

She's the powerhouse behind the women's race at the Tour de France, the prolific visionary and athlete who wrote three books, made a documentary film, and clawed her way into the professional ranks of three different sports. But walking away from a goal might have been her strongest move yet.

BY STEVE FRIEDMAN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSE MANDOJANA

KATHRYN BERTINE HAD IT ALL

FIGURED

OUT

THE NOTE WOULD BE SHORT—WHERE THINGS WERE, WHO SHOULD BE TOLD ABOUT WHAT. INSTRUCTIONS ON WHERE SHE WOULD BE. SHE WASN'T POSITIVE ABOUT THAT LOCATION YET, BUT IT WOULD BE SOMEWHERE IN THE WOODS.

FOR KATHRYN BERTINE, THE PLAN was the thing. To the people who knew her, though, what mattered was how she went about realizing it: With cheerful pigheadedness, with good humor, with unreasonable grit. Obstacles that stopped others, she clambered over, or rammed. Plans were adjusted, not abandoned.

No one knew about this one. It was August of 2014. She was 39 years old, an inspirational and even beloved figure. That summer had been at once the most successful and hopeless of her life. Two months earlier she had pulled out of the Philadelphia International Cycling Classic. A week after that she stood in front of hundreds of people at a film festival introducing the documentary to which she had devoted two years of her life. She ticked off facts, cited persuasive and alarming figures buttressing her claims about the lack of parity between male and female professional cyclists, feeling herself smile, watching herself speak, listening to a voice no one else could hear: “What am I going to do? What am I going to do? What am I going to do?”

Now she knew. She had a plan. She would drive into town. She would do some errands. She would write her note. She would decide exactly where to tell her family they could find her body.

It had worked before and it would work now. Set a goal. Work. Achieve. She felt lighter. She felt relief.

It wasn't complicated: Plan, work, achieve. Even at 11 years old she knew this. For the next seven years, every weekday at 4:45 a.m., she woke her dad who drove her from their home in Bronxville, New York, to the E.J. Murray Memorial Skating Center in nearby Yonkers, where she skated from 5:30 until 7:30. When she was 18, Kathryn tried out for the Ice Capades and the organization told her they would hold a spot for her, but that she should get a college degree first.

Time for an adjusted plan. She had run

cross-country at Bronxville High School to stay in shape for skating, and was recruited to run for Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. But when she didn't get along with the coach, she switched to crew.

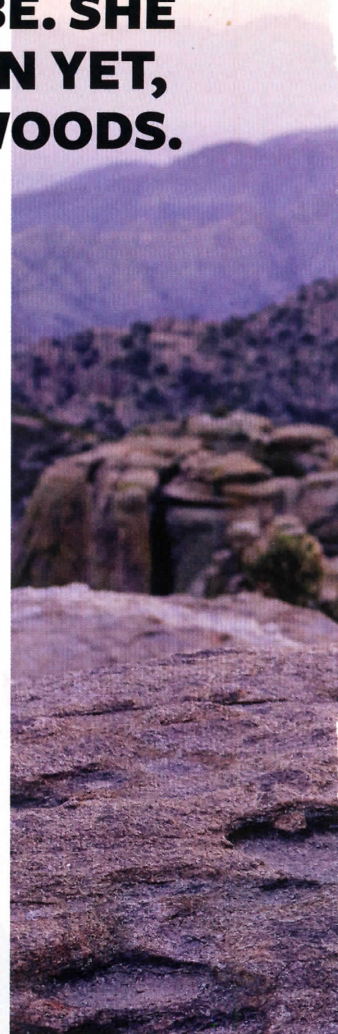
Relatively short for the sport, even at 5-foot-9, but mighty in leg strength, she rowed for the next three and a half years. She wrote, too, and realized she had an aptitude for it. And always, skating. She needed to keep up her skill level for the Ice Capades. But when she inquired, she learned the local rink was booked all day, every day. She went back to the owner of the facility, and when he refused her, went back again, and again. She ended up with ice time every afternoon from 1:30 to 3:00. A plan adjusted. Never abandoned.

She graduated in May of 1997, was accepted by the prestigious MFA program in writing at the University of Arizona in Tucson, postponed entry, and prepared herself for life as a professional skater. She was working out final details with the Ice Capades in June. Officials stopped responding to phone calls and emails in August. In September, the organization folded.

