



Getting

to know

ultra champion

Nikki Kimball

d i m i n u t i v e

# DOMINATOR

BY RACHEL TOOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEATH KORVOLA



Last fall, my body was whipped. I'd been training hard for a 100-mile stage race in the Himalayas. My long runs were not only long, but were up and down the mountains that loom over my new hometown of Missoula, MT. I'd moved from the kudzu-blanketed forests and rich red clay of the Carolina Piedmont to a place where the average person's body fat percentage was lower than a snake's belly. Missoula is a mecca for athletic, outdoorsy types. Being just a runner (not a biker or a paddler or a climber or a snowshoer or a swimmer), I felt like a slacker.

I took to driving distances requiring unabridged books on tape to enter races so I could do my long runs with company. In the West, 300 miles is practically next door. One weekend I was in Ellensburg, WA, doing a 50K; the next in Bozeman, MT, for the Lewis and Clark Trail Marathon.

A few months before, I'd paced a friend at the Western States 100M in California. Scott Jurek had won his sixth consecutive title, but a first-timer to the distance nabbed the women's Cougar trophy. I'd seen Nikki Kimball come through the aid station at Michigan Bluff, all unruly hair and freckle-dusted skin, all business. I could hear her yelling at her crew. At the awards ceremony, the 33-year-old seemed surprisingly munchkinesque—5 feet 3 inches—carrying perhaps a couple of pounds' worth of long, orange Botticelli curls, and powerfully built, rather than whippet-thin.

During the first half of the race, Kimball swelled up like a tick before realizing that the sunscreen she had used to protect her fair skin from the sun of the high Sierras was also preventing her from sweating. Once she wiped the slimy stuff off, she let it rip, winning the women's race and coming in 10th overall, not a bad debut in the distance by, as she says, a "rookie chick."

Women's ultraracing had long been dominated by one person: Ann Trason. She was virtually unbeatable. It's often the case that runners will start a race with a good idea of how they will finish. People who train together or race frequently against each other generally know the pecking order. Any time Ann Trason was entered, women knew they were racing for second. When she began to fade, it seemed like the field might open up a bit. Until Nikki Kimball started focusing on ultras.



“I’ve gotten to the **point** where I really



*Halfway into the marathon in Bozeman I was happy. It was a lovely day—sunny, cool, with snowy mountains like meringues in the distance. A woman on a bike glided up next to me. I turned, smiled. She smiled and said, “The first two women are just up ahead.”*

*I had no idea, nor did I want to know, how I was faring in this race that I was not racing. I kept plodding along. “Doesn’t matter,” I said. “I’m not racing. My legs are fried from doing a 50K last weekend.”*

*We’d just passed a relay transition zone, and for a small town, there was a big crowd, cheering over the sounds of the electronic chips chirping perkily as running shoes passed over the mat. “Which 50K?” the biker asked.*

*As much as I loved Montana, as great as it was in every way, I was disappointed not to have found a bigger community of ultrarunners. My serious multi-sport friends didn’t want to devote precious training time just to running.*

*I looked at the woman on the bike. Long, curly hair red hair sprouted from her helmet, her arms were freckled, and she looked strong. I had read that Nikki Kimball had moved recently to Montana. It clicked.*

Kimball has always lived in beautiful places, places webbed with trails in the summer and covered with a good base of snow in the winter. She has been racing for a long

time. Growing up in Vermont, she says, “I started going to cross country ski races when I was three, mostly because the ’rents had to do something with me while my 7-year-old brother got to race through the woods.”

“I ran cross country in a high school which fostered cross country skiers,” Kimball says. “Our running practices involved a lot of roller skiing, upper body strength work, and plyometrics to get our legs fit to hold a tuck.”

After graduating from Williams College in 1993, where she competed on the ski team and majored in biology and women’s studies, Kimball moved to Sun Valley, ID, to focus on biathlon—shooting and skiing—with hopes of making the Olympic team. To support herself, she learned to cook. She’d apprentice at a good restaurant until she learned all she could, and then would quit to work with another chef.

