

# The Status of Women's Cycling - Part 1: A Discussion with Iris Slappendel

*(Editors' note: this is the first article in a multi-part series delving into the current state of women's pro cycling. Part 1 is a detailed discussion with recently retired racer Iris Slappendel, one of pro cycling's emerging leaders, and a passionate voice for both articulating the challenges and improving the opportunities for women in the sport.)*

Iris Slappendel was one of the most consistent, strongest and smartest one-day riders of her generation, adept at timing a winning move, and at strategically setting up her teammates for victory. The former top professional had many great moments in her career – from her 20 personal victories, numerous high placings and teammates' victories in top-tier races, to the joyous camaraderie that comes with riding alongside or against your friends in the peloton. Her most notable career achievement was an unexpected and hard-fought National Championship of the Netherlands in 2014.

But perhaps her greatest achievement was simply being able to sustain a long career in the sport. "I was not the most talented in my age group to come up in the Dutch Federation, but I was among the last to retire," she says. As she neared the end of her 12-year career, Iris came to be valued as much for her strong leadership and teamwork ethic, as for her ability to mentor younger riders and help them to develop into well-rounded racers.

Following her formal retirement in September, 2016, Slappendel admits that she has found it difficult to transition away from the structured schedule and "normalcy" of life as a pro rider. She has replaced part of that daily routine of nutrition, training, racing and recovery by putting some of her considerable energy into a graphic design business (one of Slappendel's most recognizable cycling [kit designs](#) was worn by the Netherlands at the Rio Olympics). Nonetheless, she says she still wakes up in the morning and feels like she needs to "get out there and train!"

Most women racers today simply retire from the sport and then move on, typically transitioning to a completely new and different phase in their lives. However, after Slappendel was elected by her peers to serve on the Athletes' Commission of the UCI (along with men's rep and current Commission President [Bobbie Traksel](#)) her career aspirations began to change. The rapid growth of the UCI's Women's WorldTour (WWT), and her recognition of the longer-term potential of women's racing, converged to transform Slappendel's perspectives on her future career opportunities and choices. She saw the increased focus and support by the UCI as a critical step in the right direction, and "it convinced me that I had to stay involved in the future of our sport," she says.

Indeed, Slappendel has discovered a new energy and life purpose in giving back to the sport which she loves. She is now very focused on helping to make a difference in the careers of current women racers, as well as those who have yet to clip in at a start line. She speaks with her former competitors often – to stay on top of things, and to better represent the peloton. "I don't take the position for granted. I feel like the Athletes Commission and helping the women is my true calling, but at the same time, I don't have a lot of influence yet."

Although she has had generally positive experiences working with the UCI, Slappendel is keenly aware that there are very few women at the senior level within UCI management. "I think the UCI really wants to listen. They listen to us in the Athletes Commission, and they listen to me." But, at the same time, she says the women's needs are typically not the first business priority of the UCI's stakeholders. "For example, if a new men's race is discussed," Slappendel observes, "they (the UCI) are all for it, but usually we have to ask, 'Can we also have a women's race?'"

Currently, only Tracey Gaudry holds a Vice President's post inside the UCI, although other active and former racers Marianne Vos, Katie Compton, Georgia Gould, Greta Neimanas, Anna Meares as well as Slappendel are able to contribute ideas – but not vote – in various advisory Committees. This is an important motivation for Slappendel, who says “I want to change this from a ‘voice’ to a ‘vote’ in the near future.”

Slappendel fully understands the range of challenges which the sport faces; she rode for six different teams during her long career, and saw first-hand how the sport's growth strained its participants, without the corresponding and badly needed upgrades in governance and economic support. Many of her more talented peers simply gave up, Slappendel says, because of chronically low salaries, limited opportunities to race at top events, or because they found themselves in manipulative or even abusive situations. “There is always a moment where each girl has to decide for herself – to ask ‘is this really worth it? I have a university degree, but I only get paid €300 a month – if I get paid at all. Do I really want to risk my life every day, for this?’”

The key areas of misconduct or problems in women's cycling are basically cultural, and Slappendel categorizes these into three fundamental areas: financial manipulation, psychological control, and physical abuse. (*Editors' note: These troubling assertions will be fully examined in Part 2 of this series*). These issues intertwine to create a toxic environment for many women racers today, especially those on the smaller teams. Although Slappendel had mostly positive experiences on her teams, she realized that she had no safety net whatsoever – “nothing to protect me if something went wrong.” Like most pro riders, she had to buy her own supplemental health insurance in case of injury, and could expect no support from her team if she was sidelined, injured or unable to race or train. If you can't train, you can't race, and of course riders without results have an exceptionally difficult time finding a contract on a top team.

“The top four or five teams in the UCI may not be affected by these issues,” explains Slappendel. “I think those teams are as professional as any in the sport, and maybe the next few teams in the top ten don't see too many problems, either. But, remember, we have 40 UCI registered teams – and only the top 20 automatically get into the WorldTour races. Many pro women – especially riding in the 20 or so lower-ranked teams – are having a hard time, and they essentially have no one to turn to.”