New plan: She joined an outfit called Holiday on Ice, a touring company that crisscrossed Europe. After Holiday on Ice came Hollywood on Ice, which involved a troupe of young skaters, a string of rural South American backwaters, and a single malodorous trailer where the band of intrepid jocks changed, gabbed, and every Sunday morning, reported for a mandatory weigh-in. The bosses “wanted me to be blonde and skinny and wave at the crowds.” She was brunette and muscular, but she could wave. For someone who had trained to be a professional athlete for more than half her life, the focus on body size grated.

She enrolled at the University of Arizona in the fall of 1998. In Tucson, where there was no water on which to row and very little ice on which to skate, she joined the university's triathlon team, where she discovered that her

constantly buzzing internal engine and her leg strength worked to her advantage. She graduated in 2000 with an MFA, having written an essay that would become the first chapter of *All the Sundays Yet to Come*, a coruscating and bleakly hilarious recounting of her not-so-grand European and South American tours, as well as an unsentimental look at her driven childhood and the high price of goal-setting. The book was published in 2003, and by 2005, she was a professional triathlete (though being a pro triathlete is a little bit like being a pro synchronized swimmer in terms of material rewards and fame). She was a published and acclaimed writer, holder of an MFA from the same school that David Foster Wallace had





▲ TAKING A BREAK FROM TRAINING ON TUCSON'S MOUNT LEMMON IN JUNE 2016.

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attended. She had a boyfriend. But what was the plan? She needed a plan.

When the relationship ended, she drove back east, where over the course of 10 months, she slept in or on 11 beds, four futons, three couches, two car backseats, one floor, and a tent. She ended up living in her brother's girlfriend's house and took a job at a restaurant near Bronxville, working the lunch shift. She cadged customers' leftovers and reheated them for dinner. She did a little freelance magazine work, and a lot of babysitting. At the local YMCA she swam, lifted weights, and ran on the treadmill. She snuck in the back door because she couldn't afford the \$5 daily fee.

When does someone whose life is measured in goals set, goals met, and goals denied change course, let go, and move on?

Ice Capades hadn't worked. A career as a pro triathlete was great if you wanted to babysit to pay the bills. What if she was caught skulking through the back door at the YMCA? Would the headlines say, "Local Former Ice-Skating Prodigy Busted!" And things weren't even as awful as they could be. She still had a little more than \$200 in her checking account.

It was time for another plan, time to stop screwing around and to figure out what she wanted to do.



That's when an editor from ESPN called. How would the skater/runner/rower/triathlete like to spend the next two years trying to make the 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing—any sport she wanted? The company would pick up all her expenses and run a monthly column in its magazine and online detailing her experience. She would get paid. ESPN would publish the columns as a book at the end of the two years.

That was a plan.

She tried team handball, open-water swimming, and race walking. She tried pentathlon. Bad results, but good copy. She tried cycling.

Cycling had been her strongest discipline as a triathlete, and she rose from a category 4 (just above rank amateur) to a category 1 (just below professional) in nine months. She did so with a working knowledge of road racing best described as: "Pedal hard, go fast, don't crash."

