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Enhancing Women's Participation and Advancement in Competitive Cycling

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Abstract

While male participation in competitive cycling in the United States has grown tremendously, a lack of growth in female participation indicates there are discouraging factors at play. Critical examination of sport organizations can reveal structures and policies that exclude women from full participation. This study critically examines USA Cycling's racing structure and policies with the goal of identifying exclusionary practices that might reduce women's participation and advancement in competitive cycling. Using multiple data sources, including interviews with 10 competitive female cyclists, this study revealed multiple practices that strongly discourage women's advanced participation in competitive cycling. Suggestions for practice are offered.

Keywords: *Women in sport, sport development, sport governance, USA Cycling*

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Introduction

The bicycle has had revolutionary effects on both rural and urban communities by initiating modernized transportation, aiding in the women's rights movement, and redefining modern tourism (Strange, 2002). Although the premier bicycle, the velocipede, was widely available in the late 19th century, there was societal resistance condemning female cycling. Critics maintained the bicycle "prevented women from having children, promoted immodest attire, and encouraged improper liaisons with the opposite sex" (Herlihy, 2004, p. 267). Yet, feminists insisted that the bicycle was an "agent of reform" that allowed freedom from restrictive clothing (with the introduction of the bloomers), disproved myths about female physical capabilities, and provided an avenue for self-exploration (Herlihy, 2004, p. 266). Advancements in clothing design and early women's rights activism eventually created an atmosphere in which masses of women flocked to the bicycle, making up "at least a third of the total [bicycle] market" (Herlihy, 2004, p. 266).

Although the popularity of recreational bicycle riding among women is high, national growth for competitive women's cycling remains stagnant. USA Cycling (USAC) reported having 42,724 licenses held by members of their organization in 2002 (USA Cycling, 2012), as compared to the 65,845 licenses held in 2009, and 67,327 in 2015. Despite this uptick, females only accounted for 15% of licensed competitive cyclists nationally, which is up only 2% since 2009 (USA Cycling, 2015). Governance in sport exists to legitimize participation and validate athletes under a standardized system. In addition, an organization's use of power has a direct influence on "athlete recruitment, retention, and transition" (Green, 2005, p. 233). USAC has been successful at increasing men's participation; however, a lack of growth in female participation indicates there are factors that hinder women from participating in competitive cycling.

Scholars have suggested that simply providing more sport opportunities for women "does little to confront the conditions that create and sustain gender inequities" (Shaw & Frisby, 2006, p. 492), and that a critical examination of organizations can reveal structures and policies that actually work to exclude women from full participation (see Theberge, 1985). Often, these practices may appear gender-neutral on the surface, but the gendered impact may be vast. For example, based on a number of theoretical and philosophical frameworks, many scholars have demonstrated how masculine discourses and dated practices systematically exclude and/or disadvantage women from sport participation in various capacities (e.g., participants, coaches, and leaders) (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Elling & Knoppers, 2005; Knoppers, 1987; Knoppers, 2003). Simply put, these scholars argue that the "way things are done around here" will continue to favor men (in part because they are largely created by men), unless something interrupts and alters the pattern of thinking, thus changing the way these existing practices and policies are impacting women within the organization. This study provides a critical examination of USAC's racing structure and practices in order to identify

exclusionary practices that might be aggregately reducing women's participation and advancement in competitive cycling. With knowledge of such practices, organizational leaders, race promoters, and practitioners will be better equipped to take steps toward modifying policies that attract women to cycling and provide them with opportunities to develop and advance further in the sport.

Background and Structure of USAC Races and Divisions

The organizational practices of USAC at the time this study was conducted offer context to the participant experiences subsequently described. The *USAC 2013 Rulebook* provides information on race categories and requirements for competitor upgrades. According to the rulebook, male road racing competitors were classified as 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, and Pro (or P) for the elite, professional riders. Female competitors had classifications 4, 3, 2, 1, and Pro (or P). The categories represent experience and skill levels, with higher numbers representing lower levels. Riders are referred to as Cat, followed by their classification number. For example, a Cat 4 is a novice rider in the female categorical structure.

In theory, USAC sanctioned races match riders of the same category to race against each other. Riders can upgrade their category, often called "Catting-up," to compete against more experienced and skilled racing fields. Points are earned based on the finishing place of the competitor in a given race without "taking into account the category of the rider" (USAC, 2013, p. 9). This means that if the field combines category 1, 2, 3, and 4 riders, the finishing places do not segregate based on relative category. For example, if a women's race combines riders from categories 1, 2, and 3, the Cat 3 riders are racing against all the Cat 1, Cat 2, and Cat 3 riders at once. There are no separate place finishes for the separate divisions. As will be seen in the interviews, understanding this point system and racing structure is essential to understanding the women's experiences in competitive cycling.

