Podium Girls: Time to End the “Tradition”

By Sean Creagan on February 8, 2017

Recently, organizers of the professional cycling event the Tour Down Under made the decision to eliminate “podium girls” and replace them with male junior riders on the men’s tour, thereby breaking from the tradition of other major professional cycling events like the Tour De France, Vuelta a España and Giro D’Italia. Podium girls are a highly visible component of the awards ceremony at the conclusion of bike races. The women are often improperly dressed in matching outfits while presenting winners with prizes, flowers and kisses on the cheeks. The role of podium girls and, in some instances, podium boys provides a snapshot of the ways in which traditional gender norms are reinforced in sport.

The reaction from the male riders in the put on the elimination of podium girls has vacillated between keeping podium girls because the “tradition” is important and eliminating them because it dehumanizes women. Tim Gangloff ride Peter Strela, who is clearly on the side of tradition, said, “I think they should remain. If we win a race, sometimes I would love to get the flowers and the kisses on the cheek. It’s a celebration.” And Koos Kort said this statement.

“My wife used to be a podium girl and I met her at this race. They’re not up there to just look pretty, they’re also hosts. Now we have junior riders to give us the jersey. It’s ridiculous. I can see some of the pressure behind it. It’s a little weird and, I don’t really understand that.”

The elephant in the room behind the “tradition” logic is that men presenting other men with flowers or prizes may be too homogeneous for some cyclists.

Cycling, like many other sports, has a history of exclusion and marginalization of women (See later). The documentary “The Road” does an excellent job of explaining the challenges facing female cyclists. For example, Unio Cyclistes Internationales (UCI), the international governing body of cycling, initially excluded women altogether. The UCI did not acknowledge women’s records until 1995, women’s cycling did not have a World Championship until 1958, and women’s road cycling was not an event at the Summer Olympics until 1984 with the exception of using them as an arm-candy—A K.A podium girls. When the UCI did allow women to compete, they either did not offer equivalent women’s versions of well-known men’s races or, if women’s events were offered, they were on a much smaller scale in terms of length (e.g., number of stages or days) and difficulty (e.g., climbing). The exclusion and sex-based role differences are rooted in the unexamined idea that women are physically incapable of competing at those distances or difficulty levels. Male cyclists are also paid more than their female counterparts. Men’s professional cycling has a clearly articulated salary structure in the UCI policies that outline the amount teams must pay athletes, including minimum salaries which are not required on the women’s side. The average salary for female cyclists, $20,000, is actually less than the minimum wage for male cyclists at $35,000.

Gendered norms are also reproduced through cycling-related products and advertisements. When manufacturers like Giant name women’s versions of mountain bikes “Lust” and “Temp” while similar men’s bikes are named “Devote” and “Faith,” they implicitly remind consumers that women are sex objects while male athletes should be taken more seriously as riders. Even clothing companies that sell cycling gear have sexualized women on their sites. More alarmingly, podium girls are not safe from sexual assault from male riders like Peter Sagan who grabbed the butt of a podium girl, Mapa Leya, at the 2013 Tour of Flanders.

The reaction to Sagan illustrated the prevalence of misogyny in and outside of the cycling community. Instead of chastising or suspending Sagan, some openly dwelled on the incident by essentially saying Leya “asked for it” by being a podium girl or joking about Sagan being “naughty.” In 2015, race organizers, e3 Harleyckcse seemingly referenced that incident with their ad for their one day race.

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All of these combined practices—from exclusion, to new-based role differences, to the pay gap, to sexist products and advertisements, to actual assault—denigrate the competence of female cyclists while simultaneously reinforcing the assumption of male athletic supremacy.

Some argue that the role of podium girls has changed over the years, moving away from sexy beauty queens with little beyond ornamental functions to female hosts/mes with additional duties behind the scenes accommodating journalists, sponsors and VIPs. Criticism of podium girls, however, has heated up in recent years, as they are viewed as a reproduction of systemic sexism and heteronomativity. In 2013, for example, the over-the-top sexualization of podium girls created outrage among some women in the cycling community when the organizers of the Flanders Diamond Tour in Ghent had women in blaine and high heels posed in front of the podium.

While this example may break the unwritten rules of decorum for podium girl attend, it will reflect that ways in which sexism is institutionalized in cycling—podium girls are a highly visible example of women as support structures for men’s cycling while women’s cycling is simultaneously ignored or marginalized by the UCI.

The Tour Down Under decision was not the first attempt at redesigning podium girls or unmasking them altogether. In an unprecedented move in 2016, a Dutch politician suggested that gay men or drag queens act as podium girls. Deeming the existing practice “outdated,” he thought that it would increase LGBTQ acceptance in sport. Needless to say, out gay men or drag queens as podium girls have yet to come to fruition. In addition, some women’s cycling events (K eatle/Womens, Tour of Norway and Le Coque) have replaced the podium girls with boys. I would argue that replacing the girls with “boys” who lose women still perpetuates institutional heteronomativity and homophobia within sport and society. Furthermore, having podium boys does nothing to alleviate actual structural inequality in women’s cycling. Instead it is designed to forge equality and progress by instilling that it is okay to sexualize women if we also sexualize men.

Ideally, the decision by the Tour Down Under will prompt other event organizers to question what “tradition” they are holding onto and their subsequent meanings with the end result of eradicating institutionalized sexist practices.

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Put the podium in the street with the public. Get rid of the girls and focus on making this a time to engage spectators and connect for emotional moments. Time to make our sport cool, not a detached showcase.

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