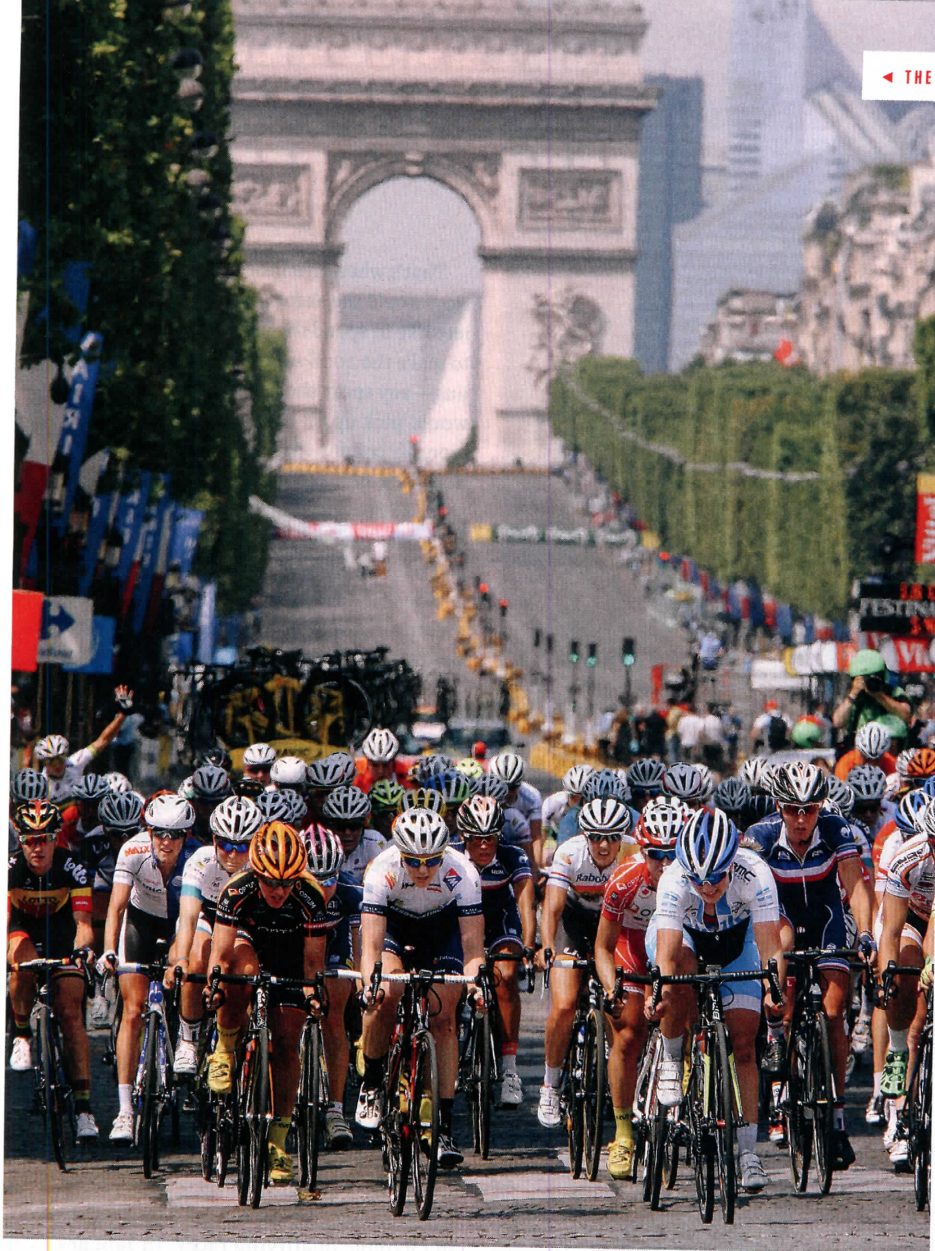
She was remarkably fast, but not remarkably fast enough. She didn't make the national team, which would have given her a shot at the Olympics. Find another way, her editor told her.

The way: She would look for a country with no national women's team and little cycling infrastructure for women, help set up both, earn a spot on the team (after the country granted her dual citizenship), which would give her a chance to compete in Olympic qualifying races. In January 2007 she worked out an arrangement with the Caribbean nation of St. Kitts and Nevis.

She hired a coach, spent the next two and a half years training, learning technique, flying back and forth from the US to the Caribbean, getting stronger, and faster, and stronger and faster. She entered a few UCI-approved races and gained points that could be counted toward qualifying for the Olympics. But not enough points.

As *Good as Gold*, an at times comedic and at other times rueful journey through her thwarted grabs for Olympic glory, was published in 2010. She got married the same year, to a man she had met riding in Tucson, where they were living. Two years later, she signed her first professional racing contract, with Team Colavita.

Life was good. She thought of how much better it would be with a new plan. A huge, bold plan.



She had already discovered that to be a female rider—even a national champion like she had been for St. Kitts and Nevis from 2009 to 2011—in a small country without an infrastructure devoted to promoting women’s professional cycling, was to be a forgotten, impoverished athlete with next to no chance of advancing her career. But as she raced more and talked to other female pros, she discovered that while the women had more opportunities in the US than in the Caribbean, they still lagged far behind their male counterparts. They didn’t earn as much prize money, there weren’t as many races, and the events weren’t nearly as long.

Male professional cyclists on the UCI World-Tour were guaranteed a minimum wage, roughly

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\$37,000 in 2014. Women at the comparable UCI level were guaranteed nothing. A race that featured events for both sexes might award a male winner up to \$75,000, while a female victor would take home a tiny fraction of that.

