

The Status of Women's Pro Cycling – Part 2: A Cultural Legacy of Sexism and Abuse

(Editors' note: In our previous article, [Iris Slappendel](#) outlined some of the biggest challenges in the sport, and pointed out several different types of sexism and harassment that still occur within women's cycling. This second article shares the personal accounts of various women who have experienced these types of problems, their personal insights, and some of their recommendations about what needs to change inside the sport in order to break these cycles of abuse.)

A legacy of abuse and sexism unfortunately continues to simmer just beneath the surface of women's professional cycling – and particularly within the smaller and more thinly-supported teams. This negative culture puts many cyclists at risk, and severely undermines the sport's reputation and potential for long-term economic growth. Governance protections and oversight in place today are woefully inadequate. Rather than being rare exceptions, abusive behavior and rampant harassment actually define the standard working conditions faced by many women racing today.

The Outer Line recently spoke with twelve current and former professional women riders who were willing to share their experiences. These women agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity, out of concern that they might endanger their position with teams or related organizations. Unfortunately, this kind of retribution is still way too common in the sport. As we will discuss later on, such retribution may even be partially enabled by a flawed UCI governance process – and one which may explain why such abuses tend to be heavily under-reported.

The group of athletes that we spoke to comprised a representative cross-section of the current UCI Women's WorldTour (WWT): five nationalities; three women are current or former members of top-five UCI teams; four race in the lower-half of the top-ten UCI teams; and the others race or have raced at other, lower levels of women's pro cycling in the past few years.

In the course of interviewing these racers, we uncovered three different categories of abuses that are all too common inside the women's sport: (i) financial manipulation, (ii) psychological control, and (iii) physical abuse. These abuses can prematurely end careers, limit professional opportunities and economic mobility, and permanently damage the emotional and physical well-being of women in the sport. While some of these abuses have also been noted in the men's sport, for the women these problems are pervasive, and they reinforce a culture which is indisputably sexist. This culture frequently puts women into situations which would not be tolerated in *any* other professional workplace.

Below we have summarized the comments and concerns voiced by these riders, regarding the current culture and how each was personally affected by it. (To protect the riders' identities, *The Outer Line* has edited certain key words, phrasing, or locations so as to prevent certain parties from recognizing or being able to retaliate against these women.)

(i) Financial Manipulation: These women shared many similar accounts of contract negotiations being deliberately changed or sabotaged, and of management failing to honor specified contract terms or changing the conditions. Contracts have been cancelled without due process, contract terms have been unilaterally changed just prior to signature, and non-payment for services under the contract appears to be alarmingly commonplace. And in addition to being the result of inept management, riders felt that this manipulation often reflects chauvinistic attitudes – that they are valued less or dismissed more quickly because they are women in a male-dominated sport.

Of the 41 women's elite and pro squads currently registered with the UCI (the top 20 of which are guaranteed WWT entries) perhaps only the top half-dozen or so actually have the budget to professionally

support a team at every WWT race – including travel costs, equipment supply and transport logistics, certified mechanics, medical staff, team directors, coaches and trainers, and so on. But regardless of a team's level of sponsorship support and financial strength, many of these women were quick to point out that “team finances can be very shady, and a contract is often not worth anything in the end.”

Riders are often charged for internal team services such as travel costs to the races, or are expected to pay those costs out of pocket. In one example, a rider was even charged €2000 for a pair of sponsored carbon wheels which were damaged in a race-related crash. Some riders reported being fined repeatedly for “infractions” of rules which seem to be invented on-the-fly, with no previous documentation in the contract, team handbook, or similar code of conduct. In one recent case, riders tried to recover compensation by inquiring if the Federation which held their team's UCI bank guarantee could release those funds, but discovered that no such deposit was in place. (*Editors' Note: per UCI Cycling Regulation 2.17.019, a deposit equal to 15% of the team's total salary expenses or a minimum of €20,000, held in escrow by the national Federation in which the team is registered to cover potential unpaid salaries or bills, is currently required as a precondition for registering as a UCI women's team.*)

One rider recalls her contract negotiations as an important life-lesson in trust. “I was promised a specific contract, in writing, during the summer. But a few days before the signing deadline, when I received the official contract, they had changed everything! I would only get salary for part of the year, and essentially at only half the rate I was promised in the emails. And by then, it was so late in the year that most other teams wouldn't return my calls, because I had already told them I wasn't interested.”

