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Athletes over 40 hurdle past records, stereotypes

By Jason Blevins
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MIKE KLOSER, 47

Kloser started pedaling his mountain bike competitively in the mid-'80s after living in the Vail Valley for several years. He dabbled in the pro mogul skiing circuit for a while, winning a few national contests. But he found his calling hammering the knobby-tired ride, winning mountain biking's pre-sanctioned world championships in 1988. The father of two teenagers who are emerging as top-tier athletes themselves, Kloser credits his longevity to his switch to adventure racing in 1997. "Now everything I do outdoors is training," he says.

In the past decade, the 26-year Vail Resorts employee has earned the most wins in adventure racing history, captaining his Team Nike to five world titles, three Eco-Challenge wins and four Primal Quest championships. Last year he won the U.S. Winter Triathlon Championship at Grand County's Devil's Thumb Ranch, confirming his reputation as one of the world's top all-around outdoor athletes. He does it all and he wins, sporting an unnervingly placid "isn't-this-fun" grin with every step.

His strategy: pray for the worst weather imaginable. "I really hope for adverse conditions. I relish those hard circumstances because I know rivals wither in those conditions," he says.

The right training regimen fosters the right mental game - and that's where some over-40 athletes say they have the sharpest edge over their younger rivals. It's the same for most sports, where the old war horses know the strategies of a contest and carry the confidence and expertise they need to defeat stronger adversaries.

"Physically, I know there are people on the starting line who are probably stronger than me, but that doesn't mean I cannot beat them," says Vail's Mike Kloser, a 47-year-old husband, dad of two teenagers, director of activities at Beaver Creek and the world's most accomplished adventure racer - who still rides a mountain bike like he's being pursued by wolves. "It might actually mean I am more able to beat them, because they rely less on their mental game. The mental game is a huge factor." So long as that mental war is waged before the start of the race. While a younger racer might be strategizing and obsessing during a race, veterans know that in competition they have to remain in the moment.