

Santa Cruz High graduate Victor Plata blows away the competition

Olympic prospect wins triathlon



Racers brave heavy surf, Highway 1 debris

By DAVID KIEFER
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SANTA CRUZ — Victor Plata, an athlete targeted as an Olympic prospect, made a triumphant return to Santa Cruz, winning the 16th annual Sentinel Triathlon on Sunday.

Plata, 25, is a Santa Cruz High graduate who has emerged in the past year as one of the country's up-and-coming triathletes.

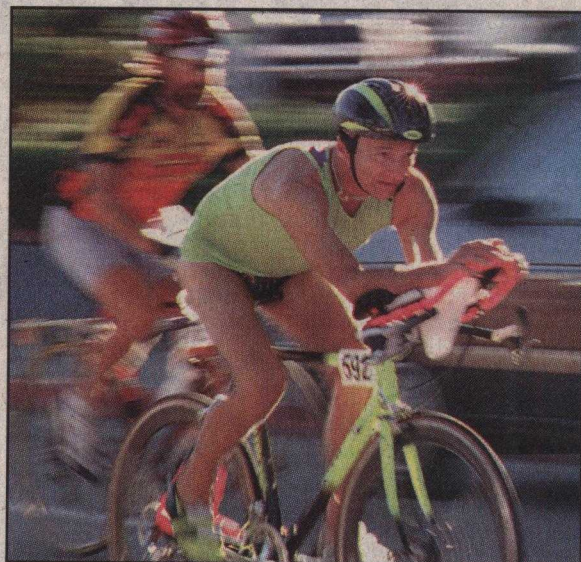
After having begun the grueling sport only two years ago, Plata is one of three triathletes training by invitation at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado

Springs. Plata raced in his home town for the first time and crushed the field of 734, winning by four minutes. His time was one hour, 46 minutes, 26 seconds.

Joan Smith, 36, of Redwood City, won the women's race for the first time in eight tries in a time of 2:03:17.

The race began against heavy surf at Main Beach with a one-mile swim around Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf and continued with a 23-mile bicycle leg to Davenport and back on Highway 1. The race concluded with a 6.2-mile run along West Cliff Drive, ending in front of the West Coast Santa Cruz Hotel.

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Heavy surf made for a difficult start to the 16th annual Sentinel Triathlon, above. At right, contestant Jonathan Hughes heads toward Davenport in the bicycle leg of the race.

Triathlon

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"When I run in Florida or anywhere else, it doesn't have the same soul," Plata said. "It's very special to be here."

Plata's performance overshadowed a series of five crashes during the bicycle portion, with two riders taken to Dominican Hospital with undisclosed injuries. Each was treated and released.

The cause of the accidents may have been a policy change of drafting — riding close to others to reduce wind resistance — made by the race committee, compounded by debris on the course.

Normally, Caltrans sweeps the course a day or two before the race. But the sweep was done Tuesday because of other Caltrans projects, allowing some debris to build up in

the meantime. One of the injured riders lost control when he ran over a piece of wood.

The drafting issue is more complex. Though plainly described as illegal in the race packets mailed to each athlete, drafting has not been enforced in recent years. Because only the shoulder of Highway 1 is used, and all lanes are open to traffic, drafting is inevitable in such close quarters.

After much dispute during a meeting last week, the committee decided to let the athletes know before the race that drafting would be allowed. But without at least attempting to keep their distance, riders were more tightly bunched than ever.

"We may evaluate this thing about crashes," race director Andre Dunkell said. "I need the athletes to let me know how they feel."