

Rabdau reflects on the Women's Challenge

By Marti Stephen

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Jim Rabdau (second from right) still gets together with the old Women's Challenge crew.

Last year, the women's world championship road race covered 172 kilometers, a distance that stirred little comment.

With that in mind, it may be difficult to recall that as recently as 1990 a proposed 129km women's road race was deemed "excessive" by the sport's international governing body, which refused to sanction it. That race, and the 16 other stages surrounding it, not to mention the 22,000 feet the stages climbed and the 1067km (663 miles) they covered, took place anyway.

Because of that race and its predecessors, starting in 1984, roughly a two-decade leap in expectations, fitness, and excellence can be traced in women's racing. The race was, of course, Idaho's Women's Challenge (1984–2002). The person behind it was Jim Rabdau.

The old FIAC deemed the Women's Challenge to be "excessive" on many counts. Sponsored by a frozen food company, the first Ore-Ida Women's Challenge in 1984 had 52 entrants who raced 180 miles, cumulatively. Rebecca Twigg won and took the silver medal in the first-ever Olympic women's road race that year in Los Angeles, which, by the way, was just short of 50 miles, or 80km.

Now retired, Rabdau says, "I have no idea why it had to be a women's race. A friend of mine said, 'You ought to do a women's track meet.' But no, I said it had to be cycling. Cycling has the color, the speed, the thrill."

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It was 1963 when Rabdau first imagined the race, and he had seen only one bike race, with male racers, in the Italian Alps while he was in the Army. Rabdau's car was stopped at an intersection by the Carabinieri, clearing the course for the peloton. The image stayed with him for years, he recalls.

After retiring from the military, Rabdau moved to Idaho and worked as an office manager in the human resources department of Ore-Ida. The 20-year-old image of that bike race inspired him in the early '80s when he won

the support of company president Paul Corddry when Rabdau floated the idea for the first Women's Challenge.

"Do it!" Corddry said and Rabdau single-handedly designed the race for the next 19 years. The Women's Challenge switched to sponsorship from Hewlett Packard from 1997 to 2002, then Con-Agra in 2003. But Con-Agra backed out that same year, too late for Rabdau to find a new backer.

The Women's Challenge served as an inspiration for many young women. Photo: Jen DialRabdau was facing a challenge of his own in 2003. He had been diagnosed with syringomyelia, a rare and degenerative disease of the central nervous system. Golf great Bobby Jones suffered from the same disease. Rabdau has had two spinal operations and walks with a cane. His right leg is paralyzed, but there is still no stopping the man who dreamed of helping women cyclists beat back all limitations. In fact, he and his wife, Marge, continue to travel internationally and have been to the cycling world championships, specifically to see the women's races, in Spain, Italy, France, Holland, and Canada.

Knowing excellence

"I've always thought in my life, that if you can be around people who are excellent, then you'll know what excellence is," says Rabdau. "That was a lot of what I was trying to do (with the Women's Challenge) — to get girls to that level."

Perhaps one of the last women to benefit from Rabdau's excellent adventure was 2006 world time trial champion Kristin Armstrong. She credits the Challenge with bringing her valuable experience, saying in 2003, "I would not have had the opportunity to sign on with an international team (T-Mobile) without this race."

Rabdau remembers Armstrong as the American woman who gave the Lithuanian racers a hard time.

"We were all excited that there was an American girl up there," he remembers.

Armstrong eventually placed 13th overall in the 2002 race. Lithuanian racers were an Ore-Ida specialty, so to speak, joining the Women's Challenge in 1991, before the country had even successfully achieved statehood.

"We flew the Lithuanian flag in Idaho before the United States ever did," says

Rab dau, noting that Lithuanian Rasa Polikeviciute won the Hewlett–Packard Women’s Challenge in 1997.

The courses that Rab dau asked women cyclists to race were hand–picked by him. The former Green Beret, who spent 25 years in the service, including time as a platoon leader in E–Company 506 (the legendary infantry portrayed in Steven Spielberg’s “Band of Brothers”), and who served in Vietnam, charted each course on maps and then drove the course himself each spring.

He cleared courses with police stations and local townspeople, even going to the point of making sure that if an elderly woman lived on a criterium course, she was able to get out and go shopping, in spite of the cyclists buzzing along her street.

It’s in the manual

He himself wrote both the technical manual and the racers’ manual, with enough details to run, not surprisingly, a military operation. “It’s supposed to be that the bosses are working harder than the soldiers,” he says, referring to the preparations he made for his dozens of volunteers, some of whom worked for the race for 16 years.

Saturn’s Lyne Bessette won the Women’s Challenge in 2001.

Photo: Casey B. Gibson Even so, the volunteers worked plenty hard.

“The racers are getting up at 6 a.m., well, the staff gets up at 4 a.m.,” says Rab dau. “I never bothered the staff the whole year — they weren’t consulted.”

But when the time came to set the race in motion, doctors, nurses, mechanics, course marshals and other volunteers gathered for meetings, read their technical manuals, and didn’t have to ask any questions. Even with all that forethought and planning, it was hard work.

“After 17 days, the staff was tired. The girls (racers) were just getting into it,” Rab dau says of his “excessive” stage race.

Point A to point B

All eyes were on the racers, who, as Rab dau wished, only had to worry about getting from point A to point B as competitively as possible. What he valued was “the mind games, the testing, the attacks. The words. It would just knock you out, it was so great,” says Rab dau of the women’s peloton. “I used

to listen in on the team strategy sessions — it was fascinating.” (And remember, Rabdau was an experienced military leader.)

Rabdau’s race provided housing for everyone, and would help out the poorer teams with food and supplies. He remembers the Lithuanian coach first showed up with two suitcases: “One had vodka and caviar in it, the other had spare parts and underwear,” he says. His goal was to provide a level playing field. He says he was saying to the racers, “It’s up to you.”

Of course, Rabdau was also referring to the then-common challenge that women racers couldn’t or wouldn’t attack, use tactics, or really race.

“We had to get people to stop using that word,” he says of the many press members who called the racers “good women athletes.”

“She’s a good athlete,” he told them.

He also faced critics who told him he couldn’t mix the relatively more experienced racers with the less experienced ones.

“Well, where did you start?” he says he told them. “I wanted to take all the lids off this thing. I wanted to see what would happen.”

Rabdau doesn’t follow bike racing these days. He and his wife visited Turkey instead of going to the world’s in Germany last year—even though his old friend the Lithuanian coach personally invited him to join the team there.

About the Women’s Challenge he says, “Whether it would have continued, I don’t know. You would have had to find somebody who had the same attitude, spirit.”

From 1984 to 2002, women’s racing is lucky it found Jim Rabdau.

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