

C3 triathlete Gupta-Balthazar credits her NCAA Championship to the training she got in Caledon

By Rob Paul

It's not every day someone new to a sport finds nearly instant success in it, yet, after just a few years of training with Caledon's C3 and former Olympic coach Barrie Shepley, 19-year-old Kira Gupta-Balthazar won the NCAA National Triathlon Championship in Tempe, Arizona on November 13 for the University of San Francisco Dons.

Gupta-Balthazar was able to make it the fourth straight year a Canadian woman captured the gold medal spot on the podium, beating out fellow Canadian and former champ Hannah Henry of Arizona State, and she says that she couldn't have done this without the work of the coaches at C3 in Caledon.

"C3 was such a crucial part of my development and there are so many people in that club that I owe my success to," Gupta-Balthazar said. "The coaches at C3 are some of the most dedicated and passionate coaches I've ever met. It was such a great environment to be in all of the time and there's a lot of triathletes that have been so inspiring. Barrie has provided so many opportunities and he's always working relentlessly to get everything done for us."

From Kleinburg, Gupta-Balthazar found her passion for the sport in Caledon training under Shepley after originally focusing on swimming and he credits her for the instant commitment she displayed when diving into the sport.

"Ironically, when she was just seven years old, she did her first C3 Caledon Kids of Steel Triathlon," said Shepley. "Since then, Kira has been dedicated to the sport of triathlon and hopes to one day to go the Olympic Games for Canada. Kira swam hundreds of hours in the local C3 James Dick Quarry in Caledon Village. On Saturday, all those hours paid off as she was first out of the water, first off the bike and won the overall NCAA Title.

"Beating all the best women in the USA, some who are two to three years older than Kira is truly a remarkable accomplishment," said Shepley. "Kira is a byproduct of her talent, hard work and the incredible support of local businesses like James Dick, Kinetico, Royal Containers, Benson Steel, RA Tech and Nuvo Iron."

The added factor of the pandemic hitting prior to her first year at the University of San Francisco made all her achievements this season all the more impressive.

"Training during an 18-month pandemic is not easy, but with indoor bike trainers, the C3 quarry and resources teammates, Kira was able to overcome many odds," Shepley said. "It's been a very busy 14 days for the local athlete. She raced in St. George, Utah two weeks ago (winning the race) then had to fly to Portugal for the World Junior Championships (where she was top Canadian) and then back to San Francisco for exams before heading to Tempe, Arizona for the NCAA Championships this past weekend.

"Kira will take a nice regeneration break from hard training and focus on her semester exams before coming back home for the holidays. All of C3 is so incredibly proud of Kira, and her coaches, family and teammates for this incredible accomplishment."

Gupta-Balthazar reaching these heights in triathlon all started in Caledon a few years ago when Shepley realized she had the athletic makeup and devotion to succeed in triathlon.

"My uncle has played hockey with Barrie for quite a while and when I was around 15, they started talking. I was a swimmer and soccer player at the time. About how I would have good potential for triathlon because I had a swimming and running background," Gupta-Balthazar said. "I went out and did a couple workouts and I really liked it, I found it a lot more interesting than swimming laps since it was three sports in one. I developed a passion for it pretty quickly because I had the dream of going to the Olympics since I was a little girl and I really visualize myself going to the Olympics in triathlon. Then when I was 16, I quit swimming and

fully transition into full-time triathlon training with C3.?

Moving on from swimming and soccer to triathlon sounds like a difficult adjustment, but Gupta-Balthazar was a quick learner and thanks to the team at C3, it didn't take long for her to thrive.

?Honestly, it wasn't as hard of a transition as it might seem because I had a lot of support around me from Barrie and the high-performance team at C3 and from my family and now here at college,? she said. ?It's really all about time and dedication and the last couple years have definitely been exciting because I've moved up the ranks pretty quickly and I'm excited to see what comes next.?

Though she's always had vast athletic goals, it wasn't until relatively recently that Gupta-Balthazar realized how far she may be able to take her talents.

?To Barrie's credit, I think he realized it very early on,? she said. ?He saw the potential in me, but honestly, I think this past season was very eye-opening for the both of us because I improved on so many levels and was given an opportunity to race in WTS Montreal?a race on the biggest circuit in the world. I really began to prove myself and we talked afterwards about seeing myself doing this for a couple years and being competitive with the top triathletes in the world.?

So, how does a kid from Kleinburg who trains in Caledon end up in San Francisco? Well, after looking into various triathlon programs in the U.S., Gupta-Balthazar saw the potential of the school in the Bay Area and knew she wanted to be a Don.

?I started researching universities in the states that offer triathlon in about the 10th Grade and it's not a huge sport collegiately in the U.S. yet so there's about 40 schools that offer it,? she said. ?I narrowed it down between Arizona State and the University of San Francisco and I visited both schools and a few others. I really clicked with the coach here?Gina Kehr, she's a past Ironman competitor?and it's a relatively new program here and so I wanted to be a part of growing it?it's really only the second year of the program because of COVID. We have a really great group of girls here and the city is so different from where I'm from and it's so cool to go to college here and have new experiences.?

Making the transition from high school to the collegiate level during COVID was no easy task, but with the support of Shepley and those training around her, Gupta-Balthazar never wavered.

?It was hard at the beginning because we had no idea when we would start to come out of it,? she said. ?I had a really good group around me, and we were really motivated to continue to train and be competitive during training which helped replicate race scenarios. The second semester of my first year I went to Arizona to train there under Barrie with a couple of other teammates.

?We were surrounded by a lot of elite Ironman athletes during training which was cool and helped us focus on training even though there was a lot of uncertainty. I didn't take for granted knowing I was in a better situation than a lot of other people and I really appreciated all of the opportunities that I got.?

Now that she's finding major success in the NCAA, Gupta-Balthazar hopes she can inspire younger athletes who train at C3, the way she pulled inspiration from the older triathletes she trained around.

?I hope I can be a role model,? she said. ?It's been a cycle at C3 of inspiring athletes, we've had Simon Whitfield and Andrew Yorke?those are the people that I've looked up to. So, I hope as I continue my career, I can become that same inspiration for the younger athletes that Simon and Andrew were for me.?

With the NCAA Championship under her belt, Gupta-Balthazar is now taking aim at achieving her lifelong goal of reaching the Olympics and she's got just over two years to get ready for Paris.

?The Olympics are definitely the goal and I know that's not until 2024, and there's a lot of improvements I need to make before

then,? she said. ?It won't be an easy road because there's a lot of great Canadian women competing in triathlon. The key for me will be staying injury free and having fun to keep my passion for it.?