

# Strong from Head to Feet

Arguably the most accomplished collegiate runner the United States has ever seen, Jenny Barringer needed to connect her body and mind in order to reach her full potential.

By Jayme Otto

**T**earing the line for her final race as a college athlete, Jenny Barringer's head buzzed. The four-time National Collegiate Athletic Association champ had high hopes for the 2009 NCAA Cross Country Championships. The stage was set for peak performance: the autumn day was sunny, the 6k course wound through grass and dirt and Jenny had her hair secured in her trademark ponytail. But this time, her pre-race jitters were extreme. In addition to thinking *win*, her mind held a jumble of more urgent thoughts: *set an impossible pace to follow, annihilate the course record, dominate by 30 seconds—minimum.*

At the gun, Barringer charged right to the front. She ran in her typical confident style, but those who knew her would say that she looked different. Perplexed, maybe. Like she wasn't having any fun. Favored heavily to win the championship, a storybook ending to a perfect season, Jenny should have appeared more relaxed, even happy.

But her facial expression wasn't the only thing amiss. In the lead just after the halfway point, Barringer suddenly slowed. She looked dazed. She stumbled. Spectators could almost see her struggling to rearrange her thoughts and to focus. The harder she tried to compose herself, the more she faltered. She fell, hyperventilating. Barringer got up and collapsed several more times before eventually crossing the finish line in 163rd place.

## TRANSFORMING TRAGEDY

"It was the most tragic race of my career," Barringer recalls from her home in Monument, Colo. "And the fact that it was my collegiate finale, an NCAA Championship and on national television, well let's just say it couldn't have been a more inopportune time."

The 24-year-old describes the experience as a shock, a

literal nightmare. She remembers feeling disconnected to reality and confused. Fans were equally stunned; Barringer had been perhaps the most consistent racer in NCAA history, setting collegiate records in indoor and outdoor track as well as cross country with seeming ease. Her performance in the 2008 Olympics' inaugural women's 3,000-meter steeplechase, where she placed ninth and secured the American record in the event, made Jenny appear unstoppable.

What stunned Barringer and her fans alike was that there wasn't an obvious explanation for what happened during the championship. She was healthy, free from injury, her training was on track and she'd been properly resting in the weeks leading up to the race.

The problem, however, had nothing to do with Barringer's body.

Sports psychologist Sharon Chirban, Ph.D., says that runners become very skilled at what she calls "regulating arousal," i.e. maintaining composure in high-pressure race situations in order to compete effectively. But certain thought patterns can turn arousal into anxiety, or in Barringer's case, full-blown panic. "In her head, Jenny had made that race into something much more than it was," says Chirban. "She'd raised the stakes so high, even setting her goal far beyond winning, that she could no longer process the accompanying anxiety."

Barringer agrees: "It had somehow gone from being a race to symbolizing the end of my college career, the end of so much that's important in my life. It had become the symbol for the culmination of my entire running career to that point."

Mental stress is an often-underestimated component of professional athletics, according to Chirban. With so much focus on training the body, sometimes the mind falls by the wayside. Barringer learned the hard way that negative thought patterns can have disastrous physiological effects.

PHOTO BY SARA FORREST, COURTESY OF NEW BALANCE





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### PUTTING PERFORMANCE INTO PERSPECTIVE

Following a career-low performance, an athlete may wish to step back from the sport in order to relax and lick lingering wounds. Instead, Barringer blazed back into the spotlight. Within days of her ill-fated race, Barringer announced that she’d signed with an agent. A month later, she agreed to a multi-year contract with New Balance, and a month after that she selected Juli Benson, the Air Force Academy’s head cross-country coach, to guide her through her first professional season. Jenny was eager to shake off the shadow of her last collegiate competition.

To be closer to Benson, Barringer moved to Colorado Springs, and into the Olympic Training Center. In her new home, Barringer began working with a sports psychologist, and found the sessions to be quite powerful. “The service that a sports psychologist provides above all is that she is not your coach, your sponsor or your agent, and therefore has the ability to

offer a truly unbiased perspective, one not motivated by your performance or money,” Barringer says.