In reality, the historical culture and lack of oversight by the sport's governing bodies means that *no* team or rider is really safe from the problems that Slappendel and her colleagues experienced and witnessed at various points in their careers. “Throughout my time as a professional, there was no one looking out for me except for me. I know this was the same for most of my teammates and friends too,” she says without hesitation. “And there was no one holding the teams accountable for how they treat their riders.”

Based on these first-hand experiences and her strong friendships with other riders, Slappendel says that after several years in the pro peloton she made the conscious decision to learn more about the legal and moral rights of professional athletes. She began to speak more openly about her experiences as a pro racer – to be a spokeswoman for the racers' perspectives on the contentious issues in the sport. And she now encourages others to do the same. She is continuing to develop the skills that will help her address these challenges as a future leader of the sport; she recently completed the UCI's Sports Director course in Switzerland.

Despite all the challenges, she has also witnessed many positive competitive changes and organizational improvements over her career, and is excited about the sport's future. To be fair, she says that many teams became more professional as they took cues from successful men's programs – investing in training camps, better coaches, better equipment, and committing support to help riders succeed in international racing programs. But, compared to top men's teams, the number and quality of staff on the women's side didn't improve at the same pace.

According to Slappendel, “Not all teams actually have the proper staff to really support a professional racing program. For example, some teams are putting up more money for branded transportation, like buses and cars with logos, but the men’s teams actually have drivers.” Many of the women racers often have to drive themselves in those team cars or their own cars to the races – sometimes eight hours or more across the European continent. “It’s the team’s choice to put money into this kind of branding, but many of us felt it would be better to invest instead in more and better educated staff members.”

But she smiles when talking about how the level and depth of the women’s peloton has improved. “When I started,” she says, “I could point out maybe four girls who could win. Now, there are ten who can win on any given day. Today’s races have faster average speeds, longer distances, and better skills and tactics across the field. And even though there may be fewer races today than ten years ago, they are better organized.” What makes Slappendel proudest about the changes in women’s racing, though, is the shift from individual to team performances; more riders are being brought up in the sport understanding the value of teamwork, and this is helping to change the mindset of women racing today.

Although men’s road cycling is still the big revenue driver for the UCI, Slappendel believes this commercial focus can gradually be changed. “Women’s racing is just as exciting as men’s racing,” she says. “It’s just that the fans hardly ever get the chance to see us on TV.” She adds, “More people need to be on the inside, driving women’s issues with us at the highest levels. But I feel like there are just too many layers inside the UCI; everything is done by committee. This makes change a very slow process.”

But some changes *are* starting to happen. Slappendel cites the growing influence of new WWT coordinator, Morgane Gaultier. “Morgane thinks differently. She asks first, ‘What is best for the women in the long-term?’ It would be nice if the UCI would hire another five Morganes – the whole sport might change tomorrow!” New ideas are being tried as the UCI’s marketing, sporting, and financial mentality adapts to expansion of women’s racing. For example, some races have changed or are reconsidering the timing of their podiums, with women and men receiving their awards together, after the men’s race, to improve the visibility for women’s champions.

From a longer-term perspective on the challenging issues facing the sport, Slappendel and other prominent women racers have begun to discuss the subject of creating a more formal union or association to represent women pro racers. She has investigated, and asked for input from a wide variety of organizations – the UCI, CPA, Women’s Cycling Association (she is on the board for the WCA in the U.S. – the women’s cycling development and advocacy organization led by retired American pro champion Robin Farina), Dutch Pro Association (VVBW) and others. Slappendel, with a small group of influential riders, intend to explore this concept further. “However, I still have a lot more to think about before moving ahead with any specific idea,” she says.

Most other organizations have essentially told Slappendel that “it’s better to work together with the men,” she says. “But none of the ideas that have been passed to me seem to feel right for what the women actually need. I am only thinking about what is the best outcome for women’s cycling, the women racing today and new pros coming up. That is the most important thing.” She goes on, “Working with the CPA has some advantages, since they are already recognized by the UCI, but we really need an association that stands up specifically for the women.”

Iris Slappendel is quickly growing into the role of spokeswoman for the needs and rights of pro women racers. She brings a unique blend of experience, perspective, and passion to a situation which clearly demands attention and innovative thinking. And while she continues to build up her professional skills to take on that role, she reminds herself each day of the big picture: most important, Slappendel says, is the need to attract and inspire more women to race, and for them to not give up on their professional racing dreams. “I know way too many women who left the sport too early because of all kinds of bad experiences. We’ll never know what they could have achieved. For them, and for future riders, we have

to change the sport.”

*(Editors' Note: In Part 2, we will explore those bad experiences, and the range of pervasive harassment problems facing the women's sport today – including financial manipulation, psychological control, and physical abuse – through the experiences of various active and recently-retired riders shared exclusively with The Outer Line.)*

*Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, The Outer Line, January 21, 2017*