

THE GRAND DUCHESS

The inaugural women's World Championships took place in 1958. *Procyling* recalls its winner, the late, great Elsy Jacobs

WRITER: Herbie Sykes || PHOTOGRAPHY: Ministère des Sports Luxembourg

There's currently a body of opinion that Marianne Vos is the world's greatest cyclist. Maybe it's true. It's certainly arguable that she's the most prolific. Vos wins everywhere, on all terrains, all the time, and in that sense draws easy parallels with the great Eddy Merckx.

Ultimately though, the Vos/Merckx analogy is overly simplistic for many reasons, the main one being that women's cycling has nothing like the talent pool of the Merckx era men's sport. Of course that's not Vos's fault – she can only beat what's put in front of her and she's a sensational athlete regardless.

In one important regard, however, women's racing is broadly similar to that which Merckx so completely dominated. There are fewer races, fewer genuinely world class practitioners, and very little specialisation. Exponentially, therefore, we see more of Vos, the great champion, and in sport it's the great champions who create public awareness.

Yet the women's sport is still light years behind 1970s men's racing as regards public interest and participation. Moreover its fans and followers are still overwhelmingly male as, crucially, are its administrators. For that to change will take time but

change it must. If it doesn't then women's cycling will never cross over into the mainstream.

The good news is that an all-conquering champion, if marketed correctly, will eventually break through the glass ceiling. Vos might lack the charisma of a Connie Carpenter or a Leontien Van Moorsel but history tells us that sooner or later, women's cycling will find a way. It will find its Chris Evert, its Mia Hamm or its Nadia Comaneci. Each appeared to be an overnight sensation but in reality, their respective crossovers had been decades in the making. The three of them – and their respective sports – owe much of their fame to the pioneering spirits who preceded them.

It was ever thus in sport and so it will be with women's cycling. And that, more than the medals, will be the true legacy of champions like Vos, Beryl Burton, Fabiana Luperini and... Elsy Jacobs.

In Garnich, a pretty little village twenty minutes west of Luxembourg City, lived the Jacobs family. They reared their animals, cultivated their eight hectares and at the weekends, the boys – Roger, Robert, Edmond and Raymond – rode their bikes. Sister Cécile, hopelessly outnumbered, promptly found herself a job in London. ◊



It therefore fell upon the youngest of the flock, little Elsy, to help her mum in providing for the menfolk. Blonde and sweet-natured and brim-full of energy, she loved nothing more than to toil from dawn till dusk. Actually not quite nothing. What she loved most of all was a challenge. That, they said, was why she once harvested 250 kilograms of potatoes in a single working day.

Elsy Jacobs was an extremely determined girl, then, and an extremely strong one. Given the abundance of racing bikes around the house (and given that if you can't beat 'em you may as well join 'em) she started borrowing them. She'd prepare lunch, clean up afterwards, then task herself with riding 100 Ardennes kilometres in time for tea.

Elsy liked cycling a great deal, both the freedom it offered as well as the woosh. What she didn't like was being the only girl. Being a sociable sort, she was the odd one out on the bike just as she was at home. As luck would have it, someone mentioned to her that they organised girls' races in France, Belgium and Holland and that the French even had their own national championship.

That did it. Elsy Jacobs's mind was made up...

The suits at the Luxembourg Cycling Federation were having none of it. The notion that they might tear up the rule book just for

HER APPEARANCE FEES WERE STRATOSPHERIC FOR A MINORITY SPORT, BUT ORGANISERS KNEW SHE'D THRILL THE PUBLIC

her was absurd. If, they added, she wanted to race, she'd need be doing it with the men, because the very idea of women's racing was, well... unnatural. In that case, she told them, they'd best just issue her a license and she'd get on with it. A license? – they spluttered. For a woman? How ridiculous! It was 1951. Elsy Jacobs was 18 years old.

In July, she finished ninth in an unofficial race at Audun-Le Tisch, just across the French border. Smitten now, she'd scan the cycling press for the weekend's races then just turn up with her bike. When they asked to see her license, she'd plead ignorance, inform them she'd ridden all the way from Luxembourg and beg them to let her start. Necessity being the mother of invention she could be extremely persuasive, so invariably the French, charmed by her smile and by her comely accent, would acquiesce. Then, given that she'd not the faintest of idea of how to race tactically, she'd just ride off on her own.

