The Road

Mariam Sadeqi, 22, is the Afghan National Cycling Federation's most experienced female cyclist.

Not Ridden

By Jayme Moye

A former road bike racer gets a chance to ride **with Afghanistan's first women's cycling team.**

At dinner in Kabul, my colleague Shannon Galpin pulls out her phone. On the screen is a press release from the Taliban that she'd picked up on Twitter. It details what they are calling the spring offensive—a series of coordinated attacks around the country. The targets? "Foreign invaders." That's us. To the Taliban, any American—a journalist like me, or even a humanitarian doing work in Afghanistan, like Shannon—is a foreign invader.

Listening to Shannon read the release from her phone, it's hard to say what's more difficult to digest: the fact that the Taliban use Twitter, or that we could be in mortal danger. I'm no war zone reporter; I'm an adventure travel and sports writer here to cover the first Afghan women's cycling team with a small group of filmmakers and photographers. Besides Shannon, none of us have any experience in Afghanistan.

But we do have a groundbreaking story. Under Taliban control in the late '90s, women weren't permitted to go to school, let alone play sports. Even today, most Afghans disapprove of women doing activities outside the home, not to mention activities that require the obscene act of straddling a saddle. Afghanistan remains one of the worst places in the world to be a woman due to lack of human rights and targeted violence.

Against these seemingly insurmountable odds, 11 women currently ride with the Afghan National Cycling Federation. The team is the first and only of the country's 12 bike racing clubs to allow women. Coach Mohammad Abdul Sediq taught his teenage daughter to ride to inspire other females to give the sport a try. He has the support of Afghanistan's Olympic Committee, who is working to increase participation in sports in schools, for both boys and girls. In March, three of Sediq's young female cyclists participated in a major international race—the 33rd Asian Cycling Championships in New Delhi. It marked the first time in history that Afghanistan fielded a women's bike racing team.

For me, the story is particularly powerful. I was an amateur female bike racer in Colorado in 2008. During that time, some of my most significant personal growth occurred, from switching careers to ending a failing marriage. The bicycle has since become my catalyst for change. I decided to take this trip because I was inspired by the idea that the bike could also have a positive effect in Afghanistan—a place where women so desperately need change. But now that I'm in Kabul on the eve of the Taliban spring offensive, I realize I may have underestimated the risk.

We spend the next couple days interviewing the Afghan women cyclists in their homes. Meanwhile, the Taliban spring offensive ramps up. Schoolgirls are poisoned in the Takhar Province in the north. A hotel in the same neighborhood as ours in Kabul is raided, and an American woman staying there is raped. I experience firsthand what it's like to live with fear on a daily basis. Each night, I pack a small getaway bag and sleep fully clothed, in case our hotel is invaded.

The day we interview Mariam, 22, one of the Afghan National Cycling Federation's top riders, the local paper reports that, in the south, the Taliban

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The women of the Afghan National Cycling Federation training on the highway north of Kabul.

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slaughtered dozens of people working in the fields. I expect the mood at Mariam's house to be somber, but it's not. She's bright and animated, dressed in a Western-style pantsuit with the requisite hijab, or headscarf. I wonder if violence is so commonplace that it doesn't affect her. Or maybe she doesn't know—like Americans who don't pay attention to the news because it's "too depressing."

During her interview, Mariam tells the story of the road bike crash that fractured her lower back. It happened earlier in the year on a training ride on a highway north of Kabul. A man on a moped pulled up beside her and verbally harassed her for riding. When she kept going, he rammed her with his moped. She tells the story matter-of-factly, as if being attacked for riding a bike is normal. I realize, as a female cyclist in Afghanistan, that's exactly what it is—an everyday, ordinary risk. If you choose to be a woman athlete, violence and harassment are part of the deal.

The women of the Afghan Cycling Federation must cover themselves from head-to-toe while riding. Here, one member cycles with a hijab under her helmet, like always.

I put my head down and scribble into my notepad, hoping no one can tell that I'm rattled. As part of my story, I'm supposed to ride with Mariam and the team on the same highway where she was attacked. But after hearing about her assault, combined with the Taliban spring offensive, I'm no longer so psyched about the prospect.

One of the filmmakers asks Mariam if she is afraid to ride. I look up to see her reaction. Mariam smiles and says her attacker was put in prison. Then she pauses, as if considering the question further. I feel like she's looking straight at me when she says, "Riding a bike is not possible with fear."

