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# SPORTS

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SENTINEL TRIATHLON

# Homecoming win for Plata

*Triathlon (Santa Cruz Sentinel)*

■ **To the Victor:**  
Local cruises in wire-to-wire win

By **DAVID KIEFER**  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Victor Plata said he felt more nervous before this race than any other in his life.

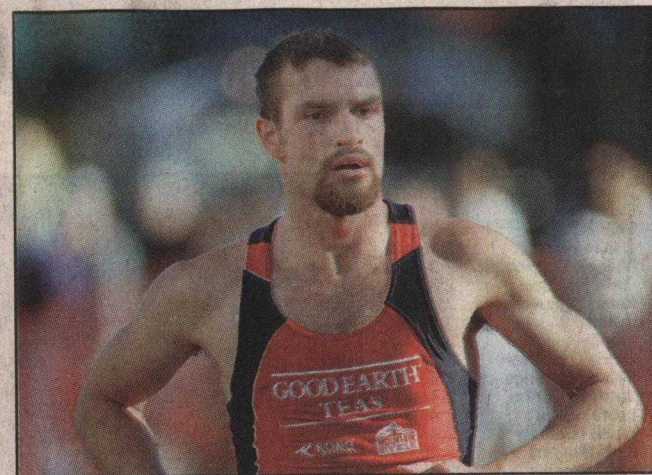
It didn't matter that he was a lock to win Sunday's 16th annual Sentinel Triathlon, and that this was one of the few amateur events sprinkled on his schedule.

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Plata, after all, was coming home.

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— **Victor Plata**  
*Men's winner*

A Santa Cruz High graduate and a lifeguard on Santa Cruz State beaches, Plata was identified as an Olympic prospect a few months ago and is now one of three individuals from around the country training full-time at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs.

Though he felt pressure to live up to expectations, he came through by crushing the field by more than four minutes.

Plata led from start to finish, through a one-mile ocean swim around Santa Cruz Municipal

Wharf, a 23-mile bike ride to Davenport and back, and a 6.2-mile out-and-back run along West Cliff Drive before finishing in front of the West Coast Santa Cruz Hotel. His time was 1 hour, 46 minutes, 26 seconds, far ahead of runner-up Pete Kain of Half Moon Bay (1:50:47).

Despite his success as a first-year pro, Plata had never competed in a triathlon in his hometown, or in front of so many friends and family. If the spectators didn't know him beforehand, they certainly did afterward.

That's because Plata's sister, Mari Hood, proudly pedaled ahead as he ran, shouting to everyone within earshot to cheer for leader Victor Plata, who was coming through.

"I was wondering why so many people knew my name," Plata said.

Though Plata had never completed the Sentinel Triathlon, he was familiar with the race after having been a volunteer in high school, and once did a running leg on a relay team.

"I didn't think it would be this easy," he

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Photos by Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Waiting on the Main Beach for the signal, the over-35 group prepares to charge into the surf at the start of Sunday's race.



Joan Smith from Redwood City crossed the tape first in the women's competition.

## Smith drafts her way to glory

By **DAVID KIEFER**  
Sentinel staff writer

■ **Complete race results — Page 2**

SANTA CRUZ — It was a hollow feeling for Joan Smith.

After having competed in the Sentinel Triathlon "at least seven times," with a best placing of third, Smith could not enjoy her impending victory as she closed in on the finish line Sunday with hundreds of spectators cheering for her down West Cliff Drive.

Smith expected to be disqualified. And to her surprise, she wasn't.

Earning her first victory in what she estimated to be at least four years, Smith was timed in 2 hours,

3 minutes, 17 seconds over a course that consisted of a 1-mile ocean swim around Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, a 23-mile bicycle ride to Davenport and back, and a 6.2-mile out-and-back route along West Cliff before finishing in front of the West Coast Santa Cruz Hotel.

With four miles left in the bicycle leg, Smith thought she had broken the rules. She found herself drafting.

The rules mailed to each entrant plainly state that one can't ride within two bicycle lengths behind or three feet to the side of other

riders.