But the plan didn’t pan out: “Unfortunately I’m not a world-class shot, and I wasn’t in my skiing peak in the year I raced the Olympic trials. I stopped when I got sick following the ’93–’94 season and realized I needed stuff like health insurance, so I quit ski racing to go to school. As aggressive as I may be running or skiing downhill, I’m a weener when it comes to taking financial risks such as living without health insurance.”

In college, Kimball had finished a standard pre-med curriculum fully intending to apply to medical school. But for much of 1994 she suffered from major depression. “At my worst,” Kimball says, “I slept 12 to 16 hours a

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day, could run a maximum of about three miles—throughout which I would cry—and lost the ability [temporarily] to understand even simple reading material. Though my doctor believed my symptoms were purely a result of an imbalance of brain chemistry, and I responded very quickly and positively to medication, I lost confidence. I thought, wrongly, that physical therapy school would be significantly easier and, correctly, that it was a shorter course of study than med school, so if I had to drop out due to illness, the debt would be less.”

Kimball attended Beaver College in Pennsylvania for a masters in physical therapy and then moved to Elizabethtown, NY, where she co-founded a multi-disciplinary running clinic in Lake Placid and began to run—and win—trail races throughout the Northeast.

She also started feeling better: “I’m lucky that my illness is fairly easily controlled with medication. Depression is a whole lot easier to manage than many other diseases. I’ve not been incapacitated by depression since 1994, and believe, with proper medical care, I never will be again.”

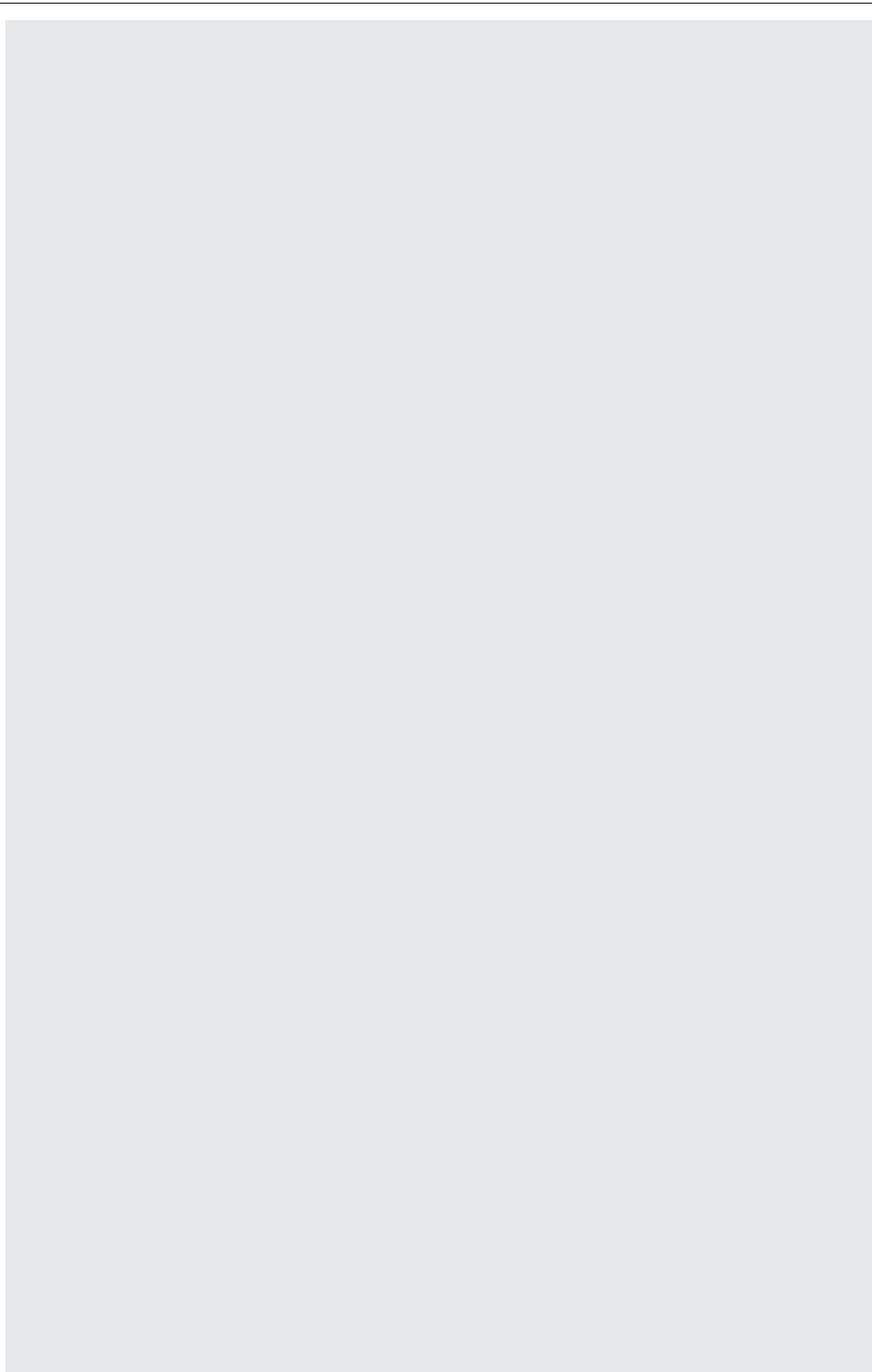
In July 2005, Kimball pulled up stakes and moved to Montana. It was an easy decision: a beautiful place, lots of trails, and good snow. Her friend Andrea Cady had gone on with the medical plan and was now practicing in Bozeman. Of their meeting, over two decades ago, Kimball says, “I was surprised to find that not all girls wanted to play with Barbie and wear stupid girly clothes. We quickly became best mates.”

