reality is she has an excellent program that she's worked really hard for; all the other women are inspired by that and lift their game, as well, to continue to push Rachel," he says.

"It's one of those things," adds Miller. "She wins again and you're like, 'Godammit!' Then you're like, 'There's no reason why it can't happen for any of us.'"

While Miller doesn't consider herself to be outwardly competitive, she does say that she's pretty competitive with herself. "Racing, if it suits your personality, is a pretty addicting thing – you always want to do something better than you did it before," she says. While she had a nervous start to her weekend in Lourdes, France, the first UCI mountain bike World Cup of the season, she says that throughout the race weekend, she felt her progress, improving on her qualifying time by 10 seconds. "She is

the most driven person I know," says Gauvin. "When she decides to go for something, she goes all in."

Miller is also enjoying the company and drive of her new Specialized teammates, fellow Canuck Finn Iles and Loïc Bruni. (She calls them "Fifi" and "Lolo." Miller is "Mimi.")

Miller says she never felt like an oddity as a female mountain biker, due in part to geography: everyone rides where she lives. She does say that if you take a look at the lineup at the Whistler Mountain Bike Park, it's pretty evenly split between male and female riders these days. It's obvious more women are getting into the sport. Miller says she hasn't put much thought into the idea of "role model," but Harwood says the girls in Squamish are kind of awestruck by her. "I think the reason people gravitate toward Miranda is her approachability," explains Harwood, who describes her as still being that same goofy kid with a braid, cracking jokes and deliberately hamming it up in photos and media releases.

Harwood reveals a bit more by recounting a story from Miller's youth when she found her way into a childhood friend's home and rearranged the contents of the kitchen. "She pranked the entire family, not just her friend – you can't help but love it," laughs Harwood. "She's that same person today – she's looking for something more original."

Miller seems to be forging her way through this new chapter, creating new stories – with a new coach, new team and renewed strategy – divulging bits and pieces of her success and the obstacles she faces on her social media accounts along the way.

"She's a character you want to pull for," says Harwood. "She's a great racer, but an even better person." 