

Jenks takes 2nd at triathlon in Brazil

Written by Jim Ecker

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Stephanie Jenks will have some incredible stories to tell her Spanish class at Linn-Mar High School this fall.

Jenks, the 15-year-old phenom from Iowa, placed second in an international field of 54 contestants at the Pan American Triathlon Championships in Brazil Saturday morning in the Junior Elite Female division, competing against women from all over the world in the 16-to-19 age group.

Jenks qualified for the world championships that will be held in London, England this September.

Jenks initially said she's "pretty happy" with finishing second, then amended her comment. "I'm EXTREMELY happy with it," she said in a telephone interview from Brazil. "It's different riding or running with people who don't exactly speak English."

Jenks competed against elite triathletes from Mexico, Brazil, Canada, Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, Italy, Colombia, Peru, Cuba and other countries. She likes to socialize with the other athletes when she competes, but it was harder this time.

"I'm trying to use some of the Spanish I knew already, but they laugh at us. It's kind of funny," said Jenks, who has taken two years of Spanish in school.

The Pan American Triathlon Championships were held in Itaparica, Vila Velha, Brazil, in the southern part of the South American country that borders the Atlantic Ocean. She said the

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swimming portion of the triathlon was held in the ocean.

"I've never swam in the ocean, besides when I was little," she said. "Some of the waves were taller than I was when we were out practicing, and then at race time they were one or two feet. It wasn't too bad this time.

"I swallowed a lot of water and my fair share of sand," she said, laughing. "The sand does not taste good, especially the first day."

Tamara Gorman of the United States won the PATCO title in 1 hour, 5 minutes and 34 seconds. Jenks finished seven seconds later in 1:05.41.

They competed in a 750 meter swim, a 20 kilometer bike race and a 5 kilometer run, all right after each other. Jenks chased Gorman in the 5K run and nearly caught her.

"When I came off the bike she (the eventual winner) was about 40 seconds ahead of me, so I had a lot of time to make up," Jenks reported. "I could see her the whole time during the race."

Jenks has enjoyed an incredible year of competition as a high school freshman. She won the Class 4A state cross country title last fall, won two events at the Drake Relays, won two more events at the state track meet, competed in a "Dream Mile" in New York City, finished second at a major triathlon in Virginia and has been named the Iowa Gatorade Track Athlete of the Year.

"I have had a pretty exciting year, that is for sure," she said. "I was definitely not expecting all of this to happen in one year. I'm happy about it."

Jenks was accompanied on the trip by her mother, Deb, who helped her daughter navigate the international journey. "It was pretty interesting," said Jenks. "My mom walked me through most of it. Now if my parents can't make it on a trip, I know what to do."

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They flew into Sao Paolo and did not experience any of the civil unrest that's been happening in Brazil this summer. They plan to leave Brazil Monday night and begin heading home.