

RIDE ON, SISTERS



THE HIGHLANDS HAS A NEW WOMEN'S CYCLING GROUP, CHICKS ON SLICKS. THREE MEMBERS TELL DEBORAH McINTOSH WHY CYCLING HAS NEVER BEEN SO MUCH FUN.

PHOTOGRAPHS TONY SHEFFIELD

CHICKS ON SLICKS' FIRST RIDE TOGETHER last November was a celebratory occasion, with a dozen women whizzing through the countryside, chatting, pumping their leg muscles and blissing out on fresh air and glorious Highlands views. That was until Andrea Mikic got a flat tyre. With any mixed cycling group this wouldn't have posed a major hassle, but for Chicks

now off Slicks, repeated failed attempts to inflate it had them collapsing with laughter.

"We were going down Mount Misery on Greenhills Road which is very steep," Andrea says. "I'm quite scared of it, so I'm like a granny going down with my brakes on. When my tyre blew somehow I didn't crash – because you have no control over your bike when a tyre blows – and then we had to change it."

"I had this tiny pump that really wasn't up to the task," says Lynne Vaughan, an experienced racing cyclist who runs the



FRONT: ANDREA MIKIC, FIONA WEBB, KERRY DELAMONT, FIONA MARTIN, LYNNE VAUGHAN AND HELENE MAARSCHALK.
 BACK: SANDRA VINCENT, MADDIE MIDSON, BARBARA SCHYMITZEK, LOUISE HILLAR, LINDA EVANS AND CATHERINE LEWIS.

group. Others had pumps too, but none could do the job.

“It was such a laugh and a learning experience,” says Lynne, “because if you’re with the men, they just do it.”

This sounds like an endearing form of chivalry, I suggest, but they laugh and set me straight. “It’s just that whoever’s fastest at changing tyres always does it so you can get back on the road,” Lynne explains.

“Eventually we found a gas pump in Andrea’s back pouch, so once we got that we were away. But when we were trying to do it with these incompetent little pumps it was hilarious.”

As setbacks go, it was a minor dip in the road for the enthusiastic Chicks on Slicks, the new women’s cycling group in the Southern Highlands (slicks are smooth tyres for road riding). The group comprises around 20 cyclists of varied experience. They range from 19 to 60, and come from diverse backgrounds, but all are thrilled to finally be able to ride with a group of women.

The Highlands has a strong cycling community, but women cyclists – apart from the elite – have always known they will lag behind the men no matter how hard they pedal.

“Cycling bunches can be a bit intimidating, because they are mostly men,” says Catherine Lewis, another Chicks on Slicks member. “Lynne is very good cyclist but we’re a bit slower, so it’s very hard to cycle with a group of men and keep up.”

Does this make her feel like she’s holding the group back?

“Oh, they don’t wait!” says Catherine.

“You get dropped,” Andrea kindly explains.

“So it’s nice to be in a women’s group where the ethos is to stay together,” says Catherine. “Lynne is trying to get women of all levels to come together so it’s not just about cycling fast or doing long distances. We’re trying to encourage people just to participate.”

The women meet at 7am on the first Sunday of the month,

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outside the Surveyor General Inn at Berrima, and ride around 50km over two hours. When there are enough riders – they’ve had 20 and hope to have more – slower riders can do a 25km loop. “It is all about the philosophy of the Ben Mikic Foundation – safe riding, not being aggressive on the road, being passive with the cars,” says Lynne. “A lot of women don’t ride on the road because it’s quite intimidating but if you’ve got this opportunity to ride on the road in a group you see it’s not that bad.”

Chicks on Slicks is one of a number of legacies of Andrea’s son, teenage cyclist Ben Mikic. Ben was killed three years ago in a collision with a car during a training ride. Three days earlier the talented 15 year old had been selected to join the elite young riders’ team at the Illawarra Academy of Sport.

His parents, Andrea and Darren, set up the Ben Mikic Foundation to promote safe cycling and driving when it comes to sharing roads. The foundation also raises money to help promising young cyclists and to teach schoolchildren about cycling safety.