Method

The governing bodies of sport organizations legitimize, regulate, and define the rules and regulations within their respective sports. Through their allocated power, the governing bodies and organizations in cycling (e.g., USAC and race promoters) have the power to determine race structure, race culture, and athlete retention. In order for USAC to successfully develop athletes through the sport of cycling, they must effectively recruit, retain, and transition them through the successive levels (Green, 2005), while relying on the race promoters to provide opportunities to compete (Newland & Kellett, 2012; Phillips & Newland, 2014). Understanding the structure and culture created by these entities as experienced by those who participate in the sport can inform future policies to improve such athletic development. Multiple data sources were utilized to frame this case study (Eisenhardt, 1989) and understand the experiences of female cyclists.

First, USAC documents, race promotional flyers, and racing club websites were reviewed. Then, semi-structured interviews with competitive cyclists ($N=10$) in Texas were conducted until each new participant revealed little additional insight about the research questions (i.e., saturation was reached). The questions were developed from gender and sport literature (e.g., Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012) and from Dixon and Bruening's work with female coaches (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Dixon & Bruening, 2007) (e.g., Please give me some background on the race structure for women in road cycling. What has been your experience with this structure? When thinking about racing road bikes as a female, what elements encourage and discourage you to participate on a regular basis?). They were designed to elicit the nature of the women's sport experiences in their own words, as well as the structures that shaped and constrained those experiences. Finally, email and telephone correspondence with USAC officials, racing club managers, and race promoters were utilized to verify, clarify, and better understand the information provided from the participants. That is, these individuals were not asked formal interview questions, only clarifying or verifying questions. Together, these data sources provided an understanding of the formal rules, opportunities, and structure of USAC and its sanctioned events.

Participants

Participants were recruited through letters to directors of sport organizations, postings on a website designed for competitive cyclists in Texas, and finally through snowball sampling from the first set of participants and researcher networks. The sampling method was designed to garner a variety of skill levels, ages, and experiences. The sample included 10 female competitive cyclists in Texas. The sample ranged in age from 24 to 49 years old ($M = 34$), and ranged in racing category (Cat) ranking from Cat 4 ($n = 4$), Cat 3 ($n = 2$), Cat 2 ($n = 2$), and Cat 1 ($n = 2$). Nine participants were Caucasian and one was Latina, which was representative of the cycling population in Texas. In this particular state, member participation has increased by less than 1% since 2006, and the percentage of female participants has remained stagnant at 12%, falling behind overall national growth and mirroring women's growth nationally in cycling participation (USA Cycling, 2015). These factors make Texas an ideal study population for understanding barriers to participation in the sport.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and a qualitative content analysis (Sandelowski, 2000) was performed to allow for data-driven coding and the identification of emergent themes. Interview data were separated into individual meaning units, condensed into categories or themes, and cross-checked with the interviewees and a second researcher for accuracy and interpretation (cf., Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Names were replaced by pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality

of the participants. Themes were informed by governance issues, knowledge, and perceptions of rules, regulations, and race structure.

Findings and Discussion

Three emergent themes were identified in regard to structural and governance issues upon analysis of the multiple sources of data. All of these themes were discussed by each participant, and the similarities in responses indicated that even in this small sample, these topics were highly salient themes for the study. The interviews in particular demonstrated the strong, negative impact the current structure and practices have on women's participation experiences in competitive cycling. The identified themes, which include category lumping, upgrading system, and race prize money, illumine some of the barriers women face in the sport of competitive cycling.

Category Lumping

The participants each explained that category lumping may be the single greatest factor impacting their experience as competitive cyclists. Category lumping refers to combining two or more categories into one race. As an example, a Women's Open Race in which Cat 4, Cat 3, Cat 2, Cat 1, and Professionals are racing against each other for upgrade points, prize money, and top finishes would be a lumped category race. A concern referenced by all of the interviewees involved category offering arrangements imposed by race promoters. That is, the most common category offering formats for women are the Cat 4 and Open (or P123). In this case, only two divisions are offered in the race. At the same time, the most common category offering formats for men are the Cat 5, Cat 4, Cat 3, and Open (or P12). In this case, four divisions are offered. The participants clearly indicated that there are consequences, both structurally and individually, that result from category lumping, including creating a lack of an intermediate category of racers and disadvantaging the beginners.

