

The Development of Women's Professional Cycling

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Received: 27 December 2019. Accepted: 31 December 2019.

In the last decade, women's road cycling gained more and more attention from the public, the Union Cycliste International (UCI) and sponsors. This new attention had a clear positive effect on women's cycling. In 2012, 28 professional cycling teams with 350 female cyclists were registered at the UCI. While in 2020, 52 teams started the season with 630 female cyclists, this means a growth of 85% in teams and 80% in female cyclists (1). Although this huge growth in women's cycling, most studies have focused on describing the demands of men's professional road cycling races with limited research available describing the demands of women's professional races (2-4). Sanders et al. analyzed a large dataset collected between the years 2012-2015 and compared the load and intensity characteristics of 616 women's races with 3024 men's races (4). They concluded that overall volume and load characteristics are higher in men's races, while time spent at high intensity and relative load is higher in women's races. This "gap" between women's and men's professional cycling is probably caused by multiple reasons.

There is a huge difference in race regulations between women's and men's races set by the UCI. Were an average women's race being 116 km and a maximal of 160 km (4). The men race on average 183 km and even up to 300 km in the classics (4). The differences in race regulations will result in a different race tactic. A part of closing the gap could be to change race regulations of women's cycling. This could result in more similarity in the race and training characteristics between women and men.

Another reason for the differences between men's and women's race is probably the salary requirements set by the UCI. Teams are obligated to pay male cyclists a minimum amount of salary, while in women's cycling this was not the case between 2012-2015 when the data of the study was collected. A lower salary will result in a lower training volume in women's cycling (5) as most female cyclists can simply not afford to train the same training volume as the men. They must work part-time or study next to their athletic career and not being able

to live like a full-time professional could interfere with recovery.

In addition, there is no U23 category within female cycling and thus junior 18-year-old female cyclists directly must start racing against senior women almost double their age and experience. This results in huge differences between the level of female cyclists starting the same race.

In 2016 the UCI introduced the World Tour for women's cycling and from 2020 the 8 World Tour teams are obligated to pay a minimum amount of salary to their cyclists. Both are a good step in the right direction and will be added value to professionalizing women's cycling, which will result in closing the gap to men's cycling. On the other hand, the salary requirements should be introduced with caution and should go hand in hand with other requirements, otherwise, it could result in a negative effect on women's cycling. With the minimum salary requirement, the investment of sponsors will grow significantly, and sponsors are mainly investing to get a return (exposure) for their investment. Therefore, it is highly important for the UCI to also invest in live broadcasting of the women's World Tour races as sponsors will base their investment decision on the exposure they will get in return for their investment. Further, the minimum salary requirement could have a downside for the development of young female cyclists. For teams, it could be too expensive to add U23 cyclists to their roster as they are not able to ride a full program yet and thus have less added value for a team compared to a more experienced female cyclist. With more and more female cyclists it could be a good solution to develop a U23 category, with lower salary requirements, like in men's cycling. This will give talented female cyclists the change to grow steadily without any pressure and compete against female riders from a similar level and training history.

In the last decade, women's professional road cycling made a huge step in the right direction to close the gap with professional male cycling. The number of teams and cyclists is almost doubled, the women's World Tour is introduced and a minimum requirement for salaries is introduced. To continue growing women's cycling, the teams, sponsors, UCI and race organizers should keep working together as this race is only starting. There is still a lot of work ahead to grow women's cycling with the pace it did in the last decade.



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