“I am *still* trying to get unpaid wages and expenses from 2015,” explained another rider. “My team manager refused to pay some wages and expenses, and the DS (Directeur Sportif) used any excuse he could find to punish me and the other girls – for being overweight, for going against team rules, for whatever – things which were never spelled out in any conduct guide.”

One rider summed up a collective frustration shared by many of the interviewees: “It costs so much to file a lawsuit, and takes so much time, that you quickly reach the point where it just doesn't seem like it's worth it. And there is basically nowhere else to go – for help, or to turn them in. And many team managers know this, so they just act with impunity. They will screw you over just because they know they can, and they know they can get away with it every time.”

(ii) Psychological Control: A disturbing pattern and range of psychological abuses also emerged in the interviews. For example, “body-shaming” or “fat-shaming” is often used to manipulate vulnerable riders, or as an excuse to fine a rider, or to create other monetary, behavioral or performance repercussions. This creates a dysfunctional team environment in which the rider is not appreciated, encouraged or even paid unless she meets an often arbitrary, misguided or simply impossible standard for her metabolism and body-type – regardless of her training and racing results.

“We had a neo-pro 19-year-old rider who was switching over from the track, and she had a lot of extra muscle and her teenage curves,” said one current pro. “It (the coach's fat-shaming abuse) was so terrible that this poor girl was falling apart by the end of her first training camp.” In one well-publicized occurrence, the British cycling Federation recently had to take recent action after it validated the complaints of a prominent rider, Jess Varnish, against then-coaching Director, Shane Sutton, regarding his alleged use of degrading language to derail her career. And it appears that this is far from unique; fat-shaming was cited by nearly every woman interviewed for this article as something they had either experienced or had seen others experience – and at every level of the sport.

Verbal abuse is also commonplace. Perhaps the worst example mentioned in these interviews is also the most important to consider, as it led directly to a woman abruptly having to leave the team. “It was *constant*,” said one of the riders, describing the verbal abuse. “One of my teammates had put up with so

much yelling from our DS, that one day she finally started crying and announced she was quitting. Before she left, however, the DS gave her a gift in front of everyone at a team meeting. When she opened it, inside was a fake penis mounted on a trophy base, like an award. Then he congratulated her as she held the open box, and told her she earned it, because she was the *first* woman on the team that he had made cry.”

Appalling stories like this one clearly demonstrate a mocking tone and malicious intent by many male managers within the sport, and there were numerous other examples cited which reveal a shocking level of sexism. A few of the more egregious ones were just as notable for *how* the abuse was delivered, as they were for the words themselves. For example, there were instances where the team official actually brought in a translator to specifically direct a tirade against the targeted woman in her native language – as if she didn’t understand enough of what was being yelled at her. And the constant verbal abuse can obviously take an emotional toll. “It deeply affected my career. It was so damaging that it really started to affect my confidence. I began to think that maybe I shouldn’t even try to be a cyclist and it wasn’t my place to be racing – and this was when I was already riding for an elite professional women’s team.”

A form of “grooming” also occurs, in the context of changing a rider’s moral decision-making and shifting their perception of right and wrong. In a nearly identical narrative to what many pro men described to the Cycling Independent Reform Commission (CIRC) and the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency during those investigations, several women described team staff who tried to convince them to accept injections of vitamins, and later recommended injections of PEDs. “He told me everyone does cortisone,” said a former rider of one such encounter with her DS, “like, that made it okay for me to use it, too?”

Several riders described how they were intimidated by having their personal space restricted, and then invaded. “The team manager refused to let me race again unless I moved into a team ‘house’ and allowed him to ‘monitor’ me. He said if my training met his expectations, he’d let me race again and pay me. I didn’t know exactly where the house was, and no one could tell me who else would be living there. I was seriously concerned about my safety in that situation.”