Less than two months after she’d gotten settled, she was out dancing at a bar and met a guy. A watch-fixer and an adjunct professor of philosophy at Montana State University, Don Demetriades had a marathon PR of 2:25. He could keep up, and was attracted to rather than intimidated by Kimball’s quickness, strength and grit. He was also impressed by her running.

Spending time with this couple can make even the most hard-edged singleton believe in the power of romantic love. They shore up each other’s weaknesses (Demetriades often reminds Kimball to return phone calls, suggests places to look for her errant cell phone) and admire each other’s strengths (Kimball has spent hours discussing the problem of evil and other thorny philosophical issues). While Kimball whips up a dinner of steak, subtly seasoned spinach, and smashed sweet potatoes, Demetriades talks about their plans for the following weekend. “We’ll drive to Boise, do the marathon, and then come home. It’ll be a good speed workout for Nik.”

Digging into his dinner, Demetriades, lean and affectionate, prods Kimball to talk about her playful idea: As a complement to fellow Western States winner Scott Jurek’s vegan, all natural, healthy training weekends, the couple considers hosting “Kimball’s Carnivore Camp”—a throw-down for red meat-eating, liquor-swilling runners.

Out on the town, listening to one of their favorite bands, the Clumsy Lovers, Kimball and Demetriades dance as if they’d just met. She’s got on a white T-shirt, and after an hour or so of athletic movement, she takes it off (she’s wearing an attractive shim-mel from her sponsor, Nike, underneath) and ties the shirt around her head, managing to look great, instead of like a dork.



**Kimball** has  
never been  
**beaten** in a  
trail ultra.  
**Never.**



While Kimball catches her breath with a beer, a woman approaches. “Ohmygod,” she says, “Nikki Kimball?” In a town of 30,000, the local paper has run a number of stories—and pictures—of the ultrastudette, and it’s not unusual for local folks to identify her. Kimball looks at the woman and shrieks. This soccer mom grew

up in Vermont and is visiting Bozeman on vacation. She recognized an old nemesis: “Before every race, my father told me, ‘Beat Nikki Kimball.’ It was the most important thing.” They catch up, the woman boasting that she’s planning to run her first marathon that fall, to raise money for the Leukemia Society. Kimball says yeah, she runs too.

