



Challenging 'Race' Discrimination

By Glenn Oakley

Cycling at top speeds up and over Galena Summit is proving to be easier for women riders than convincing international cycling officials that the athletes are capable of such a strenuous feat.

Despite a successful seven-year track record, the Ore-Ida Women's Challenge, the toughest women's bike race in the world, has been refused international sanctioning by the Federation Internationale Amateur Cycling because the race is "too excessive" for women athletes. The federation ruled the Women's Challenge had too many stages (days of racing), the distances were too long, the climbing in elevation was excessive, and there were not enough rest days between stages. For example, both the Lowman to Stanley and Stanley to Ketchum races would have to be cut by 10 miles each to meet the international regulations.

Without international sanctioning, the Women's Challenge will not attract top European cycling teams, considered the best in the world, although race director Jim



Rabdau is expecting racers from Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand and Canada in this year's race.

Rabdau has refused to cut back on the race to meet international regulations. "We can't go back to where they are," he says. "Those are archaic ideas. Those are arbitrary regulations. The men don't have those kind of restrictions."

Sheila Boester, a 1981 BSU graduate who raced in the 1990 Women's Challenge — the longest and most grueling of the races to date — says, "I don't think its too excessive at all. It's a hard race, but most of the women can handle it."

Boester notes that the Women's Challenge is unique in offering long-distance stage races for women. Women's races throughout America, says Boester, "are always cut in half compared to the distances raced by men. And we know we can do it because

The grueling Ore-Ida Women's Challenge, above and left, has been refused international sanctioning because racing officials consider it "too excessive" for women athletes.

most of us train with men."

Boise State University sports physiologist Ron Pfeiffer agrees the regulations limiting women cyclists are arbitrary. "There isn't any physiological reason the women can't do it," says Pfeiffer. "It's based on stereotype, tradition and machismo." Last year Pfeiffer and a team of graduate students conducted tests on 12 Women's Challenge cyclists during the two-week race.

"We found them to be extraordinarily fit," says Pfeiffer. "Their recoveries [from the daily races] appeared equal to any of the men we've seen in the research literature. We even had some who got more fit as the race went on. As far as the wear and tear of the actual riding, they appeared to be just fine."

In fact, says Pfeiffer, "The biggest complaint I got from women in the race is they thought the stages were too short. The athletes have become so good the organizations [controlling racing regulations] have lost touch with what kind of animal they're dealing with. These are not average human beings. They're on a whole different level. Their bodies are able to do these things."

Mark Hodges, assistant executive director for the U.S. Cycling Federation, says his organization will present the international cycling governing body with less restrictive regulations for women this August.

But Rabdau says the USCF's proposal would still fall short of the Women's Challenge race for distances and elevation. "It's probably the best they can weasel out of these guys [international cycling officials]," he says. "But I think that's stupid. I think there shouldn't be any restrictions. Distance is the endurance part of the race. If you don't have the distance you have half a sport."

Hodges defends the USCF proposals by saying, "If we proposed releasing restrictions completely, the regulations wouldn't stand a chance of passing," he explains. "We're dealing with a very conservative group that considers women's racing entirely secondary to men's."

Pfeiffer, himself a mountain bike and road bike racer, says "you have to look at the roots of cycling" to understand the resistance to tough women's races. "On the European continent cycling is what tackle football is to America," he explains. "It's typically been a male-dominated sport. Many of the people in the European cycling community are threatened by women's races. They don't want to endorse those kinds of races [like the Women's Challenge] because it shows that women can do the same things as the men."

Six years of "excessive" racing in the Women's Challenge has proven that women can indeed handle the rigors of the race, and as Rabdau says, "They're going to have to reckon with us sooner or later." □

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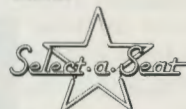
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