By 1953 she was racing for a French club, CSM Puteaux, on a French racing license. In the Auvergne she took part in the very first women's stage race, a five day affair organised by a forward-thinking guy, Marcel Léotot. She finished 20th, then 17th at the six-stage Tour de Paris Féminin.

In the winter of 1954, Alphonse Risch, director of the Dippach Cycling Club, called on the Jacobs family. He wanted Raymond and Edmond Jacobs, the two local heroes, in his team. He figured that if he threw their kid sister a bone by offering her a bike, a jersey and her expenses, they'd likely be persuaded. He did and they were, then all three of them started turning heads. To have two brothers in the club, each of them winners, was pretty big news. Two brothers and a sister, though, was something else again.

Next, Jean Leulliot, an influential French journalist and race organiser, had a very bright idea. Leulliot had successfully re-launched Paris-Nice in 1951 and his new creation, the 'Tour de France Féminin', would capture the public imagination as never before. Over five stages and 373 kilometres, they would race through the cycling heartlands of Upper Normandy in a truly ground-breaking event.

The problem (at least for the French) was that when the British sent a team of six, they utterly dominated proceedings. Millie Robinson won the thing, as four from across the *Manche* occupied top-ten positions. Only two other foreigners took part – Switzerland's Marie-Louise Vonarburg got round, while a blonde, feisty 22-year-old Luxembourger managed to finish 17th.

» So Nullis volorbis exeriam, in et latinum ex et, sequia pore, consequatqui optatqu



from the family home and out from under the family's yoke. She needed to focus on becoming the best bike rider she could be because that was the only chance she had. If she was going to make a living from her bike, she also needed to be where the races were and that could only mean one thing. Elsy Jacobs upped and left and caught a train to Paris, back to CSM Puteaux.

Now she couldn't afford to let the Parisian grass grow under her feet. If she were to become the female Charly Gaul (unlikely in light of her rapacious appetite; she probably weighed more than pipsqueak Gaul) she'd need to hit the ground running. But first she needed money to tide herself over until the racing started. That meant housekeeping and babysitting alongside secretarial work for the cycling club president. She was a long way from home and the workload was still huge. Out of the frying pan Elsy...

By and by she bumped into a 20-year-old rider who was just getting started as a cyclist. She'd met Renée Ganneau the previous year, at her first race. Now the two of them started training together, and pretty soon they were inseparable. Their friendship

would endure but would be conditioned by Elsy's ferocity on the bike and her sheer obduracy off it.

On the road, Elsy's 1957 season was much like the previous one. Because she had no sprint, she was always condemned to attack from a long way out and often as not, they tagged her before the finish. She won three of the 23 races she entered but finished on the podium in another 14. The problem was that as the number of riders competing increased, so too did the quality, but not the distance. Elsy



was accustomed to big, long training rides, so she needed for the races to be both harder and longer in order to stay away.

By now she was so strong – and so popular – that pretty soon she was turning down race contracts. Her appearance fees were stratospheric for a minority sport but organisers knew she'd thrill the public. Her burgeoning reputation, and that of the races she animated, even earned her an invite to ride at London's Herne Hill Velodrome. Never having ridden the track before she didn't win, but she wowed the English all the same.

On 29 November 1957, delegates at the UCI conference in Zurich were asked, once more, to

By the season's end, Edmond Jacobs had proved his talent unequivocally. He would ride the Tour the following year but wily old Army Franck only had eyes for his sister. He'd been a racer back in the day, and he recognised a potential champion when he saw one. He set about trying to teach her some race craft and it worked, after a fashion. Though she was worse than useless as a sprinter, she won six times in 1956. She still just took off and, as often as not, they'd not see her again until the clubhouse. That Was Elsy.

Cycling was very big news in little Luxembourg. Charly Gaul had ridden through a Dolomite blizzard to conquer the Giro, becoming a national hero in the process. Elsy was much further down the food chain but she was winning friends and influencing people all the same. Moreover, through the likes of Leulliot and Léotot – and through the adventurers who populated their races – the women's sport was starting to gather real momentum across the continent. Previously the France had been a lone voice but now support was emerging from all corners. Buoyed by increasing participation (and, by extension, more license holders and increased revenues), the British and Belgian federations threw their hats in with the women's lobby at the UCI. So too did the Soviets. Though they'd no commercial interest, under communism everyone was encouraged to play sport.

