



**I am at the start line** for the Sylvania Cycling Classic with 15 other women sizing each other up and listening to the routine instructions given by the USA Cycling official.

There are butterflies in my stomach. I am straddled across my bike, one foot clipped in, one steady on the ground, gloved hands gripping and ungrIPPING my handlebars. I take a deep breath to center myself. A moment of panic sets in and, with adrenaline pumping, I consider for a moment running the other way. Then the whistle blows and we are off.

Almost immediately the fear disappears and I am just focused on the wheel ahead of me. Is it steady? Is she strong? Will she crash in front of me? A corner comes up and we slow slightly, lean into the curve, and then stand and pedal to get back up to speed and settle in again.

Someone else stands up and sprints, trying to get away. We respond by standing up, catching back on. We will do this again and again and again, trying to make each other hurt — each of us trying to win.

Then rain starts, thunder rumbles, and an already risky race becomes more dangerous, the road slick with water. A racer takes the corner too fast, weight in the wrong spot, and her back tire skids out. She crashes, taking out the woman next to her. I narrowly avoid the crash, take a deep breath, and sprint to catch up to the quickly disappearing pack.

Heart pounding, I make it, and wonder what will happen next. How will this race end? What is my next move? The officials call out two laps to go, and I try to get to the front of the group.

The last corner comes up and I hesitate, just for a moment. Three girls pass me. I see them sprint ahead, taking the win. Always hoping to do just a little better, I count my losses, and add up my gains. Did I finish rubber side down? Yes! Did I learn something in this race? Yes! Do I think I can do better next time! Yes!

Welcome to my addiction to bike racing.

How did it get to this point? I was not an athlete in high school or in college. I started mountain biking while working at a bike rental on Mackinac Island one summer. The bikes were free, and there wasn't much else to do, so I joined up with the local guys who were riding.

# MY (BIKING) ADDICTION

BY MELISSA RYBA

I remember gasping for breath trying to keep up with them while trying to act cool at the same time (I was only 18 after all). I loved it though and bought my own bike the following summer.

I went years without mountain biking after I had kids. I got back into it when I moved to Traverse City in 2008. A few girlfriends mentioned they liked to ride, and I joined them. I showed up on my 10-year-old Schwinn with no helmet and wearing yoga pants. I had been running occasionally for exercise up until then, and when I felt the thrill of flying down hills again, I realized how much fun I had been missing.

I had always wanted to try a mountain bike race so a friend and I signed up for the 28-mile Ore to Shore Mountain Bike Epic in Marquette in 2009. I showed up to that race with my old Schwinn, but at least with a helmet and some baggy bike shorts. I got fifth in my age group, and I was hooked.

I was then encouraged by a friend to purchase a road bike and give that a try. I rode with the local bike club and I discovered the fun of riding with a group of people and learning how to work together to fight the wind. I loved it as much as mountain biking.

The idea of road racing terrified me, but I knew a few women who raced and they looked pretty cool, so I made the plunge and joined the Hagerty Cycling team in 2010. I am a mom of two, as well as a social worker in foster care. Racing became a way for me to express my competitive side, stay healthy and meet new people.

It is a big commitment. My friends can tell you that when it's race season they don't see me much, or if they do, I am often a

tired wreck. I ride about 8 to 12 hours and 125 miles a week. Races are usually every other weekend throughout the spring and summer. I still do a few mountain bike races a year as well.

My house is often a mess, dinner is on the fly, and my kids spend a lot of quality time with dad. I often struggle with guilt—it's hard taking this much time for myself. But I've learned that it is necessary to take good care of yourself in order to be a better mom.

I have lost about 20 pounds since I started racing and I am in better shape than I have ever been. And, despite how this may sound, it is a great stress reliever. When I am racing, all the stresses and worries in life melt away and I focus solely on the race.

Hard training rides and trying to keep up with the guys push me to the limits and I enjoy seeing my progress. Most of the rides are 95 percent guys who refer to me as "Ryba" and don't extend any favors just because I am a woman. They will drop me without looking back.

Occasionally a guy who is also struggling will come back and ride with me, but I know better. It's an easy way to save face — go help the chick that didn't make it up the hill again. But, the only way to get better is to ride with people better than you.

Smokey Hollow on Old Mission Peninsula is a hill on a ride we do every Tuesday. Every week I would make it to that hill, hanging on for dear life the whole way out, riding at speeds around 25-28 miles per hour, just to get dropped on that hill.

Until the time I finally DIDN'T get dropped. At the top of the hill I looked around, saw that I was still with the group, and whooped with joy! They all looked at me like I was crazy, but



## Grand Traverse Woman

that victory was sweeter than any race I've ever done.

I have made many new friends in town through cycling, but unexpected was making friends among women across the state or "the competition." As we share a common goal, they are the only ones who really get it. Being able to talk bikes and racing for hours with another woman is awesome.

These women come from all walks of life and are all ages. Last winter I spent a week in North Carolina mountain biking with someone I met through racing. Fellow racers are willing to open their homes to you so you can race and not have to pay for a hotel. They will show you their latest bruise, share their latest war story, and have the same wacky tan lines. It is a great community.

I really encourage women to give it a try — our numbers are too few in this sport. One can enjoy the sport of cycling late into life, and it isn't too late to get started — I'm 37 and still consider myself new at this.

Although I may not be a traditional mom, I believe that I am teaching my children a lot about being committed to something you love, that the things in life worth doing take hard work, and success doesn't come easy.

They have seen firsthand how many races I have lost and how great small victories can be. It has become a way of life. My 12-year-old son also enjoys racing and my 8-year-old daughter thinks she may be the next best thing in racing since she is able to get started at such a young age, unlike her old mom.

I think the best advice I can give women looking to become more active is to keep trying different activities until they find something they love to do. Then "working out" isn't just a loathsome task; it's a part of a newer, better YOU.

And yes, you ARE worth it.

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