I voice my concerns about riding to Shannon over dinner. I imagine that, to the Taliban, an American woman on a bike, blond ponytail flying, would be like waving a red flag in front of a bull. I'm torn. I want to ride, it's a big part of what brought me to Afghanistan, but I'm afraid. And not just for myself. If the Taliban see me—a foreign invader—with the Afghan National Cycling Federation, it could put them at even greater risk.

Shannon agrees that riding would be risky, not just for me, but for the team. She doesn't want to spoil my trip, but, at the same time, she knows how dangerous it is to piss off the Taliban. She suggests I sleep on it.

After a long night, I decide to leave my bicycle—which made the trip crammed in a bike box—at the hotel. On the morning of the training ride, I show up at a gas station on the outskirts of Kabul with a notepad and a pen, and watch six women of the Afghanistan National Cycling Federation prepare to ride. I'm distracted by the fact that we're near gas pumps—it seems dangerous to be close to explosive fuel. I keep checking over my shoulder. For what exactly, I'm not sure. I feel like a chicken shit.

The women—girls, really, as most are in high school—don't appear concerned. They're amped up on adrenaline, just like my team was before a big ride. As they make their final gear checks, they giggle and tease each other. The language is different, but their tone is familiar from my days as a competitive cyclist. At the same time, their clothing gives away a cycling culture that American bike racers wouldn't recognize. The women secure their helmets and sunglasses over a hijab. They wear full-length pants and long sleeves under their jerseys, no matter how warm the temperature. And despite these precautions, they risk inciting violence every time they ride.

I load into the follow bus with the coach, the filmmakers, and the photographer. As we trail the team, I notice that the road has recently been paved and in relatively good shape, with a wide shoulder for riding, which surprises me. It appears that the Afghan countryside, with its sweeping pasturelands set against the backdrop of the Hindu Kush Mountains, is actually a decent location for a road bike ride. The Afghan culture is another story.

The bus pulls over so that the videographer and photographer can jump out and position themselves on the side of the road to film the team pedaling by. I stay in the front-most seat, watching out the window for suspicious activity—cars that drive too slow, mopeds that get too close, leering men in beards and turbans. I observe several brightly painted semi

Local men watch a female cyclist as she trains on the highway between Kabul and Charikar.

trucks traveling past. They are ornate, with lavish murals, beads, and bells. Coach says that truck drivers decorate them as a source of pride. I'm surprised again. In my mind, Afghan men are not the type to lovingly adorn anything, let alone a truck.

After the team rides by, the film crew returns to the bus and the driver accelerates to catch back up. As we get closer, I notice that Selma, one of the younger riders, is way ahead of the rest of the pack, and riding in the middle of the lane. How'd she get so far off the front? Then I see it. She is getting a free ride, holding onto the back bumper of one of the brightly painted trucks.

Suddenly, Selma lets go and pedals furiously in the truck's slipstream. She must be going 30 mph. She rides as long as she can, probably 15 seconds, then re-grabs the bumper just before she starts to fade back. As she catches her breath, she pumps her fist in the air toward the truck driver's rearview mirror. The driver sticks a thumbs-up out the window in return. I know exactly what they're doing—interval training, Afghan style. As we start to pass, Selma goes for another interval. I can't help but cheer for her out the window. Watching her pedal at top speed, a giant grin on her face, I forget to worry about the Taliban.

An hour later, the women pull over and pile into the bus to join us for lunch. They're sweaty and rambunctious. Selma dashes to the front in order to crank the radio volume. Bollywood pop blasts so loud that it cuts off all conversation. With the music, the women become even more energized. They remove their helmets and headscarves and start to dance in their seats and in the aisle. They clap and sing and laugh and shout, twisting their arms and hips in the serpentine movements of a belly dancer. Suddenly, they are no longer the vanguard of change in post-Taliban Afghanistan—they're simply teenagers enjoying life.

Selma notices that I'm the only one not moving and starts a chant, "Jayme, Jayme, Jayme." I hesitate for a split-second and then slide out from my post against the window into the aisle. The women whoop. I throw my arms in the air and mimic their motions, swaying my hips in a figure eight and twirling my hands from the wrists. They shriek their approval. Dancing in a bus somewhere between Kabul and Charikar, I stop feeling like a chicken shit. I realize it doesn't matter that I didn't ride. What matters is that they did. ■

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AFGHAN CYCLES

The film *Afghan Cycles* is a joint project between Mountain 2 Mountain and Let Media. It offers an intimate look at the women of the Afghan National Cycling Federation, from their training rides to their homes, and documents everyday life in a male-dominated society. The film will debut in the spring of 2014. Follow its progress on Facebook (*facebook.com/AfghanCycles*) and Twitter (*@AfghanCycles*).

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