In order to ensure she was both physically and mentally strong, Barringer waited nearly half a year before kicking off her comeback on May 1, 2010 with a 1,500-meter race at the Payton Jordan Cardinal Invitational. It was her first race since the 2009 NCAA Cross Country Championships, and she had been working hard in spring training, concentrating on controlling any potentially crippling nerves. “You don’t want to step up to the start line in your first professional [competition] feeling like you have something to prove,” she says.

Barringer kept her anxiety in check during the race start by relying on advice from her father, a professor in Oklahoma, who told her that she shouldn’t let any one day in her life define her. She steered clear of a tempting trap of thought patterns that would mark this race as setting the larger tone for her entire professional career. When she won, in four minutes

and 11 seconds, she solidified the fact that Jenny Barringer was back in everyone’s mind—including her own.

### SETBACKS REQUIRE STEPBACKS

But by June her performance began deteriorating, this time physically. After finishing a disappointing third in the 5,000 meters at the USA Outdoor Championships, Barringer announced that she was ending her season due to a stress reaction at the head of her right femur. Even those close to her were surprised. Barringer admitted that she’d been trying to hide a nagging pain, but at this point, she needed to let her injury rest.

It was a choice Jenny agonized over. “It was so difficult to just shut things down when I was probably in the best shape of my life,” she says. It was also the first important decision Barringer made completely on her own. “As a pro, your doctors and trainers will let you train through whatever you think you can train through,” she explains. “It was my call to step back.”

FROM LEFT: PHOTO BY SARA FORREST; PHOTO BY PETERZ PHOTOGRAPHY; PHOTO BY SARA FORREST

### LEASONS LEARNED

Barringer’s last race of her collegiate career and the first of her professional career came chock-full of life lessons. In the NCAA race, mental anxiety gave way to physical debilitation; in her first pro race, physical strain resulted in the mental stress of a tough decision. Jenny was quickly learning that each was the flip side of the same coin—the place where mind and body intersect.

Tapping into that mind-body connection can be tricky for even the most seasoned runners. And up until this point, Barringer didn’t have any disappointing experiences to draw upon to help negotiate that tenuous relationship. “Jenny [had] almost been too lucky, having such a seamless ride for so long,” Chirban says. “Sometimes without a setback, you can’t really learn the lesson.”

The lesson here is that it’s critical for an athlete to always be listening to the inner voice that communicates when her body or mind is overtaxed. Since the two are interwoven, stress in

the mind can result in equal, or even greater stress on the body—and vice-versa—according to Chirban.

Barringer’s mental shift is perhaps the key to her entire comeback. Beyond the break from running she took in July, past the cross-training and core-strengthening she focused on for the remainder of the summer, and even beyond getting back up to her full mileage this past fall, Jenny’s most profound changes have happened inside her head. Even for a steeplechase champion, that’s no easy hurdle to overcome.

Barringer is confident she’ll come back stronger on all levels. Her time off has given the athlete space to concentrate on herself as a runner, and as a woman as well. In October 2010, Jenny married, and she is now starting a life with her husband. “I’m Jenny Simpson now,” she laughs, “It’s a whole new me.”

*Award-winning freelance journalist, Jayme Otto writes about the people, places, ideas and events that are changing the way we think about our world. Follow her adventures at [jaymeotto.com](http://jaymeotto.com).*

## MAKING A COMPLETE COMEBACK

*mind >>>*

### TIPS FROM SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST, SHARON CHIRBAN, PH.D.

Manage the “vanity variable.” Caring what people think is a tough obstacle.

Set expectations lower than your prior level of performance. It always takes longer to come back than expected.

Forget your tough work ethic when recovering. Less can be more in a comeback.

Remember that comebacks are based on a careful process. Desired results come to those who are patient.

*body >>>*

### TIPS FROM JULI BENSON, JENNY BARRINGER’S COACH

Cross train to maintain fitness. Consider water running, elliptical training or biking to simulate running.

Prepare your body to return to running by improving flexibility. Carve 20 to 30 minutes into your daily routine to stretch. This can be a good time to try yoga or Pilates as well.

Enhance your running with strength training. Find a qualified trainer who can ensure correct form.

Strengthen your core to help with proper form and posture while running.

Ease back in when you begin running again. Your cardiovascular system will be ahead of your body at first.

For more tips on making a comeback check out “Be a Comeback Queen” on page 26.