

[PEDALING]

CLUBS

CycleFitCHICKS

Ottawa's Female-Only Cycling Club Says Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

BY LISA EVANS



courtesy CycleFitCHICKS

(l-r) Sylvie D'Aoust, founder of CycleFitCHICKS women's club, Sue McIsaac, Heather Tkalec, Heidi Mierau, Shen Higgs and Natalie Labbe



Calah Wright given'r at a weekend race

Grégoire Crevier

As more and more women take to the bike, female-only cycling clubs are gaining traction, catering to the social needs of women riders. The former spinning-studio owner and president of CycleFitCHICKS, Sylvie D'Aoust, wanted to give women an opportunity to cycle among their female peers in a non-competitive environment. Since forming in 2008, the Ottawa club has grown from 42 members to 231.

A club dedicated to women appealed to those who were frustrated by the competitive nature of male-driven cycling clubs in the region. "We end up cycling a lot by ourselves [because we can't keep up with the male riders]," says D'Aoust, who admits men and women approach the sport differently. While male cyclists tend to enjoy the competitive aspect of cycling, focusing on who's the fastest up the hills and who has the latest trendy gear, CycleFitCHICKS aims to create a supportive atmosphere to allow women of all ages and abilities to have fun on the bike. "[Many of these women] are just looking for a nice ride and good conversation," says D'Aoust.

While the club is predominantly focused on the social aspect of recreational cycling, CycleFitCHICKS does encourage its members to improve their cycling skills and dedicates Monday-evening rides to training. "Every Monday from May to the end of August, we cycle through a variety of different skills [such as] hill climbing, descending, group riding, speed drills, cornering and bike handling," says D'Aoust, who leads the skills clinics.

CycleFitCHICKS also requires all new members to take a four-hour bike-training clinic at the start of the cycling season. The club runs eight learn-to-ride workshops every April and encourages all members, new and experienced, to participate. "Every new member has to take the learn-to-ride clinic to understand how to group ride with others safely, so when we start our group rides in May, everybody knows how to rotate around and follow a wheel and get to know their bike," says D'Aoust.

Group rides are divided into four categories according to rider abilities. The Zen group is designed for women with hybrid bikes who cycle 20kph or less and stick to local bike paths. The Beginner group cycles distances of 40- to 60-kilometre rides at 20-22kph. Intermediate riders cycle 40- to 60-kilometre rides at 22-25kph, while the Advanced group is dedicated to more experienced riders who cycle 50 to 80 kilometres at 25-27kph.

Although the predominant focus of the club is social cycling, CycleFitCHICKS does have a racing team, although D'Aoust says it's a small percentage of their members who want to tap into their competitive side. "For 99% of our riders, [they cycle for] recreation," she says. The CycleFit racing team was introduced in 2005 before the club's inception, and follows the FQSC race schedule in Quebec. The team had six members race last year and one podium finish.

CycleFitCHICKS encourages women to learn about the mechanics of cycling and runs bike-maintenance clinics that are open to the public. The clinics are taught by women and include such basics of bike mechanics as changing a tire and how to use a bike pump.

With an average age of 47, CycleFitCHICKS recently added a Masters 50+ program to encourage mature women with previous experience riding in a group (but who haven't cycled in years) to return to cycling. The group cycles shorter rides (20-40 kilometres) and hosts workshops dedicated to the needs of the 50+ age group, including nutrition, cycling-specific yoga, and even a menopause and cycling workshop.

For more information about CycleFitCHICKS, visit www.cyclefitchicks.ca.

► IN BRIEF

Continued from page 22
as one of seven 2013 inductees into the Hamilton Sports Hall of Fame. Hughes, the only athlete to win multiple medals in both the Summer and Winter Olympics, moved from her hometown of Winnipeg, Man. to Dundas, just outside of Hamilton, Ont., as she followed her coach Mirek Mazur to Ontario.

It was in the Hamilton area that she trained as a cyclist and developed into the famed world-class ath-

lete she is today. Later in her career, she became a philanthropist and key spokesperson for the Right to Play humanitarian organization. Hughes also recently spoke out about her battle with depression in an effort to lift the taboo from the illness and help others suffering from the condition. In April, famed Sydenham Hill in Dundas was renamed Clara's Climb to honour Hughes in a dedication ceremony.

New High-Performance Athlete-Development Program

A new partnership between Cycling Canada, Cycling BC and the Canadian Sport Institute Pacific has resulted in the creation of the Cycling Talent Development Program, which will begin operating on Oct. 1. Based in Victoria, B.C., the new program will work directly in line with Cycling Canada's High Performance Athlete

Development Pathway, to identify and develop athletes who have the qualities to become Olympic and Paralympic champions.

With the financial support of Own the Podium (OTP), Sport Canada and the Province of B.C., the partners will recruit and hire a cycling-talent development-program coach who will be a full-time employee of the Canadian Sport Institute Pacific.