The foundation’s main fundraising activity is entering a team in the annual Pengana Goulburn to Citi Corporate Charity Ride each September. Two years ago, before the advent of Chicks on Slicks, Andrea took part with a team of men and just one other woman, Wendy Den. “It nearly killed me,” she says.

“It’s a 150km ride, at around 38km an hour, and you really need to be an elite cyclist to do it. I got dropped at Goulburn,” she says, laughing now, “on the first hill.

“I was lucky because there was a car that picked Wendy and I up, and they’d take us a bit further up the road and we’d start again. We had to do that three times. But it was really demoralising. I got to the end and thought I can never do that again.”

Before last September’s ride, she and her father, foundation chairman Phil Herd, asked the charity ride organisers if they could enter a women’s team starting from Mittagong, making it an 70km ride. They were told they could, and Andrea found 11 women to join her.

“It was just fantastic,” says Lynne, who did the ride three months after having her second baby. “I remember screaming, ‘This feels so good!’ which was partly because I was out there again after having a baby but also because of being out with a group of women.”

The ride was so successful that Lynne determined to repeat it, and two months later Chicks on Slicks did their first ride.

Why is it different riding with women? Partly, the women say, it’s the fact that they’re more evenly matched in terms of speed and strength, and partly, it’s the conversation.

Andrea Mikic

Andrea Mikic took up cycling just before her 42nd birthday, inspired by her son Ben. “I spent four months watching him race and helping with time keeping and I just loved the atmosphere. I told my husband Darren I’d like to try it – and he bought me a bike.”

Her first ride was hardly auspicious. Darren took her to Mittagong’s circular Marchmont Drive to do laps and she came home after an hour, utterly exhausted. “I didn’t even know how to change gears so he had to ride next to me telling me what to do.”

But Andrea immediately started riding a few times a week, and within a month she was racing with the local club. “Ben was into soccer and athletics but he discovered cycling and just loved it. Then I followed, and Daniel (the second of her three sons) followed and took to mountain biking, and Darren started as well.”

Lynne Vaughan

Lynne Vaughan, 40, had a sports party for her 21st and dressed up as a cyclist, never guessing that she’d one day excel in the sport. “Although I was into riding, I wasn’t a racer,” she says.

At 24, she and a friend rode from Adelaide to Alice Springs and she decided to make cycling part of her working life. For five years she lived in the Snowy Mountains, leading cycle tours in the summer and ski tours in the winter.

Lynne still hadn’t considered racing, but that changed after she and her husband, sports teacher and rock climber Simon Vaughan, moved to Berrima in 2000.

“I was riding home one day and someone was ahead and I was trying to keep up with him. When he got to Berrima, there was this massive bunch of people racing in my home town!

“I thought, wow, and I joined the Southern Highlands Cycling Club straight away. So I started racing at 30.”

Lynne was soon competing in road, mountain and track events at a national level. “I had so much in my legs – because I was passionate about it before – so I took to it like a duck to water.”

Highlights of her racing career include being fastest female in both the day and night laps at the Mont 24 Hour Mountain Bike Championship in 2004 and coming second in the National Mountain Bike Series in 2003.

She had her first child, Hugh, in 2006 and her daughter Audrey in 2009, and managed to win the NSW Southern Division Road Championships (Masters Women A-grade) between the two, in 2008.

Despite her success, she says racing is just one dimension of cycling. “It’s aggressive and powerful, and it’s wonderful – but I don’t think cycling is about racing. I find being out with the women just as empowering as winning a race. Seeing people lose a bit of weight or get a beam on their face – that’s what it’s about, bringing people together.”

“I’ve been in a lot of men’s packs and there is an amazing vibe in that too,” says Lynne. “It’s awesome and you chat the whole time. But it’s just nice being with women.”

“For a lot of us, our whole families are involved in cycling, so everybody knows everybody,” says Andrea. “And it’s a really good support network.”

Lynne adds: “Women have said to me cycling has kept their postnatal depression at bay, or it’s kept them connected. Young families or death or marriage breakdowns are things that disconnect you from people, but this is a constant group.”

