

WINS & LOSSES

In 2008, veteran pro triathlete Becky Lavelle rebounded from the tragic loss of her twin sister Jenny to have her best season of racing.

BY MATT FITZGERALD • PHOTOS BY LARRY ROSA





On the night of Friday, Dec. 17, 2007, Becky Lavelle, now 33, and her professional triathlete husband, Brian, ate dinner with friends at a restaurant near their home in Los Gatos, Calif. During the meal Brian's cell phone alerted him to a couple of missed calls from Chip Bankston, the husband of Becky's twin, Jenny. There was nothing too unusual about that, so he merely made a mental note to return the calls the next day.

It was well after 10 o'clock—past 1 a.m. in Birmingham, Ala., where Chip and Jenny lived—when Brian and Becky returned home. Soon after they walked in the door, the home phone rang. The incoming number was the same. Becky answered.

"Becky, it's Chip," she heard. "You'd better give the phone to Brian." Becky's body went numb with dread as she obeyed her brother-in-law.

Brian took the phone. Chip told him that Jenny and her newborn son, Graham, had been found shot to death in their home that evening. "It was one of those out-of-body experiences," Brian recalls. "Becky was looking at me, knowing something really bad had happened, and

I had to tell her. It was awful."

Devastated, unable to perform even the simplest functions, Brian and Becky called his parents and asked them to come help them make arrangements to catch a morning flight to Minnesota, where Becky and Jenny had grown up and their parents still lived. While waiting for the flight at San Francisco Airport, Becky received another call and learned that the gun found with the bodies of her sister and nephew had been purchased by Jenny the same day. She had taken the lives of her child and herself while in a severe postpartum depression.

"It was a total shock," Becky says. "Hindsight is 20/20, and looking back I can see little things that might have been signs. She would cry a little bit more after Graham was born and she struggled a little with breastfeeding, but there was nothing glaringly out there to tell us she was as hurting and depressed as she was. She definitely kept it in."

No loss could have cut Becky more deeply. The bond between same-gender twins is typically very strong, and Becky and Jenny were no exception. "When they were little they were like sisters," says Becky's



father, Bob Gibbs, “but when they got to high school they realized they were each other’s best friends. They had a group of 12 friends that was known as The Posse, and Becky and Jenny were the magnets—they were the center of this whole group.”

All three of the Gibbs siblings—Jenny, Becky and their elder brother, Randy, now a coach for the U.S. Nordic Ski Team—were gifted athletes. Becky and Jenny started swimming for the Minneapolis Mach 3 Flyers Swim Club as 7-year-olds. They quickly became two of the best swimmers in the state, but Becky was never the very best until one fateful day in 1988 that her father will never forget.

“When she was about to turn 13,” he recalls, “she was swimming in the State Championships in Rochester, Minn. She was going up against a girl she had never beaten, a state champion who had beaten her five or six times before. In the preliminaries, Becky qualified first with a faster time. We went back to the hotel and we were in the lobby with the parents of another girl on Becky’s team. One of them said, ‘Well, that other girl will probably swim faster tonight.’ And Becky said, ‘She’d better!’ Sure enough, Becky crushed her in the final and never looked back. She was named the best swimmer of the state meet seven years in a row.”

Bob Gibbs was shocked by this unprecedented competitive ferocity from his otherwise almost preternaturally calm daughter, but he got used to it. A sudden mood switch from relaxed to bloodthirsty at the starting horn became a hallmark of her mental approach to racing. “She just had the eye of the tiger,” Gibbs recalls. “Other coaches would come up to me and say, ‘She looks so sweet, but when she gets in the blocks, she’s a beast!’”

Brian Lavelle sees the same characteristic in his wife today at triathlon starting lines. “My dad says that when she’s standing on the starting line of a race, she looks like she’s standing in line at the movies,” he says. “She’s never stressed. I don’t know how she does it. It makes me crazy sometimes.” The moment she dives into the water, however, Becky is determined not to lose, and because her swim and bike legs are stronger than her run, she races all the more mercilessly in hopes of building an insurmountable lead by the time she reaches T2.