» So Nullis volorbis exeriam, in et latinum ex et, sequia pore, consequatqui optatqu

» So Nullis volorbis exeriam, in et latinum ex et, sequia pore, consequatqui optatqu

At the UCI conference, therefore, a motion was tabled for a women's World Championships. They lost the vote, but only just. Of the delegates, 32 out of 74 had been with them, so now suddenly the unthinkable seemed not only possible, but probable. With a fair wind and a bit of mutual back-scratching, they might just reach the promised land.

*

THE STICK-IN-the-mud Luxembourg Federation finally sanctioned female racing in 1957. By then, however, Elsy had had a taste of the high life which was French stage racing. Convinced that she had what it took, she resolved to try her hand as a full-time cyclist. Franck encouraged her but both knew that for it to happen, she needed to be away



< So alpsae. Ut qui dolumque rerum ut ex et aspernam hit magnissimus, enti odisqui

> So alpsae. Ut qui dolumque rerum ut ex et aspernam hit magnissimus, enti odisqui



vote in favour of a cycling World Championships for women. They were assured that, were they to do so, the federations of Russia, Great Britain, France and Belgium would each send a full compliment of six riders to the inaugural event, backing it completely from the very start. Vote they duly did and now Reims, more or less mid-point between Paris and Garnich, was charged with hosting it.

The race would take place in advance of the amateur version, on a broiling Saturday morning in late August. The movers and shakers were as good as their word in fielding six-woman teams, while both East Germany and Romania sent two. A solitary Dutch girl made the trip, and so too did Elsy Jacobs. Notwithstanding trenchant opposition from the more conservative elements within the Luxemburg Cycling Federation, she pinned on the number 38...

In truth, nobody knew what to expect. The Eastern Bloc girls would be an unknown quantity but the Soviets in particular were expected to be formidable. The British had proved themselves consistently strong, while the hosts fancied their chances. Two of them, Renée Vissac and Lily Herse had been rivals for years. Herse started the race as nominal favourite while Elsy, in the form of her life, secretly harboured ambitions of a medal.

They'd race three laps of the bruising 20 kilometre circuit the professionals would tackle 14 times the following day. It suited Elsy perfectly, in the sense that there was barely a metre of flat and it featured a particularly hurtful climb named Le Calvaire.

COMETH THE HOUR...



Three months on from the rainbow jersey, Elsy Jacobs produced another prodigious feat. In September, Millie Robinson had set a new women's hour mark - 39.718 kilometres. Elsy was keen to try but her DS, Raymond Louviot, refused to commit to

a challenge. But the team she was contracted to was part-owned by Raphaël Géminiani. 'Gem' was not only a beast of a cyclist but also a hugely persuasive man. He lobbied Louviot at the Giro di Lombardia and finally he acquiesced. So it was that on 9 November 1958, Elsy rode an astonishing 41.347 kilometres at the Vigorelli, a record which stood for 14 years.

The 'Grand Duchesses' would never again capture the rainbow jersey, though not for lack of trying. She would eventually ride sixteen World Championships but a new star, Yvonne Reynders, was in the ascendency.

Elsy died in 1998, but ten years on, Garnich honoured her with a cycling festival and a three-day stage race. The Grand Prix Elsy Jacobs is run off on May Day weekend, and its list of winners is a who's who of women's cycling. In 2010, Emma Pooley won it but she came up against an immovable force in 2011, 2012 and 2013. The winner those years? You guessed it...

*Elsy Jacobs Festival: www.elsy-jacobs.lu
There is also a French language biography,
Elsy Jacobs by Gaston Zangerle.*

WHEN FINALLY SHE DARED TO LOOK ROUND THE RUSSIANS, AND THE REST, WERE OUT OF SIGHT

On the first ascent, a group of seven went clear. Vissac and Herse were joined by one of the Brits, three of the Russians and one from Luxemburg. The second time round Elsy, never much for hanging around in crowds of cyclists, ran out of patience.

At the top, she had twenty seconds but she'd be needing the strength of three Russian girls in order to stay away. With that in mind she did what she always did, which is to say she put her head down and gave it everything. When she'd finished doing that, she gave it a little bit more besides, so by the time she hit the climb for the final time, she only had the race commissar's car for company. When finally she dared to look round the Russians, and the rest, were out of sight.

And that, in a nutshell, is how Elsy Jacobs won the first ever women's road race championship. Moreover it's why the champions that followed, and will follow, owe her an incalculable debt of gratitude. For without her, Marcel Léotot and the rest of the class of '58, there would be no Nicole Cooke, no Emma Pooley, no Giorgia Bronzini and... no Marianne Vos. 