

## Cycle Of Life

*Christine Thorburn, MD, balances being a rheumatologist with trying for cycling gold in the Olympics*

It's 6:30 at night, a long work day behind her, but Christine Thorburn, MD, can't go home. Not just yet. Finishing her clinic day, she quickly changes into cycling gear and starts riding hard in the hills near Stanford University. In the 2004 Olympics, Thorburn finished as high as fourth, one place from calling herself a medalist, a term which involves standing on a podium, hearing your country's national anthem and knowing you've been the cause of it all. Her top event is the time trial, particularly appropriate when you consider that every day is just that, trying to balance 24 hours between a rheumatology career and her desire to not give up on an Olympic dream she's had forever. Thorburn finishes her training, tiredly slips in her car and home to her husband, Ted, an understanding man, to say the least. Thorburn will ingest some dinner and then hit the pillow knowing another day awaits, just as demanding as the last.

The next morning, she'll enter her clinic across the street from Stanford, the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, eucalyptus trees strewn about, the building nestled between campus and the railroad tracks. "We're a multi-specialty group so we have the latest bone density machines and everything is done with electronic health records," she says proudly. There are three rheumatologists in her office, within a building teeming with approximately 150 physicians. "I work  $\frac{3}{4}$  time right now, allowing me to train and making sure I'm not spreading myself too thin with my work...I knew rheumatology was right for me, because as a pre-clinical student I was fascinated by autoimmune illness, especially stomach lupus keratosis. I also knew I didn't want to do anything in the surgical field. The outpatient setting allows a continuity of care and I prefer dealing with all organ systems."

But Thorburn says the most rewarding part of her job is the individuals she connects with. "One patient I worked with didn't have coverage for his medications and that's challenging for rheumatoid arthritis illness where the latest and greatest can run more than \$10,000. I tried the now-generically available medical options and worked with drug companies to provide financial assistance and get him inhibitors. I was hoping that was the end of story but he didn't respond well. Now we have him enrolling in a clinical trial with my colleague at Stanford. It's not a one-time visit but getting him through this process that's rewarding. I see that he's trying to do everything he can for himself and wants to feel better so he can continue his own work."

Seeing patients for as much as 10 hours in a row, she then goes back—you guessed it—to cycling. "I've lost track of some of my older friends from medicine and college because of how busy I am," she says. "It's gets pretty wearing over time." Now 37 and thinking of having children, Thorburn says there will come a point where enough's enough: "Professional athletics is a selfish endeavor and I don't perceive doing it for much longer." Still, if she ever needs to be inspired by where her cycling bug started, she only has to look around her, having first picked up the sport as a medical student at Stanford.

Thorburn even sees some particular similarities between her hobby and her livelihood. “Both require a lot of dedication and focus: cycling is a sport that the majority of the time you won’t win and medicine is also delayed gratification. You can work hard all year for one result.”

When she’s scheduled an off day during the week, Thorburn switches her bike route from the hills of Stanford to the Santa Cruz Mountains. “It’s always inspiring to go near the coast,” she says. “I love to ride over views of the ocean.” And, as Thorburn mercilessly pedals, she’s thinking about that fourth place finish and the 2008 Summer Olympics—if she qualifies, a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Beijing awaits and a final shot at taking home gold. As she said, you can work all year, or in this case, four years, for just that one result. Yet, Thorburn admits, even on designated training days her thoughts pull back to her patients and figuring out how to do her job better.

And, maybe, she can’t really help it. When you’re as athletic as Thorburn, you appreciate all the more how rheumatism can hold back an active life.