“Becks is a strong woman,” says her friend and rival of 12 years, Laura Bennett. “Her greatest strength lies in the bike. When racing her I realize that her swim will be strong, her run will be solid, but her bike will be lightning. She has proven herself time and time again on the bike and poses a serious challenge that I look forward to every time I race her.”

Upon graduating from Wayzata High School in suburban Minneapolis in 1993, Becky and Jenny took up studies at Louisiana State University, where, despite Jenny’s having won a state high school

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swimming championship title of her own, only Becky continued to swim competitively. While working her way toward a bachelor's degree in kinesiology, which she received with *summa cum laude* honors, Becky earned NCAA All-American status 10 times. But before she even completed her second year at LSU, Becky began to tire of swimming and craved a new athletic challenge.

Becky expressed her restlessness to her brother, Randy, while at home in Minnesota between her sophomore and junior years. Randy was dabbling in triathlon and suggested she try it. Becky signed up for a local race that took place on a course that would later be used for the Life Time Fitness Triathlon. She borrowed her dad's much-too-big bicycle for the race. "I came out of the water in the lead and stayed there for quite a while, which was kind of fun," she recalls. Becky finished fifth overall and was hungry for more.

After graduating from college in 1998 with a few more triathlons under her belt (including a seventh-place finish in the ITU Age-Group World Championship), Becky moved back to Minnesota and turned pro. "At that time I had no idea that 11 years later I would still be doing this, and doing it for a living," she says. In fact, it was some time before Becky made a living as a professional triathlete, because race prize money was less plentiful in the late 1990s and she waited a couple of years before aggressively pursuing sponsorships. These efforts were helped by her victory at the U.S. Triathlon Series Championship in Oceanside, Calif., in 1999.

The following year, then-26-year-old Becky Gibbs decided to attend an altitude training camp in Hawaii. Among the two dozen other athletes there was an up-and-coming age-grouper named Brian Lavelle. He vividly recalls the moment he first saw her. "She was on the treadmill doing a VO_2 max test with a tube in her mouth and her nose plugged and electrodes on her chest," he says. How romantic!

Although Becky had a boyfriend at the time, the two quickly hit it off. "What really attracted me to her was her caring, calm, sweet demeanor," says Brian. "I'm kind of a spaz. We definitely define the 'opposites attract' thing, because she's mellow, calm, anything but type-A. She was attractive to somebody like me who needs to be toned down."

By the time she left Hawaii, Becky's days in Minnesota were numbered. It was March and the weather was awful. "In three weeks she managed to get outside to train maybe three times," her father recalls. Soon Becky was making plans to move out to California's Silicon Valley to join Brian. "Initially I came here thinking I would just try it out for a couple of months," she says. Nine years later, she is happily and inextricably immersed in her fair-weather environment, outdoor lifestyle and partnership with Brian. They were married Dec. 28, 2002.

"We live up in the hills surrounded by redwood trees," Becky says. "Town is only five minutes away, but it feels pretty remote, so we get comfortable here and it sometimes seems like a big deal to go to town." Although she confesses that, like any couple, she and her husband do "get on each other's nerves" sometimes, especially given the amount of time they spend together, she gratefully recognizes that they make a great team.

"We probably do 75 percent of our training together, unless he's doing an Ironman," she says. "We do all of our swimming together. We do our weekend long ride and long run together. He's pretty high-energy and he keeps things light and fun. He makes it fun to work hard."

Brian feels that he gets just as much out of the arrangement. "I really can't imagine going to races by myself," he says. "It would take a lot of the fun out of it. Traveling with bikes and equipment can be stressful. She does all of the organizing of the trips and keeps everything calm."

After settling in California, Becky began to work part-time as a

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personal trainer to help make ends meet, but after the 2003 season she decided to quit the job and focus entirely on qualifying for the 2004 Olympics. “That came back to bite me when I got injured in February of ‘04,” Becky says. “Trials were in April. I didn’t go to that race, and I didn’t race at all the entire year. It was a struggle—a huge test of patience.”

More than one injury hobbled Becky that year, but the most debilitating and persistent was a bad case of iliotibial band friction syndrome. Treating it became a full-time job, she says, as she addressed the root cause with strength work and shuttled back and forth between sports medicine specialists for cortisone injections, massage therapists for deep-tissue work and active-release treatments, and a chiropractor for Graston therapy, a technique that involves rubbing the injured area with a metal implement.