*We started talking at mile 14 and didn’t stop. Kimball’s job was to accompany the lead women, and occasionally she would zip ahead on her bike to check in with the others—whom she also met during the race—and give them each back splits. We discovered that we’d both moved to Montana at around the same time. She told me about meeting Don; I told her that I was dating a non-runner who said that my body was like that of a tyrannosaurus rex. “What?” she asked, looking at me. “Puny, little upper body, big honkin’ legs,” is what he’d said by way of explanation. I told her I didn’t think the relationship was going to last long.*

“It’s amazing how many strangers come up to me at races and tell me to lose weight,” Kimball says. “I’ve gotten to the point where I really like my body. It’s strong, and it works. I’m rarely injured. I can take harder crashes skiing and running at this weight than I could in ’94–’95 when I was thin for a few months. I sometimes wish I were thinner, but I don’t want to be thin badly enough that I get hurt when I fall. Also, I want to still love running when I’m 60. Fearing food in order to run faster takes my love of the sport away.”



*We pass the woman in second place. The leader is within sight. We're at mile 24. Nikki looks at me. "She's right there," she says, nodding ahead with her head. "You're not even running hard. Can't you put the hammer down for two miles?"*

*I've told her that I'm a decent age grouper—better in longer runs—but nowhere near her league. I've told her that I have a long race coming up and that I'm just getting in a training run. I've told her that my legs are tired. But I'm talking to Nikki Kimball, a woman who pushes herself to the limit in every single event. I feel ashamed and embarrassed. I want her respect.*

People with allergies would have a hard time visiting the Kimball/Demetriades home. When you sit down in the little house, within walking distance from Bozeman's Main Street, chances are that soon someone will be in your lap. It's likely to be Darby, Kimball's pointer, a sleek, quivering, mass of doggy love. But it could be one of the other two dogs, or the cat. There's fur everywhere, lots of clean clothes that have yet to be put away, running magazines, books, a game of Scrabble. "I'm a real geek," Kimball says. "We play a lot of Scrabble."

Kimball is as excellent in snowshoe racing as she is in ultrarunning—she was the snowshoe national champ in 2001, 2004, and 2005. She competed on the U.S. Mountain running team from 2001–2003. She also participates in ski joring, where she puts a harness on Darby, and the 37-pound dog pulls 135 pounds of Kimball on skis.

But it's in ultrarunning where Kimball has really been able to shine. She entered her first long race—the Vermont 50 Miler—in 1999 and came in fourth overall, setting a new women's course record. Last year, Kimball won the Montrail Cup—a series of trail races from 50K to 100 miles that attracts the cream of the ultra crop—with a perfect score: She won every race she entered, and broke her own course record in the champi-

onship White River 50 Mile. The year before, she had broken Ann Trason's record by, as she points out—always quick to give due credit—writing Trason's splits on her arm.

Since starting ultrarunning in 1999, Kimball has never been beaten in a trail ultra. Never. Nikki did not tell me this. And when I asked, she took pains to qualify her achievement, saying, "I've only won every ultra trail race; I've lost on the road and in lots of events."

With her earnings from winning last year's Montrail Cup, Kimball came to Missoula for ear surgery, and we had lunch at a local pub with great food but a noisy and smoky atmosphere. "People told me that I got a lot louder since I lost my hearing. At races, they thought I was yelling at my crew. I was. I just didn't realize how loud I am." She suffers from a congenital hearing problem, and before her surgery she was nearly deaf. Now her right ear has slightly lower than low-end normal hearing and the left will be fixed "the next time I can afford to take a few weeks off exercise." She adds, "Luckily my competition can no longer depend on sneaking up on me unnoticed, as has happened in the past when I've seen someone streak past me at the finish line before I could register her or his presence."

*"Okay," I say. "I'll go for it."*

*I'd followed my plan for most of the race. I'd gotten in a good training run. What I hadn't counted on was winning not only the race, but a good friend.*

*Afterward, Nikki greets me and introduces me to Don and Darby. We sit on the grass, sip Diet Cokes, and continue the 16 different conversations we'd begun during the race.*

*"You're going to love the prize," Don says. He's right. It's an aerial photograph of Bozeman, with a discreet red line marking the course. I look it at it often, especially after a trip to Bozeman when I've been able to spend time with my friends, at impromptu versions of Kimball's Carnivore Camp. [1]*