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Together Stronger: The Future of Sport

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“The equal opportunities: How to make it happen”

By Pat McQuaid, IOC Member, UCI President

Ladies and gentlemen

I would like to thank you for this invitation to address the issue of “how to make equal opportunities happen”.

Discussion on this topic has often, and with just cause, focused on the disadvantages, discrimination and underrepresentation often faced by women.

Women are challenged by many barriers based on prejudice - not only within a political, economic and social framework but equally within the local, national and international sports environment. This is particularly true for endurance sports which have at times in history, including in modern history, been considered too difficult or even harmful for women. The heritage of these stereotypes has been damaging to the advancement of women and it has deeply affected decades of coverage by sport media, decisions of sport organizations, access to education and the participation of girls and women in recreational and competitive sport.

The benefits of sport for women, as a physical activity, as a source of empowerment and integration, are undeniable. Sport provides access to leadership roles, to employment, to social networks and it encourages tolerance.

In short sport stands for our core values and is closely tied to democratic and human rights.

Yet much remains to be done to make equal opportunities happen. In cycling, as in many sports, there have been years of involuntary segregation where women found them channeled into certain disciplines and were often required to hurdle numerous prejudices before getting near the start line. The advancement of women in sport despite the challenges, and in particular in sports once considered a bastion of male prowess, including in endurance disciplines such as road cycling at elite level, stands as a tribute to a certain number of measures taken by our international sporting community.

I would therefore like to today focus on the achievements, rather than the setbacks (of which there have been many), so that we can build on these to accelerate the momentum for positive change. In particular allow me to speak about a topic close to my heart: the work which is being done to reinforce the role of women in cycling.

Women's cycling was introduced into the Olympic program in Road Cycling at the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984. This is 94 years after Road Cycling for Men – which were part of the very first modern Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens.

Since 1984 women's cycling has taken off significantly and clearly the introduction to the Games marked a turning point. It gave women exposure on an international scale and conveyed a clear signal to the wider cycling community. Road racing was followed by the introduction of Track Cycling for women in the 1988 Olympics, Mountain Bike for men and women in 1996, BMX for men and women in 2008 and in 2009 UCI took a decision to have gender equity throughout our Olympic programme so this means that in 2012 at last there will be an equal number of medals in cycling for men and for women.

In order to achieve this equality the number of men's events in Olympic Track Cycling has been reduced and the number of women's events increased. Clearly this change came into effect thanks to solid backing at the highest level and support of all stakeholders. It has meant a complete revision of the Olympic Track format.

Female athletes from a large number of nations have now won Olympic Medals in cycling disciplines which means that Olympic role models have been created for girls and women across the globe and the number of role models can be expected to grow significantly in 2012 given that there will be more women's cycling medals up for grabs in London.

The fact that there are more sportswomen benefitting from the huge Games-time television audiences also means better access to sponsors as well as to institutional support. For many national federations, access to local and national government subsidies is also directly linked to Olympic participation and or qualification. Therefore the changes which have been progressively introduced at Olympic level over the past twenty-five years have already had a significant influence on our sport.

I briefly revisit this recent history, because behind this major – albeit belated achievement – an important strategy has been put in place. In parallel to the Olympic changes, the UCI launched in 1997 a high profile Elite Women's series called the Women's Road World Cup with the best teams and the best riders competing across four continents. The direct result is that over the past decade participation of women at the top level has grown dramatically. There has been a 153% increase in the number of elite level women athletes and a 68% increase in the number of elite level women's teams. Equally impressive is the growth in television interest for the top events with the Women's World Cup now enjoying pan-European, pan-Asian and pan-Australasian coverage. It is significant to note that the World Championships in all cycling disciplines is held at the same time for men and women. This means that rights holders have access to excellent footage and coverage on an equal basis for women and men.