The situation pissed off Kathryn, the professional rider. It excited Kathryn, the professional writer. She pitched an idea about the issue to ESPNW, the company’s sister brand. Her editor said, “It’s just women’s bicycling. Does anyone even watch it?”

Other writers might have sulked. Kathryn decided to make a documentary. She would spend the next two years writing, directing, and coproducing *Half the Road: The Passion, Pitfalls & Power of Women’s Professional Cycling*.

The more she worked on the film, the more knowledgeable she became. The more knowledgeable she became, the more dissatisfied she became. The dissatisfaction led her to team up with fellow pro cyclists Emma Pooley and Marianne Vos and professional triathlete Chrissie Wellington to lobby the UCI (cycling’s governing body) and the Amaury Sport Organization, which runs the Tour de France, to bring more parity to women’s professional cycling. Neither was responsive. So Kathryn started an online petition asking that women be allowed to race the Tour de France. The four women wanted three weeks of racing, the same course as the men. In two days, there were 10,000 signatures. After three weeks, there were almost 100,000.

The negotiations were difficult, and even when the ASO agreed to let women race, its executives consented to only 55 miles, 13 laps in Paris ending on the Champs-Élysées. The race, called La Course by Le Tour de France, would happen just before the men’s final stage, when spectators would already be in place.

To those who knew little of the predicament of female pros, it wasn’t enough. People complained, “Only one day?” To those who knew a lot about the situation, though, who had been living with the disparity, La Course was huge. It would bring the kind of coverage women’s racing sorely lacked, at the one time of year when people are really paying attention to cycling.

By the beginning of 2014, Kathryn had become one of the best-known activists in professional cycling. *Half the Road* would premiere on January 29 in Tucson. La Course would take place in July. Her third book, *The Road Less Taken: Lessons from a Life Spent Cycling*, would be published the same year.

But she wasn’t a professional cyclist anymore. In December 2013, Colavita had said they wouldn’t pick up her contract. Without a team, she wouldn’t be invited to participate in La Course, the event she had been so

Kathryn Bertine Had It All Figured Out

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instrumental in creating. “I was in a place where my activism would be seen in two ways. One, that team managers would have the mindset of, ‘We understand and support what you’re doing for the sport.’ The other side of that coin would be, ‘Wait a minute, this is the one who speaks her mind and maybe we should be careful.’”

A lifetime of planning had taught her that even as things were falling apart, the planner had to stay prepared. She didn’t want anyone to invite her on a team only because she had helped women’s racing, so “I was going to train for a yes.” She ramped up her long rides into the mountains outside Tucson. She kept calling teams. “Thanks for making this happen,” she was told. “But no. Sorry, we can’t take you.”

The film helped. Five hundred people came to its opening in Tucson. It played at theaters across the country. It was accepted at film festivals from Fargo, North Dakota, and Richmond, Virginia, to Sheffield, England. Racing the time trial at the Tour of California in May of 2014 for St. Kitts and Nevis helped. What helped most was when, in April, Rochelle Gilmore, owner and general manager of Team Wiggle Honda, sent an email.

“She was like, ‘You should be there,’” Kathryn says. “You made this happen.”

ON THURSDAY, MAY 22, 2014, Kathryn flew to Denver to introduce *Half the Road*, and then back to Tucson Friday morning. She called her husband at work, they agreed to go for sushi later, then she headed out for a 40-mile ride. It was a rolling route. She looked at the Rincon Mountains as she ascended toward Colossal Cave, then regarded the Santa Catalina Mountains on the way back. When she returned mid-afternoon, she felt good. Her husband was sitting on the living room couch.

Later that afternoon she found herself on the floor, sobbing, and an hour or two later, in her bed, still sobbing. That night she vomited once, maybe two or more times, she’s not sure.

Kathryn would rather the particulars of what transpired between the moment she returned from her ride and the moment she found herself on the floor not be published. She will say that the request for a divorce shocked her, and that she has not heard from or spoken to her now ex-husband in the two years since.

Within days, she moved into her father’s apartment in Tucson where he sometimes lived. She slept on a couch in his office. The next week, she cried often, slept late, forgot things—like meals. She didn’t ride.