Because of space constraints on the shoulder of Highway 1 (no lanes were closed to traffic), drafting is inevitable and race management has not enforced the no-drafting rule in recent years. But for the first time, competitors were told just prior to the race that drafting would indeed be allowed.

Smith, however, didn't hear the announcement.

During the bicycle leg, she decided she would tell race director Andre Dunkell about breaking the rules and disqualify herself, which would have given Santa Rosa's

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# Men's race

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said.

Plata's athletic origins are in swimming and running and he competed in both sports at Cal Poly. But since then, cycling has become his passion. Because of that, Plata is unique for his strength in all three events and has no obvious weaknesses. This allows him the confidence to attack during any part of the race.

As it turns out, he didn't need to. Plata was only tested once, and that was because he allowed 16-year-old Bryan Beckman to pull even on the bicycle leg.

**'I was pretty excited. I knew he would have me on the run, but I just wanted to hang on as long as I could.'**

**— Bryan Beckman  
age 16**

Plata had a slight lead over Beckman coming out of the swim-bike transition, but slowed to allow Beckman to catch up — partly because working together creates faster cycling and also to give Beckman a taste of the big time.

"Our juniors need all the help they can get," Plata said. "I wasn't going to dump him. I wanted him to feel what it's like to go with the better guys. It was like Triathlon 101, he needed the experience."

Beckman, a junior at Oak Ridge High in El Dorado Hills near Sacramento, placed 86th in 1996 and 39th last year. This was clearly his finest race, spinning side-by-side with Plata.

At one point, Beckman started to drop, but Plata slowed a bit to allow him to catch up.

"I was pretty excited," Beckman said. "I knew he would have me on the run, but I just wanted to hang on as long as I could."

Just after the turnaround in Davenport, however, Beckman's rear tire blew, forcing him to drop out.

Meanwhile, Kain, racing for the first time since winning the world championships in the 35-39 age-group Aug. 30 in Lausanne, Switzerland, trailed Plata by only



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Victor Plata crosses the finish Sunday, more than four minutes ahead of second place.

1:09. But Plata extended the lead to 2:46 as the run began.

From there, Plata unleashed a 33:38 split over 10 kilometers to win going away.

It was the second straight year a Santa Cruz County athlete won. Last year, UC Santa Cruz graduate Pat Williams had ended an 11-year drought dating back to 1985, when Pat Gilbert won the last of his three straight titles.

Williams had no delusions of a repeat. Now a medical student at UC San Francisco with little time to train, Williams said he was pleased with his sixth-place finish.

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Stephanie Brown-Barber the victory in 2:04:41.

"I tried to stay draft legal, but then I hit a hill," Smith said. "There were a lot of riders and just no way to avoid it."

Still, she never considered dropping out, even if only for personal satisfaction.

"I wanted this race," she said. "Even if I had to give it up."

Smith, 36, a former small-college All-America in swimming and track and field at the University of Rochester, took the lead at the outset of the bicycle leg from Sarah Kerlin and held it to the finish.

"I heard everybody clapping," she said, as she came down the home-stretch. "But I felt like telling them that I wasn't really the winner. Someone asked me my name and I didn't want to tell them."

After the race, Smith confessed to Dunkell, who refused to disqualify her.

"Didn't you hear the announcement?" he said, reassuring her that she won after all.

"I just wish I'd known beforehand," she said.

The race capped a rough season for Redwood City's Smith, who quit her real-estate job 1½ years ago to concentrate on making a run for the 2000 Olympic Games. Great training wasn't reflected in results.

At the Pacific Grove Triathlon two weeks ago, she suffered from asthma and faded badly. Smith wasn't sure if she should end her season right there.

"I've never wanted to just crawl

into a hole more than after that race," she said.

Even as late as 6 p.m. Saturday night, Smith still wasn't sure she wanted to go through all that again and even compete at the Sentinel race. It took a phone conversation with her mother to convince her otherwise.

"I told her I really wanted out of it," Smith said. "But she told me, 'You've got to get out there tomorrow and race to your full ability. Sometimes, you've got to do things you don't want to do.'"

Smith listened and won, fair and square.