One woman who did move to a team’s headquarters commented on how awful it was for her. “The level of mistrust, not knowing what would set the DS off when you said anything, it just made me paranoid. Even the other riders living there would hardly speak to each other. I was isolated – I wasn’t allowed to use the team car, my food was essentially rationed, and he even had one of the neighbors spying on us to tell him if we returned too early or late from training rides. I was nearly held prisoner – on the promise of racing in the WorldTour.”

Another rider had an even more troubling encounter. “My DS barged into the massage room while I was on the table wearing only a towel, just so he could continue yelling at me, and he never truly apologized.”

(iii) Physical Abuse: Altercations in the sport rarely become physical, but the outcome of financial and verbal abuse often results in physical harm. Riders are expected to perform even when injured or sick, often under the threat of withheld salary or a monetary fine. This has eventually caused many athletes to physically break down and has ruined entire seasons, even careers.

These women uniformly said they found many team staff to be completely unqualified, and unable to differentiate between the basic needs and specific programs for different riders, for example, sprinters vs. time trialists. “He (the DS) made everyone do exactly the same training, with daily full-race simulations, which led to over-training and worse,” explained one current pro, as to why her teammates rode through the pain for fear of losing their spot in important events. Another says, “The DS constantly demanded that I lose weight. He even restricted my food intake on endurance days during camp! The lack of proper nutrition got so bad that the soigneur had to sneak me energy bars whenever I was fading.”

Another rider described how this incompetence damaged her career. “Our team manager wouldn’t believe me that I was allergic to gluten, even though I was suffering terribly. He just blamed my ‘poor training’ for the lack of racing results. I went for tests on my own which showed I was celiac, but also had a dangerously low hematocrit and iron. He ignored the doctors and said I was faking it in order to not ride and take *his* money.”

And the threat of physical abuse or danger is often present: “One time I dropped off the pace with a teammate to recover from the hill climb intervals the DS was making us do. He saw that we dropped back, then drove dangerously and erratically alongside me and started hurling f-bombs, cursing me for being too soft and disrespectful to him; my teammate truly thought that he was going to hit me with the car and she feared for both of our lives.”

Another rider described an incident where her teammate became fed up with the verbal abuse by their team manager; when she attempted to step past him in a hotel hallway the manager pinned her by her shoulders against the wall to finish his abusive statements, and then walked away as if nothing had happened. She chose not to challenge the situation – or the manager – again, because in her words, “If we need to report abuses, who can we call?”

Outright sexual abuse is also a longstanding concern for the sport, and has been highlighted by several recent high-profile stories; the CIRC report (page 70) even identified it as a key concern in need of investigative action two years ago. The cycling Federation of the Netherlands is currently investigating the prevalence of abusive and intimidating behavior, as it studies the culture of elite women's cycling, and the British Federation will shortly publish the findings of its own study. Other Federations should follow suit.

Sexual abuse in other organized sports like gymnastics and swimming has happened when governance bodies failed to protect athletes with policies, fully confidential and independent reporting processes, and disciplinary oversight to identify and uproot predators. The culture within these sports became desensitized to and may have even enabled the behaviors which led to abuse. And it is a definite concern within women’s cycling. In what may be an indication of what the British, Dutch, and other future investigations might find, two of the riders interviewed here repeated a deeply disturbing phrase regarding two specific men still involved in UCI women’s pro team management today: “I am legitimately scared of some men in this sport.”

Looking Forward: Women racers have tolerated the difficulties inside this prevailing culture for two primary reasons – the desire to achieve their lifelong athletic objectives, and the grudging acceptance that there is very little they can do right now to improve control or oversight. “There is no clear pathway to becoming to an elite rider, and therefore we just have to deal with the circumstances best as we can,” said one rider of her experiences coming up in the sport. Another rider added, “There just isn’t any other option – so we just have to put up with it. We tough out the bad situations because we see it all as a possible stepping stone to being picked up by a better team to further our careers.”

Another rider elaborated on the influence of poor governance, which dramatically underscores the overall situation. “We don’t have any association who will back us up when we have a problem. The men’s riders have the CPA; but if we speak out individually, we can get blacklisted and likely not get another good contract. The standards are only on paper, and it seems like no one at the UCI or the Federations really keeps the women’s teams in line. We can’t afford to not to be on a team, so we just don’t speak up.”