She talked about what had happened and how she was feeling with almost no one. How could she? She was the face of female empowerment

on wheels, the often-unsigned-but-ever-optimistic racing pro, the almost Olympian who had forced the crickety old men who ruled professional cycling to capitulate. She was the eternally planning, irresistibly forward-moving activist, author, and athlete. Was she going to let people know that she’d come undone because her husband left? And if he left, didn’t that mean she had failed? And if she had failed, didn’t it mean that willpower wasn’t all that? That plans were useless?

ONE PERSON SHE CONFIDED IN was her friend and fellow professional racer Lauren Hall. Hall had been divorced, and told Kathryn she knew what she was going through, and that she just had to get through the day. Hall said she knew what Kathryn would be going through in six months, and that she would just have to get through that day, too, and the days before, and the days after. She told Kathryn it would take awhile, and it might never stop hurting, but it would stop crippling her. She told Kathryn that she knew it was hard, especially if you weren’t able to share your pain. (“In professional sports, if you show any weakness, people will use it against you,” Hall says.)

The week after the split, Kathryn was scheduled to fly east for the Philadelphia International Cycling Classic, “an actual paying gig” that she couldn’t afford to miss. From Philadelphia she would fly to Chicago, where she would introduce her film, then back to Tucson, where she would do her best to not fall apart before La Course, which would take place on July 27.

On May 28, four days before the race in Philadelphia, she called the director of the local team that had invited her to guest ride. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve come down with something.”

She made it to Chicago on June 3 for the *Half the Road* screening. She remembers looking at the crowd, hearing her voice saying smart, insightful things about the film and women’s racing. “Meanwhile my brain is on autorepeat: ‘Your husband just left you. What are you going to do? What are you going to do? What are you going to do?’”

She blamed herself. “Should I have cleaned the bathroom more? Should I have taken out the trash more? It’s my fault. I did this.”

The few friends she told, especially Hall and another professional rider, Amber Pierce, told her to stop torturing herself, that her questions were self-destructive, and whatever answers she came up with were undoubtedly wrong.

They told her to take care of herself, but she didn’t understand. Did they mean she should take herself to lunch and get a pedicure? (They did not.) “What did they mean, take care of myself? I was lost.”

She knew she had to do La Course.

She felt as bad as ever, but she had a plan, and this one she couldn’t abandon. Too many people were counting on her.

Paris helped. Wearing the Wiggle Honda kit helped. Riding in the race she helped create helped. Kathryn flattered about a third of the way in. She tried to chase, but officials pulled her out after about three more laps. She spent those laps smiling, waving at the crowd, watching them wave back, wondering if they knew who she was, what she had done. She cried with joy and grief. She was sure no one knew her grief.

In a prerace interview with Universal Sports there were questions about her personal journey, or at least that’s the way she heard it. “I just remember feeling, ‘Don’t crack. If you crack now you’re on a slippery slope.’”

She tried to say something innocuous but honest. “Sometimes when you shoot for everything you want,” she said, “you lose everything you have.”

AFTER EUROPE, SHE FLEW TO Albany, New York. Her father met her at the airport and they drove to a cabin in the woods. She would write. She would ride. She would heal.

She had no husband, no home, no car. The books and the film and the new place—a small place, but a place nonetheless—for women at the Tour de France? It was nothing. It was worse than nothing, because she had engineered all of that, which meant she wasn’t allowed to tell anyone how sad she was, how broken. What would that do to the people who believed in her cause?

She rode her bicycle for four or five hours a day, not to work out, not to prepare for anything, just to quiet her mind. She had heart palpitations. She knew she “didn’t live in a war zone, that I had food,” but that awareness only made her feel worse. How could she be so weak, so selfish, and feel so hopeless when others had it much worse than she did?

Other people got better. Other people survived divorces. Why couldn’t she? Was there something deeper that was wrong with her? Had she, in her zealotry and single-minded pursuit of success (qualities necessary in great athletes, not incidentally) forgotten something else, something critical to happiness? If so, what? And if what she did was so important that it meant the people who are most important in your life don’t stick around, is what you do really that important? She recognized the irony: The woman who made the Tour de France bosses buckle now entertaining the idea that her strength had ruined her marriage, wondering if being weaker might have helped.

Kathryn Bertine Had It All Figured Out

Kathryn was educated and she had written about athletes. She had plumbed her own psyche before, had examined the roots of her drive, her sensitivity. Why couldn't she recover? Why couldn't she tell someone how bad things were?

