A downhill racer on her way up

Andrea Napoli freely admits that there are two Andrias, really.

On the one hand, there is the meticulous, process-driven, planning-minded Andrea. This is the person who can look at a stretch of road and see the unassuming blacktop come alive before her eyes with the possibility of multiple uses for pedestrians, automobiles and bike users.

It’s the same Andrea who can be out with friends on a mountain bike ride along the ridges near her old home in Lake Tahoe, riding for fun, yet also thinking of the ride in terms of another building block, another natural progression, in her skill as a mountain biker.

“When I ride for fun,” Napoli says, “I’m pretty conservative and generally don’t take a lot of chances, for better or worse, I suppose. I’m more about ‘baby steps’ and working up to things to build my confidence.”

When Napoli races, however, an entirely different Andrea surfaces.

“Downhilling,” Napoli, who won the USA Cycling Collegiate Mountain Bike National Championship in downhill in late October, says, “requires a lot of confidence. When I’m racing, I feel totally different. It’s like I don’t have time to think and I just do it. I often get in a zone when I’m racing where I’m just too distracted to pay attention to my ‘self-preservation’ voice … who’s probably screaming at me.”

Either way, having two sides, one a bit methodical and one a bit intuitive, one brimming with long-term plans and professional ideas and the other full of the passion and simplicity of a single, thrilling moment, has made Napoli an extremely well-rounded individual.

In December, Napoli, a graduate student in the Department of Geography’s Land Use Policy Program, was named the recipient of the Joshua Kuck Memorial Scholarship, a national award given through the USA Cycling Development Foundation in honor of outstanding achievements in the areas of cycling safety, advocacy and education.

“I’m completely honored to have been selected,” she says of the award that capped an “amazing season.”

Napoli’s impressive advocacy efforts have included walking audits of the Reno/Sparks Bike and Pedestrian Plan through her graduate program’s student club, the Northern Nevada Student Planning Organization; as well as doing research on “Complete Streets” and “Safe Routes to School” programs; and volunteering with the Reno Kiwanis Kid’s Bike Program. In addition, Napoli has become involved with the newly formed Campus Cycling Coalition, an ASUN club advocating cycling in and around campus.

“I feel very strongly about making biking safer in communities,” she notes. “I’m doing what I can to contribute here in Reno.

“I help refurbish bikes to be given to kids.”

In visiting other bike- and pedestrian-friendly communities, Napoli has been struck by the fact that she would often see entire families out on the road, biking or walking, together.

“Biking is such a great form of transportation and exercise, and because we’ve been designing our streets to only accommodate automobiles for so long, the safety of those biking and walking is jeopardized … First and foremost, improvements need to be made to allow cyclists to feel safe. If that happens, more people are likely to give it a try.”

“Introducing people to biking at an early age helps, too, which is why I volunteer for the Reno Kiwanis Kid’s Bike Program,” she says. “I help refurbish bikes to be given to kids.”

She plans to help with the Kiwanis’ bike safety classes this spring.

Thanks to her participation with the University’s cycling team over the past two seasons, Napoli says her enjoyment and appreciation of the sport has never been greater.

“It certainly has made bike racing a lot of fun,” she says of being part of the team. “Some of the races that I compete in outside of collegiate racing have competitors who take themselves very seriously, which can take away from the fun of racing. College racing and the team aspect of it all, however, is such a welcoming environment.

“We all want to win, of course, but the team atmosphere is more about having a good time rather than killing your competition,” she adds. “It could be your first time on a bike and you’re dead last in the race, but your Nevada teammates are going to yell and scream for you just as loud as they did for the Wolf that won it. That’s how we roll.”

Napoli will graduate in May and would like to land a job doing biking and pedestrian planning, preferably in the Reno- Tahoe area.

Her number one deciding factor if she must relocate: “Are there good trails? At least I know I have my priorities straight,” Napoli says.

—John Trent ’85/’87, ’00M.A.