Lack of an intermediate category. Although race promoters often claim it is necessary to lump categories because of low female participation rates, interviews with female competitive cyclists reveal that category lumping may in fact be a cause of those low rates. This is because it results in the loss of at least one entire intermediate category (Cat 3), in which women should be able to continue to develop their skills and gain experience without having to compete against women in the P, Cat 1, or Cat 2 levels. Whereas men have separate categories that encourage participation and category advancement (Cat 5, Cat 4, Cat 3, P12), women are limited to a novice category (Cat 4) and an elite category (P123). Such disparity in opportunities is highly recognized by female competitive cyclists and discussed by each participant. Sandy (Cat 4) was adamant that the current race structure creates a disparity in the opportunities for men and women that in turn affect motivation.

They [category offerings] really are set up specifically to move the men's Cat 5 up in category and...the women's categories should be set up the same way...but it doesn't encourage them [women's Cat 4] to move up, it encourages them to stay put; whereas the Cat 5 is set up specifically to...go to the next level. Yet, the next level for women is demoralization... With women, there is a Cat 4 in addition to an Open or a P123...so you are going from novice to competing with the pros.

Cassandra (Cat 1), described category lumping in the following way:

There is no transition for beginner women to continue to race with that group of people and grow their skills at the same time as the people around them. Instead, the race promoters throw them into this Open category that has a group of women who have been racing their entire lives. It is very much a sink or swim situation and for a lot of women to stay motivated to race...it is just way too fast and way too hard for them. And they are just not quite ready for a race like that...It could be a little demoralizing for sure.

One cyclist pointed out how even the training plans differ for the various levels, so moving up too quickly serves as a major limitation for novice cyclists. She explained using Joe Friel's *A Cyclist's Training Bible*, which recommends that Cat 4 females should log 350-500 annual training hours. Yet, once a Cat 4 cyclist upgrades to Cat 3, she will be racing against women who follow an 800-1200 annual hours training plan (Friel, 2009). The physical disadvantage some Cat 3 women experience immediately after upgrading often decreases desire and motivation to continue racing. Describing her experience as a newly upgraded Cat 3, Hannah recalls, "getting dropped part way through and running out of steam and not being able to stay with the pack...and after so many times of that you really get discouraged." Interviewees often referred to feelings of "disillusionment" and "demoralization" in an effort to describe racing with women who have more advanced skill, knowledge, and experience than themselves.

The Cat 3 women interviewed also placed less importance on upgrading/advancing due to the seemingly normalized race structure. Because Cat 3 females are scored in relation to where they place in the P123 field, and not in relation to the other Cat 3 women, the likelihood of accumulating points seems daunting. Theoretically, even if a Cat 3 racer places first against the other Cat 3 women in the field, but sixth overall (thus beating a significant number of P12s), she will not receive any upgrading points. Therefore, advancement often takes several years. In addition to the fact that Cat 3 women are competing for upgrading points against P12 women, they are also competing for prize money against these same women, instead of just other Cat 3s. This too fails to recognize the achievements of Cat 3 talent because their talent is compared to that of women who have more experience and greater skill. Cassandra (Cat 1) described the situation many Cat 3 women face upon upgrading:

If you move up from a 4 to a 3, which would be your first step, you are competing for the same money as the Pros or Cat 1s that you are racing against. So, the likelihood that you would have access to that money is pretty hard.

While a few outliers do break the transition barrier and move up categories, the current practice of category lumping can produce the effect of turning women into riders rather than racers. As Hannah (Cat 3) articulated, "Some women Cat up and quit racing because they went from winning races to...getting dropped at every single race." (Getting dropped is a cycling term that refers to the point in the race when a cyclist is unable to keep up with the peloton, or main pack of riders, and drops back from the field). There are several women like these who have remained in the sport despite a lack of results. These women revealed that they have significantly lowered their competitive cycling goals and expectations to meet the realities of competing against professional racers. Rather than anticipating top finishes, recognition, and/or upgrading (which used to be their goals), both of the Cat 3 interviewees referenced a desire only to improve themselves. As such, the illogical transition several females go through when upgrading from a 4 to a 3 has the potential to decrease athlete retention in the sport.

The novice disadvantage. An indirect effect of category lumping in the P123 women's field is manifested in the women's Cat 4 field. Although the Cat 4 field is intended to serve as a category for novice riders, it too replicates the varied skill and experience level seen in the women's P123 races. Sandy (Cat 4) described the situation of several Cat 4 women:

If you are going to keep racing for fun and without having to compete with people who do this for a job, your only option is to stay a 4. And I know people who do that...who are way too experienced racers, way too trained, but they simply won't move up to the next level...I am one of those people.

