

SoCal Dirt Cycling League Opening Race Speech: Season X
Lake Perris, CA on February 24, 2018
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(Matt Gunnel will give opening and introduction)

Good morning everyone! I remember when I first decided to join my high school mountain bike team. It was January of my sophomore year, and I saw a flyer that literally said "Great Oak MTB Team Needs Girls!" After I looked up what MTB stood for, I was like "Oh. Well I can do that, right? I mean I like hiking and I ride my *fixed-gear beach cruiser* back and forth to Walmart, so same thing basically." I found Mr. Oddi's classroom, and was super nervous because I had never been apart of any sport before, *ever*. I considered myself athletic, but I was too afraid to ever sign up for a sport because I figured all the other kids had been doing that sport since they were like seven or whatever. I remember asking him if you needed any experience to join the team, and he looked at me, very seriously, and said, "you do not need any experience at all". Just then, a boy ran in the classroom and said "Tell them I sent you! My name is Branden, they're giving out gift cards if we bring girls to the team!". Not only did I decide to give the team a shot, I also found myself later dating that boy, and we are coming up on our three year anniversary.

I said I would only do two or three of the races, but of course, once I started, I started every race. I was so scared my first race, because I had only been riding for three weeks, and the scar on my arm was not even close to being healed. Needless to say, it went fine, and I eventually worked my way up to seventh place at the end of the season. I remember how excited my coaches were throughout my whole race, running alongside me and cheering me on, holding up whiteboards and hands to let me know what place I was in. They even had walkie-talkies so they could talk to each other and update each other on how we were doing. I remember after I crossed that finish line, all the hugs and high-fives my coaches and family gave me, all the encouraging words, and I remember thinking to myself, "Man, it doesn't get any better than this". I thought I would never feel more loved by my coaches and team than I did in that moment. They all looked at me like I was made of magic.

Fast forward to my senior year. I was the first girl in my high school's history to ever qualify to race at the varsity level. However, those qualifications, as you all know, are decided in the previous season. Which means I had a whole year to make mistakes and lose all that I had worked so hard to achieve. I wasn't eating right, I wasn't doing cross-training, but most importantly, I wasn't riding as often as I should have been. And it showed. Varsity is a whole different ball game, and that's with three laps for girls instead of four so props to you fools. I came in dead last my first race. The vendors were literally beginning to pack up. I was embarrassed, and didn't really want to talk to my team or coaches, because *I thought* I knew what they were going to say. As I trained better, the courses also got harder in that I was actually with competition, which included fighting for my line amongst the Varsity Boys. Many of them made me feel like my race was not important. They said to "get out of the way", like the whole day was meant for them, and that I was not in my own race, that *I* was fighting so hard for. I lost motivation, and placements. I was back of the pack again, with not a soul in sight...

except of course for my lovely sweep, Mario. Then, I see one of my coaches on the sidelines. I am so ashamed of myself, of how far I had fallen, and I hoped he didn't see me. But it would appear that bright red jerseys are easy to spot, and that coach turned to me, started cheering me on, and ran along my side, just as he had always done. He said "you're my hero!"

The thing of it is, that I avoided my team in my prior race because I thought they would come to me with all the wrath of hell below, and tell me what I already knew - that I was slow, and no longer a winner. That I let them down, that I lost points for the team, all that stuff. But if I had just bothered to look up during my race, or approached them after, I would have found that these people have some kind of weird irrational forgiveness and grace in their hearts. They never stopped believing in me, when they had every reason in the world to do so. And I realized, that I was wrong. On that race day years ago, I thought that I would never feel more love from my coaches than I did when podium was just within reach. But when I was panicking over a gash in my knee, when I had a lungful of dirt, when I was at the medical tent getting water poured over my shaking and crying body one hot race day because I didn't hydrate the way they told me to, and every other time I had just flat-out blown it... They all still looked at me like I was made of magic. All of you never stopped believing in me - the staff, the teams, the spectators, and the coaches.

So, with the first race of Season X about to start, I want to encourage all of you here today, to just be crazy about these kids. Remember that they will remember everything you say, the way that you treat them, and the way you look at them, for better or for worse. Riders, despite what you may have been told, and despite what some of you may even choose to believe, it is *not* about winning today. Take it from someone who has tasted victory as well as the dust of my opponents. If you podium, you are great. If you come in dead last, you are great. If you're middle of the pack, you are great. While this a lesson I know you will all learn in your own time, I do hope that you get it sooner than later, so you can enjoy these days while they last. As I found out myself, "there's just no way to know you're in the good 'ole days, before you've actually left them". Thanks for listening to everybody, now let's go kick off Season Ten down here in SoCal!