Catherine also appreciates the chance to learn from more

A year later after Andrea started riding, Ben was killed. She still cycles regularly but races only occasionally. “I just go out and do my best. I know I can’t keep up with the men, or the really good women, but I still enjoy it. We just ride on such beautiful roads – even if I’m by myself I still go as hard as I can.”

Asked about the main plus in riding with a women’s group, she says: “I can keep up. I don’t get to the end of a ride and feel completely done in, which I do with the men.

“I love the women’s rides because I’m learning from people like Lynne, I’m keeping up my fitness and it’s good for my head. And I can really celebrate Ben’s life on a bike. I just feel close to him when I’m riding. So I love it. Cycling has really helped me, and Darren, to learn to live again.”



LYNNE VAUGHAN, ANDREA MIKIC AND CATHERINE LEWIS

experienced riders. “Even though I’ve been riding a long time, I’m quite slow, so I’m not used to riding in a group. The advice that Lynne and other experienced riders can give us is really valuable.”

Lynne says: “There are things you pick up from years of riding you can just pass on. Like if you want to look behind while you’re riding, grab the shoulder of the person next to you and look back. Sometimes you might have to go from two abreast to single if there’s a lot of traffic, so the more experienced riders are always giving pointers on what to do.”


“That’s why this group is different,” says Catherine. “We’re not racing. We’re trying to improve our cycling.”

The group rides different routes each month – Lynne decides which will work best for the group when they meet. Favourites include Wombeyan Caves Rd, the ride to Canyonleigh and another to Bundanoon.

“We are so lucky in the Highlands,” says Catherine. “There are some really beautiful, quiet roads.” On a few rides, women from Sydney and Wollongong have also joined the group.

Afterwards, the women gather at a cafe. “You wouldn’t have a ride and not stop for coffee,” says Catherine.

Over the next few months they’ll be out with their thermal socks, ear warmers and gloves, but none are overly fussed by the cold or even drizzle.

“You feel so good, being out on the road in the early morning,” says Catherine. “And afterwards, even though you’re tired, you just feel so energised. You could say that about any exercise I suppose, but I think cycling’s special because even though it’s an individual challenge, you share it with a group.” 

Chicks on Slicks meet at 7am on the first Sunday of every month at the Surveyer General Inn in Berrima. Any women interested in joining should phone Lynne Vaughan on 0408 835 234.

Catherine Lewis

Catherine Lewis started cycling on a whim – but as whims go it was a fairly full-on. It was 1986 and she was backpacking in Europe when she decided to cycle from Munich to Bordeaux, via Paris, a trip of more than 1000km.

She did it on her own, and it involved about four weeks of riding (she also stopped along the way). “When I think about it now I had no idea what I was doing but I was pretty lucky. I just went into a department store, bought a bike and an occy strap, strapped my backpack to the bike and took off.”

Back in the Highlands, she hardly rode until a decade ago. “I wanted to keep it going, but it’s hard to ride on your own.”

Then, in 2003, her husband, Geoff Duxfield, took up cycling. Catherine is a landscape architect and Geoff, a horticulturist, so both are happiest in the outdoors. It wasn’t surprising that he chose cycling as a sport, says Catherine. “He was such a convert, I had to take up cycling as well – otherwise I wouldn’t have seen him.”

The following year, aged 42, Catherine started riding. She initially found it hard going. “I’d do 17km and I’d have to go home and lie down afterwards. But as soon as you start doing it regularly, even once a week, your fitness improves and you enjoy it more. Now I get home and I’m so energised.

“I don’t race so I’m not a member of the (Southern Highlands Cycling Club) but it’s our community. It’s a big part of my life and Geoff’s, both socially and in terms of training. The community has been through a bit together. Andrea lost her son Ben three years ago, and that has pulled us together too.”

Catherine has no plans to do another month-long trek but is glad she had the experience in Europe. “It was really hard but I just loved it. It showed me what was possible – because we’re capable of a lot more than we think.”