



## The Young Guns – Joao Silva (POR)

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*They're fit, fast and they've all got youth on their side. In this series we profile some of ITU's rising stars - a generation of talent set to challenge the established names on the international scene. This week's Young Gun: Joao Silva.*



Without a world title to his name at any level, you could be forgiven for not knowing too much about Joao Silva, but the 21-year old from Portugal quietly crept up the world rankings to finish the 2010 season in fifth position, above some of the biggest names in the sport. This ability to slip under the radar and amass consistently good results could make Silva one of the most dangerous men on the Dextro Energy Triathlon ITU World Championship Series circuit in 2011.

Joao Silva's triathlon career began much by chance back in 2005 when a teacher recommended he attend a talent identification clinic ran by the Portuguese Triathlon Federation. The goal of the programme is to find, nurture and support young athletes who have a potential for success at high performance level. At that time Silva used to swim and practice some cross-country but admits he did not take these sports too seriously. His love at the time, like most other young boys in Portugal, was football.

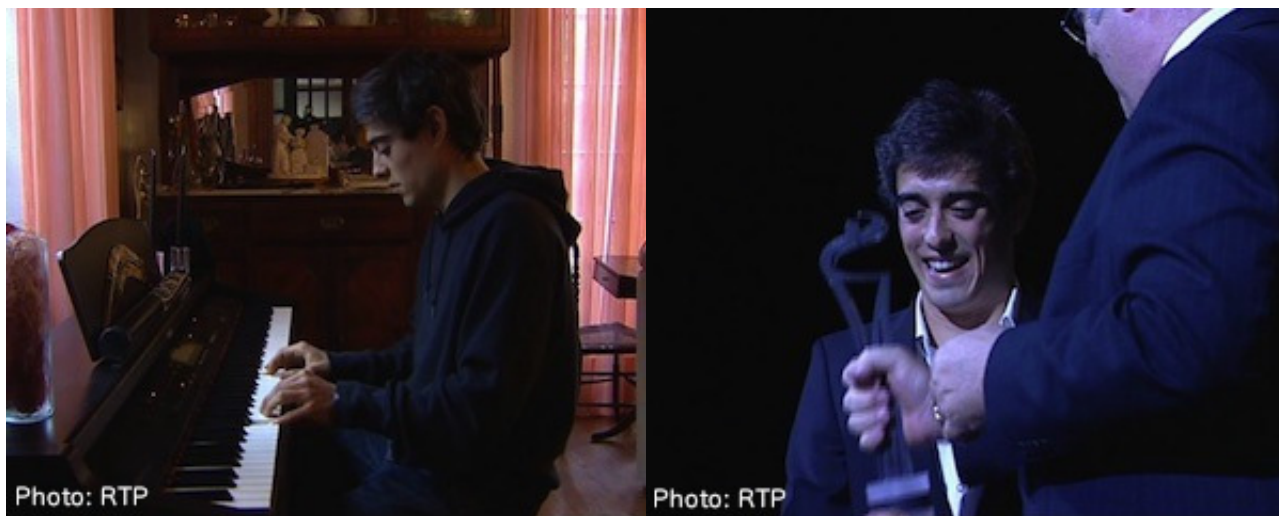
Silva, a naturally quiet and unassuming character who is currently studying medicine, immediately showed enormous potential in the trials and was earmarked as a future talent. The Portuguese federation quickly set about designing a programme for Silva, who hails from the small town of Benedita, north of Lisbon. The first task was to equip him with a bike which he didn't even own at the time, and take his mind off football.



The first year in the sport was a difficult time for the young talent as he had a number of small accidents and injuries. As an only child he also found it difficult to acclimatise to life away from his home for the first time. The combination of factors led him to miss the 2006 Triathlon European Championships in Autun, France. However, Silva persevered, and in September after his first real solid block of training, Silva demonstrated his potential by claiming a bronze at the ITU Triathlon Junior World Championships in Lausanne.

Athletes take different paths to success. Some are shining stars who burst onto the scene and sometimes disappear just as quickly, while others quietly and steadily improve without attracting too much attention until they're performing at the highest level. The latter can be said for Silva. Since 2006 it's been a long and relatively modest road to improvement, having been plagued with various minor injuries over his short career.

In 2007 he won gold at the European Duathlon Championships in the junior division, and he has also collected a pair of Under23 European Triathlon titles in 2008 and 2010. However, he did not take any world titles during this time, and largely escaped widespread notice in the public arena. He unfortunately injured during the U23 ITU Triathlon World Championships in Gold Coast, after receiving a heavy blow to the ear during the swim leg.



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But this injury may have contributed to Silva's successful 2010. After the disappointment of missing the chance to win an U23 world championship medal, he was eager to continue his season and represented Portugal in the U23 Cross Country World Championships. Displaying good form there, he consolidated this with some solid off-season training and his hard work paid off with Silva claiming the 2010 Monterrey ITU Triathlon World Cup. This event seems to have been a good indicator of seasonal form as Paula Findlay took the women's title in that event also.

Silva followed up the win with an inconspicuous 22nd at the Seoul leg of the 2010 Dextro Energy Triathlon ITU World Championship Series. From here on however, he put together a string of impressive and consistent performances. It was his seventh place at round three in Madrid which Silva feels was the turning point in his 2010 season.

"I felt like I began to improve at the beginning of 2010, Quarteria [ITU Triathlon European Cup] and Monterrey were really important, but Madrid was really 'the moment' where I mixed it with the big boys. I was amazed," said Silva.

He followed this with a notable fourth place at the European Championships, and finishes in 10th, 11th and 7th positions in Hamburg, London and Kitzbühel respectively. It was the sum of these performances followed by an excellent fourth position at the Grand Final in Budapest which gave Silva his final world ranking of fifth position. World rankings award consistency and form over time, mixed with the ability to perform on the big day when it counts and Joao Silva is a perfect example of this.

Silva attributes his rise in form to staying injury free in 2010.



"I felt like I improved so much in 2010 as until then I never had the opportunity to train continuously, mainly because of all my injuries. Perhaps now I'm a little more responsible or I've been fortunate but I've have no serious injuries which allowed me to train solidly," he said.

While Silva's exploits might not have garnered him widespread attention internationally, at home his success was quickly noticed by the Portuguese media. He recently signed with Sporting Clube de Portugal at a large reception in their stadium, with a fanfare normally reserved for footballers. The club is interestingly the main rival to Benfica, where Bruno Pais, Anais Moriz and Vanessa Fernandes are all members. He was recently awarded the 'Olympic Medal' from the Portuguese Olympic Committee for the best athlete in an Olympic sport, and also the 'Best Male Athlete of the Year' by the Portuguese Sports Confederation.

When asked of his expectations for 2011, Silva is modest.

"If I was asked that question one year ago, I would say that I'd really like to earn some points to improve my Olympic qualification ranking. This year my goals are the same," he said.

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If Silva can remain injury free and continue to improve as his did in 2010, then Olympic qualification may come easier than expected, and it could be podium positions and not just points he is challenging for this year. With Javier Gomez recently stating that he views Silva as one of his biggest threats in 2011, it seems as though Joao Silva is a name we might be hearing a lot more of in the coming years.