



Leticia Cline takes us through how resilient women have become in this male dominated industry

BY LETICIA CLINE

Recently, while at Daytona Supercross, I escaped from the exhaustion of walking around and standing in long lines for a much needed break in the media tower. While there, I looked out over the track and pit area and noticed something I sadly hadn't before. In the sea of people there were women, lots of women. From Monster Girls, mothers, wives and fans, the amount of females in the crowd seemed to be equal if not be more than the amount of men.

In the past, extreme sports and women have not historically gone together in the same sentence but now that seems to be changing; stereotypes about women on bikes are becoming more and more outdated. In fact, women are now the fastest growing demographic in the motorcycle world. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council, one in every four riders is a woman and that number grows by 67 percent every 5 years.

If this is the case then why has the world of women racing been slow to the change? There are too many factors as to why and this article is hardly long enough to do each answer justice, but I think the biggest concern is that the AMA and MX Pro Racing has not adapted to making women feel more welcomed. This is evident in the downsizing of women's races. Instead of celebrating women who ride, they seem to pay little to no attention at all, therefore fewer women show up to starting lines at races. Why would they risk their lives for very little acknowledgment?

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Dianna Dahlgren is the trackside voice of the AMA Supercross Series



Above: Manitoba's Ami Houde has generated quite the following through social media.

The track life isn't exactly glamorous. Being one step up from constantly camping, it's a hard, isolated life for anyone and even more so when you're the minority. It's not that port-a-potties aren't great places to do your makeup, the problem is that the amount of focus, dedication, drive and travel tend to separate you from the safety of the rest of the world. A lot of people don't understand why someone would put their life at such a risk, and they really don't understand why a woman would do it. Riders, mechanics and teams travel across the country like a traveling circus where the sideshows are the women who ride, the freaks of nature.

Think about it, women have challenges no one else faces in the industry. Everything from whom they date to what type of gear they wear is under a microscope with very little room for error. Women riders are held to a much higher standard, starting out as a negative and having to prove not only their value on a bike but also to constantly maintain their worth. In the eyes of those who don't understand it, there's a thin line of being labelled a "Racer Chaser", "Diesel Dike" or "Renegade", and one mistake can send you

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flyng into the wrong rut for the entire race. So why do they subject themselves to all of this? Believe it or not, they love it. They are the One Percenters; the few who broke away from that limiting societal box and decided to trade their heels for boots, blush in for mud and daintiness for self-respect. Since they had to fight to get there, women are more committed to the role. Women should not be put off by a male dominated environment but instead encouraged to embrace the opportunity to push the boundaries. From a personal perspective, Canada seems to be pulling the holeshot when it comes to having more women involved in motorcycle racing. Riders like Ami Houde, announcers like Erin Bates and Women's Nationals supporters such as Camille Baker and Denaye Giroux have all helped change the sport in tremendous ways. With more and more women coming to the forefront and showing a genuine interest in the sport, the two former racers worked hard to get sponsors on board and support an East and West Women's Series. And it looks like this year's events will be even bigger than the last.

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From a personal perspective,



A short time ago I got the opportunity to sit down with my dear friend and rider Ami Houde to get her thoughts on this topic. I met Ami on a motorcycle publicity tour for Honda and Ontario Tourism some time back and gained respect for her after experiencing her talent first hand. I thought that if anyone could shed light on the ups and downs of women motocross it could be her since she has been riding longer than most guys she races against!

Q You got your start as a little girl on a PW50. What got you interested in motorcycles at such an early age?

A My father is a former Canadian National Champion and a Vet World Champion and my parents even met at the race track, so I guess you can say racing is in my blood. My parents never pushed me to race; dirt bikes were introduced to me as just a hobby, and it wasn't until I was in the Super Mini class [all boys] and getting dead last that my mindset changed. I was going to do everything I could to get faster and make a name for myself. That is when motocross became my lifestyle.

Q Was that your first introduction to racing?

A Actually, there was no 50cc class in Manitoba when I started riding, I just rode around the pits while my Dad raced. It was my Dad who actually started the first kids class in 1993 [when I was 4 years old] with only one other racer kid, who happened to be another girl.



Q Fast forward to 22 years later, what would be some of your best and worst experiences involved in racing?

A Best? My best racing experience would have to be being the first Canadian out of men and women to be invited to race the World Championships in Europe. The women's series there is huge and the fan following for the girls is incredible. But my most meaningful memories I will cherish from my racing career would have to be the emails I receive from girls and boys around the world who tell me that I have inspired them to never give up on their dreams and/or ask for advice and share their stories with me. It's so humbling and I feel honoured especially after coming from nothing, and working so hard and struggling with the challenges of trying to make a name for myself in this industry. It makes all of that completely worth it when someone tells you that you are his or her role model. It's a bigger accomplishment than any championship I have ever won. I want every person to know they can make their dreams reality.

Worst? Being invited to race the World Championships in France and having my shoulder pop out in the first moto. It was a very devastating moment.

Q I've noticed the huge following you have on social media sites and seen it first hand at the track: people look up to you. A lot of your supporters seem to be girls who want to become a racer like yourself. Why do you feel that is?

A It's crazy to think people actually look up to ME because I am still figuring myself out. But I think people can relate to my journey because I have started where the majority of people do... THE BOTTOM. I always had used bikes and used gear; never allowed to be home schooled, not to mention that I even juggled five years of university while I was racing. I went to the races every weekend with my Mom and Dad (and still do). I think most people can relate to the "homegrown" story because it reflects their journey. I share my accomplishments, struggles, and determination to hopefully inspire others. If I can do it, they can too.

Q You would have thought women would have proven themselves by now. Why do you think it's hard for women to make it in racing?

A Let's be honest, there is a very obvious lack of sponsorship and backing from the industry for women. When I was a girl, the dream was to one day race the WMA, which was the goal for every young girl starting out racing. I looked up to Sara Whitmore and Stefy Bau and kept working hard to one day be able to race in the Pro Women's class in the USA. Where does that dream go now for the girls? The renamed WMX cut back to three races last year and now run with amateur rounds for 2014. The number of women riders multiplies every year and they are faster than ever, but the industry lacks credibility and recognition in a professional female division.

Right: Two-time Women's Western Canadian Champ, Hailey Larson



Right: Sara King with Cycle North's Kourtney Lloyd



Right: Camille (Baker) Bunko and Denaye Giroux are raising the Women's Nationals to a higher level.



I agree with Ami, I think one day women may not be completely accepted but they will definitely have a stronger presence as long as we continue to have martyrs like Ami, Erin, Camille and Denaye out there not giving up the race. For me personally, when I'm on my bike, nothing else matters. I'm not thinking about the fact that I'm a woman in a man's world, instead I'm just in the moment and I ride. I may not be a racer but I look up and follow the women who have the strength and courage to do it, and there are thousands of other women out there like me. There may be a lot of obstacles in the road ahead for us but the only setbacks are the ones we let get in our way. **EMMA**