Becky eventually recovered, but the dark cloud of her frustrating rehabilitation had a silver lining: It taught her a lot about her body, and she has been able to use this knowledge to avoid injuries and overtraining ever since. “She will never overtrain,” says Brian, “because she’s been doing this for so long, and she’s smart enough to know her body and know when to back off. I’ve never seen her overcook herself.”

Becky confirms, “I’m a big proponent of resting when I need it. I really feel that a rest day is sometimes better than trying to push your body through a workout when you’re tired.”

Her comeback season of 2005 was Becky’s best to that point in her career. She won five races, including the U.S. National Championships and the Chicago Triathlon. The following year she won eight races, and in 2007 she scored one of the biggest wins of her career at the Wildflower Triathlon. By the end of that season, her past injury troubles were but a distant bad memory. Life was good—and then came that horrible phone call from Birmingham.

Recovering from the sudden loss of her sister and nephew was infinitely more difficult for Becky than mending her sore IT band. If Graston therapy was the key to the latter, the creation of Jenny’s Light was the critical therapy that carried Becky through her mourning process. Jenny’s Light is a foundation that Becky created along with her parents and brother to raise money and awareness of postpartum depression. Its mission is to improve and save lives by increasing awareness of all perinatal mood disorders, including postpartum depression.

“Jenny’s Light was a big part of the recovery process for me and my parents and brother,” Becky affirms. “Just knowing that we are helping people really helps us. We receive so many e-mails from people who say they wouldn’t have sought help if they hadn’t seen our website. We know we’re making a difference.”

Every charitable foundation talks about raising awareness, but the

cause of helping sufferers of perinatal mood disorders needs awareness-raising more than most. “I had heard about it before but never knew the depth of what it really was, and how common it is—one in seven women suffers from it,” Becky explains. “We thought that if we didn’t know much about it, then probably everyone else didn’t know much about it. We thought it needed to be brought out into the open. These women need to feel that they are not alone and that they can get help, because it’s 100 percent treatable. We just want to stop that type of tragedy from ever happening to anyone else.”

While Jenny and Graham’s deaths initially decimated Becky’s motivation to train and race, triathlon gradually became another tool to help her work through grief. Since she gave up competitive swimming, Jenny had been Becky’s greatest supporter. “Jenny was always making posters and banners and getting kids together to watch her wherever she raced,” recalls Bob Gibbs. Such memories became for Becky the source of a strong desire to return to competition. “I knew that Jenny would have wanted me to go on and continue racing,” she says.

She was no longer the same athlete, however. Becky now had not only the “eye of the tiger” working for her but also a certain detachment that enabled her to race all the more fearlessly. “It changed my whole perspective on life,” she says of her family tragedy. “It made me realize there’s a lot more to life than triathlon. It gave me a new appreciation for being able to do what I do for a living. I put less pressure on myself now. I do the best I can do, and if I race well, that’s great, but if I don’t, it’s no big deal.”

Perhaps somewhat ironically, judging by last year’s performances, Becky’s now being not as concerned about racing well helps her race well. In 2008 she won two Life Time Fitness Triathlon Series events and the Toyota Cup that is awarded to the overall best performer in the series, and she capped off the year with a third-place finish in the Ironman 70.3 World Championship. But the highlight was her eighth-place finish in the Hy-Vee World Cup in Des Moines, Iowa, which earned her a slot as an alternate on the U.S. Olympic Team. In an interview with the Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune after the race, Becky said, “It felt like [Jenny and Graham] were on my shoulder, just pushing me along, telling me to dig deeper. It was like it got easier. I was feeling stronger as I went. It sounds crazy, but it became effortless.”

Becky’s father shares the fact that Becky not only feels Jenny’s presence during races, but she also sees her. There’s a small photograph of the two sisters together taped to the handlebar stem of her bike. With that kind of inspiration to draw upon, “It’s a wonder anyone can beat her,” he says. ▽

For more information about Jenny’s Light, or to make a donation, visit Jennyslight.com.