

Women's cycle team gets winning manager

Looking for a fresh challenge this year, John Robertson, who conceptualised, established, owned and managed Barloworld, the first team with South African connections to compete at the Tour de France, has taken on the considerable challenge of women's cycling through the formation of Team bizhub.



Catherine Williamson doing what she loves.

"Companies are continually looking for new ways to market themselves and women's cycling offers exciting opportunities," says Robertson, who believes this aspect of the sport is still largely unexplored.

Robertson, with the support of Konica Minolta, took great care in assembling some of the finest local and overseas road and mountain bike talent under the bizhub umbrella, however, the season had its challenges to begin with.

"We first had to establish credibility as a women's road team and, secondly, mountain biking is something entirely new to me. Managing women also has its own set of challenges. However, we have built a solid foundation for the future and since July we've had very consistent results."

Robertson says the team is predominantly composed of younger riders as they have always focused on shaping future talent. "However, it is important to have a nucleus of experience."

There's no stopping Stopforth

At 38, Dr Ischen Stopforth, the current MTN Series champion, is the grand dame of the team. She is one of the country's top endurance riders as recent victories in the Trans Baviaans and MTN Series show.

"On the other hand, in a rider like Yolandi du Toit we have experience and versatility," says Robertson. Du Toit is one of a select few South Africans who have competed in the Tour de Femme (the women's Tour de France). The former African and Pick n Pay 94.7 champion has in recent years shifted her focus to mountain biking. She lies second in the MTN Series and won the inaugural Fairbairn Capital-Old Mutual JoBerg2c this year.

Among the team's international members is the Brit Catherine Williamson. Third place at the Pick n Pay Cape Argus Cycle Tour made her the leading overseas finisher. Williamson rides for her national outfit during our winter and has been selected for the UCI Road World Championships in Australia next month, after which she will be returning to SA.

"We also target riders who are new to the sport if we believe they have the talent," says Robertson. Former athlete Lise Olivier, track rider turned roadie Victoria Myburgh and rookie Chantell Swanepoel (who recorded the fastest time in last year's Pick n Pay 94.7 from the open section) are examples.

Extending sponsorship

Robertson says the association with the office automation company has been a win-win scenario. "Konica Minolta has proved that having a long-term relationship with cycling is successful and the return which we have derived has been equally so. "I believe focusing on women's cycling has extended the life of the sponsorship and it has given a great opportunity to our female athletes."

Robertson's vision for SA cycling is to have its own European training centre - similar to the Australian Institute of Sport in Varese, Italy. "It has been a dream of mine for several years now. I have put forward proposals to Sascoc for this in the past, but so far no one has bought into it."

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