Despite these pervasive cultural problems, all of the riders interviewed indicated a desire to stay in the sport, particularly as the wave of optimism for the WWT grows. The new investment in individual teams and races is providing many women a bigger stage on which to shine, and more chances to achieve their goals. The WWT is providing team owners and entrepreneurs with more leverage to seek new and bigger

sponsorships. In turn, this creates opportunities for new races in the calendar, and for riders to switch teams and earn a higher salary.

There are also more women entering team management, reducing the risk of sexist influence in some teams. Many of the interviewees say that the level of professionalism in the top-ten teams is notably improved from just a few years ago, but they reiterate that some minimum levels need to be standardized and monitored. Several credited the influence of American teams like Rally (formerly Optum), United Healthcare and the former Team High Road (and its later iterations) for setting the example of the kind of highly-supported team environment in which they would like to race.

As one rider compared her experiences in a U.S. pro team to that of several European teams, “They respected me, and every rider, no matter if we were just a worker or a winner. American team or not, if every woman could start out with just one good experience, she might demand better and stand up for herself more.” Some of the riders interviewed intend to, or have already moved up into management-level positions, to try and foster those positive conditions for the next generation.

Two of the riders currently racing for well-supported top-five teams are looking ahead to a brighter future. One woman strongly believes that the WWT can do more to increase television coverage for the races. “It is so important to draw new fans into the narrative and stories, to bring in more sponsors and investment.” The other one sees progress being made, and said, “I feel more secure today, and everything is way better today than in my first years. The top teams are at a higher level of professionalism, and I feel it is getting better with more investment. We need the WorldTour, and the UCI for this sport to succeed.”

Many things need to change for that success to happen. At this important juncture for the women’s sport, having a reliable and attentive reporting channel for abuse inside some of the national Federations is an important step forward. Although UCI President Brian Cookson recently stated that his organization is handling claims of abuse, the only reporting channels today are an anonymous email inbox for the UCI Ethics Commission’s secretariat, and a “filing process,” which has a serious confidentiality flaw. We contacted the UCI for comments on January 17, 2017, but have received no response as yet. But according to Article 21 of the UCI Code of Ethics:

“Any person may address a complaint or report an alleged breach of the Code to the Ethics Commission. The Secretariat shall acknowledge receipt of the complaint or denunciation, *although the person submitting the file shall have no entitlement for proceedings to be opened, to be a party to proceedings or to be informed of any decision passed,*” (italics added.)

This potentially represents a key failing in the monitoring and reporting oversight today. Many of these women were keenly aware that if the Ethics Commission investigated their claims by contacting the allegedly involved parties, and if it decided not to pursue a hearing, the abuser would not only be able to identify the accuser but could also potentially retaliate with impunity. Some riders refrained from filing complaints rather than risking their safety, and as one woman described the situation, “Why would I cry ‘wolf’ directly to the wolf?” The UCI’s critical immediate need is for the prevailing culture to be documented and fully acknowledged, so that better governance controls can be installed at each level to protect riders, rather than react later to the damage they have suffered.

Furthermore, the UCI should begin to exercise the same level of review and accountability for women’s teams as it does for the men. It must be willing to exercise judgment on team employees who do not meet the basic requirements to work in professional cycling, and who do not pass – as Cookson has previously described it – a “fit and proper” ethics standard. There is a valid concern that many teams might fall out of UCI and disband altogether if these standards were rigidly enforced, which in turn could put riders and staff out of work. However, without basic standards like a team financial deposit or ethics being enforced, the aforementioned abuses will probably continue to occur.

Just as the men's sport staggers every time an organized doping or cheating scandal comes along, women's racing will be similarly and negatively impacted by continuing cases of abuse. Yet in many ways, women's professional cycling is perhaps the sport's untapped opportunity to redefine its image and connect with a new fan base. Women's racing is full of excitement and visual spectacle, and has a unique kind of inspirational athletic storytelling that makes the sport so emotionally captivating. But the women's sport must put an end to this sexist cultural legacy. Just as millions of women worldwide defiantly took to the streets on January 21, 2017 to protest social and political inequities, the women inside the WorldTour have the ability to stand up and demand change in their sport. In the process they could also help to strengthen all of global pro cycling.

Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, The Outer Line, February 8, 2017