The note would be short—where things were, who should be told about what, maybe a few words about her reasoning. Instructions on where to find her. There were a lot of other things to say, too, but she was a writer. She wanted to get to the point.

"I'm not strong enough for this," she would write. "I'm sorry, this has tested my limits. I have found something I'm not strong enough for."

She would leave it in a place her family could find it. It would lead them to her body.

Tuesday, August 12, was a mild, overcast day. Kathryn drove into the nearest town in the morning. She walked into a coffee shop, ordered a cup of tea, opened her laptop and before she checked her email, scanned the headlines. For a moment, she stopped breathing.

Robin Williams, she read, had hanged himself the day before. She spent more than an hour searching online. There was overwhelming reaction on social media. People said they understood

the popular comedian's despair. They understood how it could seem like there was no way out. They understood how depression could blind a person, how it could destroy a person.

Many of the online commenters understood, they wrote, because they had felt that way themselves. But they had shared their pain, they had received the help they needed. They wished Robin Williams could have been so lucky. They wished that anyone feeling hopeless would tell someone about it, that he or she would hang on.

She got up from the computer, shaken.

She walked to the car, drove to the cabin. Maybe she wouldn't get better. Maybe she wasn't lucky, and never would be. Maybe she would write the note she had already composed in her head. But she wouldn't write it this day. This day, she would put her plans on hold. Maybe plans weren't all they were cracked up to be. She told her father: "I need help."

"I'M FINALLY IN A PLACE WHERE I am able to truly appreciate the present," Kathryn says. "When I hit little bumps in the road, it's easier to say, 'Hmmm, bad day, bad week, but you've been through worse, you'll be okay.'"

She's sitting on the balcony of the one-bedroom Tucson apartment she still shares with her father. It's February 2016, a year and a half since she abandoned her plan. In less than two months, she'll crash during a race in Mexico, where she'll break her clavicle, suffer a brain injury, go into a seizure, spend a few weeks in hospitals during which her survival will be in question, then make a full recovery.

She returned to Tucson after the cabin in the woods, and saw a therapist. She was dropped from Wiggle Honda in late 2014, signed with BMW-Happy Tooth just before it folded at the end of 2015, then landed with the Cylance professional UCI Women's WorldTour team. She got a marketing and public relations job with El Grupo, a Tucson-based organization dedicated to empowering youth through cycling. She has forged new friendships, deepened old ones. She's been on some dates, none great, some awful.

Kathryn has told some of her friends what she's been through and to her surprise, they all understand. If she meets someone and asks how they're doing and they reply, "Okay, I guess," she stops, then asks another question, "How are you really doing?" It feels nice, being able to use what she's gone through to help someone else.

Before the accident, Kathryn had intended to retire after the 2016 season. Now she's thinking 2017. She wants to go out on her own terms. And then? She isn't sure. Setbacks and depression and a near suicide and recovery have changed her, but they haven't replaced her identity. She is still focused, still forward-looking, still obstinate at times. But in February, sitting on the balcony of her father's apartment sipping tea, more than a year after she almost died, less than two months before she would almost die again, Kathryn's faith in the sanctity of plans has weakened. She had set goals, worked toward them, achieved them, and it all had led her to a cabin in the woods, contemplating a final, terminal plan. Willpower matters. But so does giving up and asking for help.

Determination alone can't save a person. She knows that now. It feels something like wisdom. **B**

DON'T HATE THE PLAYER. HATE THE GAME.

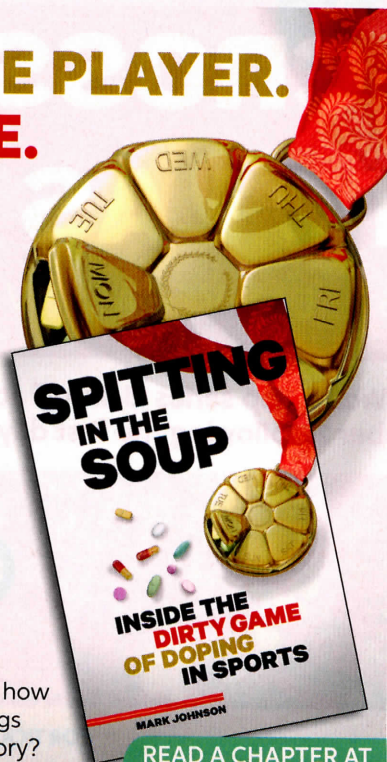


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