Conditions for riders, in particular for women, has improved significantly, especially after 2009, when the UCI introduced new quality criteria, requiring teams to provide bank guarantees contracts and insurances before getting UCI recognition. This meant greater protection for riders and has strengthened the movement as a whole. Much work remains to be done and the UCI is committed to creating better visibility for women and to providing the best possible conditions for the development of women's cycling. Growth of visibility of the sport can be expected to have a direct affect on financial resources and raise athlete wages. The UCI does not employ athletes and teams and does not pay wages to men or women, but it can help to work on creating a favourable environment for progress and investment.

In order to do this and to boost the leverage and quality of women's cycling at continental and international level the UCI is investing heavily in youth as a whole. For this the International Cycling Union 10 years ago created the World Cycling Center with an annual operating budget of over 4 million US dollars with a clear mandate to create opportunities and to encourage the worldwide development of all cycling disciplines for men and women.

This annual budget is entirely invested in education, training and development across the board. Today over 180 young women from all five continents have gone through the high performance training program at the World Cycling Centre. The institution has taken under its wing many youngsters who have gone on to become major figures and role models in our sport such as Olympic and World Champions Victoria Pendleton, Guo Shuang and Lisandra Guerra.

The World Cycling Centre identifies and nurtures young talent but it also acts as a trampoline and opens the door to working within the cycling community. For example it gives young men and women equal access to traditionally male dominated sports jobs. The Centre has thus trained the very first women to become a Directeur Sportive, many women have qualified as Riders' Agents or have qualified as coaches recognized with a prestigious UCI diploma, having gone through the high-level coach instruction programme which provides each continent and as many National Federations as possible with outstanding coaches capable of accompanying their riders to the highest level.

This kind of success is very positive; it topples stereotypes and shows how transparent systems of access allow women to project themselves into leadership roles. It is also an example for other women striving to make lasting change in our sport and we certainly hope that many other women will follow in their footsteps.

For this reason the UCI is pleased to announce that 2012 will see the launch of a new practical training programme. In order to improve access to the cycling trades, and to enhance the expertise of those involved in organising races, the UCI has invested in a new educational platform which develops sporting career talent in situ, at the important Tour de L'Avenir. This training platform reaches out equally to women and men wishing to become commissaires, radio announcers, information outriders etc.

Having women in key roles within our sport is essential for changing perception, including that of the sport media. It also is the first step towards improving access to decision making roles at an institutional level in the international sports environment.

It is no secret that many of those working in a prominent role within Olympic family sport governance have come to the role after significant sporting success or after playing a prominent role in the athletes entourage as for example a coach or manager. Women sport directors, coaches, commissaires etc therefore play a huge role in the empowerment of women within the wider sports industry. We are convinced that the work we are carrying out to boost the gender balance, through international recognition, increases the level of expertise of those working in our sport and ultimately will do much for the long term future of women in sport.

Other actions impact the short term.

In order to increase the influence of women in decision making roles in our sports administration, the UCI has decided to enforce an equal opportunity recruitment plan which has led to 49 % of its staff being female. Further over 35% of its managers and directors are women. The voice of the athletes is also well represented by women with just under 50% of

the athlete commission being female. The UCI has also created an internal working group "Women in Sport" chaired by a former female athlete from Brazil to explore industrial and institutional change.

However there remains much to be done and the UCI encourages its Members to continue to nominate for election and elect more women to its highest bodies at national level and international level.

Sport is an essential part of our social fabric – of course as important to men as to women. This is not an altruistic consideration. Women make almost 80% of consumer purchases and represent a resounding economic force, women are more than half the population of the world and in cycling women are pioneers of change.

We have therefore an important task ahead of us. I am pleased to see so many men and women here today because the issues we are discussing today concern us all. I would venture to say that the men in this room have a huge challenge.

Many of our sports institutions are male dominated and the involvement of men in defying unequal power relations is absolutely essential. What we decide and do today will affect young people's lives and aspirations for decades to come. Sport is about bringing value and improving the lives of everyday people all over the world and if that means making some changes, I would like to think we will meet the moment.

To quote a thinker who has had no small affect on changing the world: Albert Einstein who put it quite simply when he said

"Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving"

Ladies and Gentlemen, even if riding a bicycle is somewhat easier than moving forward with change, let us keep up the momentum so that we get our balance right.

Thank you