Several Cat 4s choose to remain at the novice level simply because they do not want to "be thrown in with the lions [P12s]" (Patty, Cat 3). When Cat 4 women with several years of experience stay in a race, however, it disadvantages the "true" novice cyclist. Just as the Cat 3 women suffer due to race structure that forces them to race with P12 women, true novice cyclists suffer the same physical and mental struggles of not being able to keep up with those with more experience and not seeing reward for their efforts. Also, while Cat 3 women deem it unfair to have to race with women who have been racing "their entire lives," it can also be seen as unfair for first-time racers to be competing against women who have been racing for up to four years.

Upgrading System

The more novice the riders, the less familiar interviewees were with the upgrading policies and systems. Although several novice racers were aware of the

existence of race requirements for advancement, they did not know the specifics of those requirements. When asked how many points were needed to upgrade, Sydney (Cat 4) said, “I believe it is 25 points within a year...or maybe it was 25 races with 20 top 10 finishes...with 25 women or more in a race.” Because several women are not aware of the upgrading policies and prerequisites, participants shared experiences of women consistently entering into races (unknowingly) where the distance or field size did not meet the minimum requirement. Thus, the travel time, entry fees, training time, and individual energy spent on competing in a race that either fails to meet race distance or field size prerequisites becomes meaningless under USAC policy.

Many participants also said that the upgrading policies are not as objective and clear-cut as they appear or are intended, “It is not like you make the points and you are in,” insisted Patty (Cat 3). Upgrade requests are submitted by a cyclist and then reviewed by an upgrade official who “interprets” the point calculation. It is in the “interpretation” phase where some feel they are treated unequally. Cassandra (Cat 1) recalls a time when several of her female teammates requested upgrades simultaneously, yet all received differing information about what races “counted” and for how many points:

We would all calculate them [races] differently based on what we thought was truth...and the person who interpreted the upgrade would also interpret them differently by telling one person, “Yeah, you got yours,” and telling this person, “No, you didn’t get yours because this wasn’t separated out for points...that race doesn’t count.”

Interviewees felt that the “fairly subjective upgrading process” (Patty, Cat 3) had more to do with which official processed the request, the relationship that person had with the requester, and how much sympathy the official had for women working through an upgrading system that disadvantages females because of small field sizes. The consensus among the female cyclists was that the race structure does not serve the interests and unique factors affecting females in competitive cycling. The upgrading system enforces prerequisites for race distance and field size, both of which are often not met in the races that are offered. Therefore, it is possible that inadequate race distances (along with several other components) are influencing the participation of female competitive cyclists who desire to earn upgrade points.

Prize Money

Opinions and knowledge regarding prize money for females at competitive cycling races varied among the interviewees and tended to be different depending on the level at which the women were competing. Whereas some of the women competing at lower levels were unconcerned with prize money because “racing is not [their] job, but a hobby” (Hannah, Cat 3), others competing at the higher levels suggested that offering larger amounts of prize money for the elite women’s

field would “encourage women to move up” (Amanda, Cat 1) and would entice more women to come out to races. When asked to reference prize money for men and women in regard to category, Cassandra (Cat 1) asserted that “typically the cross-section is that the P12 men get 1.5 to two times the amount that the women in the same categories get...kind of roughly how the pay inequality works.” Although some women disregarded the significance and implications of the gender disparity, several women justified it by referencing the fact that female participation rates are so low. According to the participants, it is well known that race promoters advertise large amounts of prize money for races to bring out large field sizes with established, big-name racers. Race prize money has both financial and cultural value. The participants argued that women were just as “financially motivated” (Amanda, Cat 1) as men, and increasing the “prize money would definitely encourage people to compete” (Diana, Cat 1). Interestingly, although there is a general consensus that the amount of prize money for women's events is “significantly less than the men's” (Mandy, Cat 4), the females interviewed were adamant that they will continue to participate in competitive cycling events regardless of the gender disparity. The differing perspectives on prize money awarded at women's competitions demonstrate that women's motivations for participating in the sport of cycling are not solely financial; however, the disparity between men's and women's prize money amounts does provide an opportunity for improvements to consider.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Women in competitive cycling clearly face significant barriers to participation and advancement in their pursuit of competitive cycling. Organizational practices such as category lumping in races, an unclear upgrade system, and unequal prize money negatively impact female participants by making transitions within the sport difficult. These identified issues reveal that the current structure of competitive cycling is detrimental to the retention, motivation, and advancement of women in the sport (Green, 2005), but also highlight opportunities to interrupt and modify the existing patterns of thinking about and providing women's competitive cycling that tend to exclude or discourage women's participation, as well as to improve practices and policies to be more inclusive and challenge the status quo (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Based on the data gleaned in this study, we offer five recommendations geared toward increasing participation and enhancing the experiences of female cyclists.

