

Jenks became world traveler in 2013

Written by Jim Ecker

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Stephanie Jenks likes to collect souvenirs when she travels to her triathlons and cross country meets, but she has a plan when it comes to new articles of clothing.

Just like in her races, timing is everything. She's learned to wait until after an event to collect T-shirts and sweatshirts.

"I'm kind of a 'stuff' person, so I love getting things," she explained. "But I don't want a bad memory of the race. I don't want that sitting in my closet if I didn't do well, so I wait to see how it turns out. It just seemed like I was jinxing myself every time."

There weren't too many jinxes this year, however.

The Linn-Mar sophomore won two races at the Drake Relays and captured two more distance crowns at the Class 4A state track meet, so it was OK to get souvenirs from those trips to Des Moines.

She placed fifth at a special "Dream Mile" for high school runners in New York City, so stuff from the Big Apple was cool.

She placed second at a major triathlon in Virginia, finished third at the USA Triathlon National Championships in Ohio and took second at the Pan American Triathlon Championships in Brazil, so she loaded up there.

Jenks fell off her bike and finished a disappointing 47th at the Junior World Triathlon in London, England, in September, and her biggest souvenir from that trip - and the most painful - was a case of "road rage" from all the scrapes and bruises.

"I was in the Med Tent for awhile," she related. "I was in tons of pain. I had a hole in my suit. It

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was rough."

Jenks had happier memories this fall when she competed against collegiate runners in open cross country meets and whipped a number of them in Cary, N.C. (against ACC schools) and in Springfield, Ore. (against colleges out west).

She also finished ninth at the Foot Locker Cross Country Championships in San Diego this fall, becoming an All-American.

Those open races in North Carolina and Oregon forced her to forfeit the rest of her high school eligibility in cross country races in Iowa, costing her a chance at becoming a four-time state champion, but she knew that ahead of time and accepted the consequences.

Jenks ran away with the state cross country title as a freshman at Linn-Mar, but decided not to run this year. She stuck with swimming for the Lions, hoping to improve her swim times in the triathlon and to enjoy swimming on the same team with her sister Jennifer.

"It was hard," Jenks said of her decision not to run cross country for Linn-Mar. "It was one of the things I talked to my parents about, because I was like, 'Well, I'd be giving up a shot of trying to be a four-time state champion.'

"We talked it over for a couple of months leading up to it, weighing the pros and cons. Inside in my gut, I knew that if I wanted to do well nationally and internationally, I needed to focus on Worlds (the world triathlon in London) and not race my high school cross country season.

"I want to go as far as I can, so doing well at Worlds was my goal," she said. "I had posters on my wall, saying what I had to do to do well at Worlds. Every day I put in an extra hour."

Jenks made all those sacrifices in preparation for the World Triathlon, then had a spill on a slippery surface and came home with a bunch of black-and-blue souvenirs.

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"The first couple of seconds after I went down, I was all ready to go up in tears," she said. "It was really hard mentally on me, but I managed to pick myself back up and finish the race."

The gears and brake-pads on her bike were damaged, and she had to make the repairs herself because no outside help is allowed during the event. "Thank god my mom had me practice before that summer," she said. "I knew how to fix the bike myself."

Most of her major trips have been happy ones, but not that one.

"I'm kind of glad it happened to me, in a way, because if it would have happened to me when I get older, maybe I wouldn't have known what to do with it," she said.

Jenks said she has learned a lot from her travels around the country and to different parts of the world, all when she was just 15 or 16 years old.

"It's been pretty exciting," she said. "I never thought I'd leave the country twice this year. It was definitely a great experience. Going overseas and seeing other people internationally, it's taught me so much and I'm excited to carry it over.

"Competing overseas has taught me how to push myself," she said. "You find out you have a lot more left than you thought you did. So when you come back, you push yourself a little bit more to see how far you can go. When you see people who are faster than you, it gives you that little edge. That's taught me a lot there.

"And of course I'm getting a whole lot better at airports and stuff like that," she said, laughing.

Jenks feels like she's become a stronger, tougher competitor with all the experiences she's had this year.

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"Just being able to trust myself more and figuring out what works for me and what my routine should be and keeping control of the pre-race nerves," she said. "I'm definitely getting better at that."

Jenks has been getting letters from major colleges that would love to see her compete for them in a few years, but she's in no rush to pick a school.

"I really haven't given it much thought," said Jenks, who is a top student at Linn-Mar as well as a world-class athlete. "Right now I'm trying to make it through my sophomore year in high school. I don't want to get too far ahead."

Jenks is not sure if she'll compete for the Linn-Mar track team this spring due to a few scheduling conflicts. "I am trying to qualify for some more international races, such as the Pan American Games and the 2014 Youth Olympic Games, both of which have qualifying events during track season this year," she said.

Jenks has been taking a few weeks to completely rest her mind and body, with no running and no swimming until later this month.

"I am really enjoying it right now," she said.