Demonstrate that Women's Participation is Valued

USAC and its race promoters would benefit from increasing women's participation. To do this, it is important to recognize that current practices may have the unintended consequence of conveying the perception that female cyclists are not valued. Thus, current policies and practices should be revisited with the awareness that such a perception exists, and then revised to be more inclusive of

women in the sport. If this is not done, USAC risks limiting their potential target market, which could lead to a stagnation or decline in overall participation. Some first steps might be to increase visibility of women's cycling on their website and other forms of media, as well as increase prize money awarded at women's events to be more on par with the amounts awarded at men's events. Though prize money may only motivate participation for some, primarily elite, cyclists, the current disparity may give the impression that women are not as valuable or as worthy of higher amounts of prize money as men. These suggested efforts, combined with an increased nation-wide effort to understand the perceptions and experiences of women, could help diminish the perception that women are not valued as competitive cyclists and thus help increase female participation.

Create Women's Race Structures that Enhance Smooth Transitions

In the current study, we found that the women's competitive cycling structures of both racing and advancing are characterized by category lumping and subjective point systems, which can discourage retention and advancement in the sport. The men's structures are different, however. They have little lumping, for instance, creating a competitive environment in which they are racing others at a similar level, which can result in stronger involvement and commitment levels. Since the time of data collection, USAC has added a classification level to their women's structure; it now mirrors that of the men (USAC, 2017). In the context of racing, it is recommended that race promoters reduce lumping of categories in races such that women race against competitors of a comparable skill level, if resources permit. It also seems that USAC needs to encourage and incentivize buy-in from the race promoters on this element. Creating another category, without implementation, does little to promote change. If a reduction in lumping is not feasible, another suggestion is to award points only based on how racers fare against others in their particular category. This practice would benefit USAC by enhancing motivation among the athletes, thus aiding in the retention, advancement, and potentially recruitment of licensed cyclists.

Provide Knowledge and Information about Structures and Point Systems

One limitation of women's participation in competitive cycling is a lack of knowledge of the upgrading rules and systems. Therefore, it is important to first improve and clarify this process, which would involve creating and implementing a fair, consistent, and standard policy for upgrades. Second, it is imperative that race promoters provide races for both men and women that meet USAC standards for upgrades and points. This would reduce the "guesswork," especially for novice cyclists, and enhance trustworthiness of the race promoters by assuring competitors that the races they are entering will meet advancement standards. Third, USAC should provide training sessions for novice cyclists regarding rules and systems, which could be produced and delivered online, not only through manuals or rulebooks, but also through modules in which experienced female

riders provide video tutorials. Training opportunities could also include more creative methods. For example, racing teams and race promoters could provide novice cyclists with camps and clinics in which participants learn tips and skills for riding, as well as tips for navigating the racing structure successfully.

Emphasize the Influential Role of Race Promoters and Organizers

Race promoters and race organizers fulfill an influential intermediary role between USAC and competitive cycling participants. Consequently, USAC must make a special effort to ensure race promoters comply with and accurately communicate any changes to policies, practices, and structures adopted by USAC. Because they are such influential stakeholders, without their specific support, lasting unified change in the efforts to enhance the experience of women racers may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Listen, Learn, and Adapt

The final recommendation is for cycling organization leaders and race promoters to take into account the voices and opinions of the national cycling community and make a commitment to consistent improvement. Knowing what does and does not work will be useful information for these entities to employ in future iterations of policies and practices. Thus, it is recommended that USAC survey the consumers of the sport at a national level to discover potential areas for improvement, learn more from outside research examining issues pertaining to the sport, and continue to revise their policies to reflect new information.

As can be seen from the results of this study, there are identifiable barriers to women's participation and advancement in competitive cycling. It is important to note that this study is exploratory in nature, limited in its size and scope, and only begins to provide an understanding of the experiences of women in the sport of cycling. Although this study does provide useful insight and information, additional research is needed to gain awareness of the barriers and challenges female competitive cyclists experience in their participation in the sport, especially from a national perspective. With this knowledge comes opportunity to improve policies and practices to enhance women's experiences, participation, and retention in the sport. As organizers, race promoters, and participants in competitive cycling embrace positive structural and organizational changes, doors are opened for an entirely untapped market to consume cycling at multiple levels (e.g., sport, product, and media) and to embrace and promote the sport among future generations.

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