

Getting more girls on bikes in NICA programs requires attention to both recruiting and retention. NICA suggests focusing your team's efforts on recruiting and retention to increase female participation on your team and in your leagues. Recruit creatively and with intention and create a team culture that creates a welcoming and supportive environment for girls and female coaches and you will see your female ridership grow over time.

Recruiting Girls

Outreach is the first step towards getting more girls on bikes. To be true to NICA's core values "Inclusive and Equal" we must first understand girls and women often join and participate in sports for different reasons than boys. In order to equally serve girls and women in our programs, we must therefore use recruitment strategies that specifically cater to girls. There will of course be outliers and many of these strategies will work to recruit boys as well. But, in order to recruit and retains more girls into NICA programs, NICA offers the following suggestions:

Strategies to Recruit:

- Invite them! Women and girls respond well to being asked specifically and invited to join
- Recruit more female coaches. Having female coaches/role models involved and visible within your team is important to girls wanting to join
- Get girls to invite their friends to the team and other girls or to try a practice. Nothing works better than this strategy!
- Take the time to thoroughly explain your program to girls interested in joining. Girls and women respond well to details
- Get girls' parents to invite and recruit other girls
- Host recruiting events specific to recruiting girls at races. Have open pre-rides or arts/crafts/jewelry making stations. Offer socializing opportunities at races and practices for girls only
- Take time to thoroughly address girls' parents' concerns
- Look to other comparable sports like cross country running, nordic skiing, etc. for endurance sport oriented girls.
- Trust that if you have a good program for girls, it will grow over time

Keeping Girls on your Team

NICA programs are generally successful in retaining girls once they join. However, to ensure you keep the girls who join on your team, consider the following strategies:

Strategies to retain girls and female coaches:

- Create a culture of support and camaraderie before competition
- Check in with girls on a regular basis. Keep tabs on how each girl is doing

- Recognize peer group is the number one influencer on girls' social choices. Emotional support, self-esteem enhancement and loyalty is critical to girls' friendships
- Provide choices. Present multiple options and let her decide which is right for her
- Make an effort to connect with girls' parents/guardians
- Have female coaches/role models involved and visible within your team
- Set girls up for success. Things to consider: appropriate terrain choice, a bike that fits and rides well, give clear details ahead of what to expect before a ride or practice starts. Girls and women respond well to full details before an activity starts
- Give specific feedback to help her improve. Girls tend to respond positively to specific comments rather than general feedback. It shows you care and are paying attention
- Guide them in defining specific measurable and attainable goals (i.e. getting in and out of pedals smoothly, uphill starts, steady cadence, anticipate shifting, changing a flat)

Co-Ed Groups Management

Strategies:

- Look out for the girls - they are usually the minority
- Encourage and ask girls to lead trail rides
- Mediate maleness. Challenge the idea that "boys will be boys."
- Encourage and ask girls to follow behind a skilled teammate to see new lines
- Reframe comments that insinuate that girls are not as strong or fast. Focus on skill and technical ability
 - Do not ignore physiological differences between males and females. There are differences (muscle mass, VO₂, power, etc.) between boys and girls which is why genders can train together but compete separately
- Support girls-only rides, clinics, and camps
- Allow girls to practice new skills on their own or in small groups away from boys

Coach Conduct

Strategies:

- Be an ally to girls and female coaches. Be on their side
- Maintain professional boundaries - a "hands-off" policy
- Watch your words. Avoid using condescending language. Do not use pet names such as sweetie, honey, etc.
- Avoid being alone with individual girls
- Don't be afraid of tears. Ask, "How are you feeling" not "What's wrong?" Tears are often an emotional release for girls and don't indicate a problem.
- Build trust gradually. Ask a lot of questions.
- Respect girls' comfort zones
- Give specific, genuine praise and encouragement
- Be patient, kind and open to their thoughts
- Stock tampons in med kits for coaches. Be aware girls may need time and extra accommodation to change tampons during trail rides/bathroom breaks

Body Image & Self Esteem

Strategies:

- Avoid body/image comments
- Compliment girls' strengths and character, not their looks
- Encourage good nutrition
- Understand the cultural forces girls are up against
- Be prepared to quell myths such as:
 - weight training makes women bulky
 - playing sports makes girls a tomboy or gay
 - suppression of the menstrual cycle is "normal" for female athletes

Girls' Social, Physical & Emotional Needs

Strategies:

- Allow girls to have rituals
- Understand relationships are very important to girls. Allow them to be social
- Watch out for social dynamics and intervene when necessary
- Don't baby girls
- Encourage girls to take risks on their own terms
- Honor girls when they say "no"
- Be aware that competition may not be an intrinsic motivator. Work to outline other non-competition based goals
- Provide lots of specific, positive feedback. Notice if the athlete responds better to private encouragement. Always criticize in private, but consider praising in private as well.
- Girls often have more performance anxiety than boys. Be aware of perfectionist tendencies many girls have
- As girls develop, many experience hip widening. This can create knee injuries/soreness as girls Q-angle (knee-femur-hip alignment) changes
- Be aware menstrual cycles impact mood, coordination, motivation and fatigue levels. Girls may want to skip practices/events during their cycles.

Female Athlete Health Issues

Eating disorders, disordered eating and the Female Athlete Triad tends to appear more often in girls and women participating in endurance based sports. As a mountain bike coach, be aware that you may encounter these behaviors and conditions in your female athletes.

More common in female athletes than full blown eating disorders is The Female Athlete Triad. The FAT is defined as one or more of the following conditions: disordered eating, amenorrhea (loss of periods) and osteoporosis (low bone density). Most commonly, the behavior manifests

as over-exercising combined with under-eating. If untreated, it can lead to low bone density, stress fractures and decreased performance among many other health complications.

Symptoms:

- Anemia
- Weight loss or binge-purge cycles
- Irregular or no menstrual cycle
- Stress fractures
- Muscle injuries
- Delayed injury healing time
- Hair loss
- Dry skin
- Cold hands and feet
- Fatigue and decreased ability to concentrate
- Depression, mood changes

What to do if you suspect the Triad or an eating disorder in an athlete:

- Don't try to manage it alone. Intervention takes a partnership between parents, coaches and medical and mental health professionals
- Informing a parent should be the first step
- If a coach has a positive, supportive relationship with the athlete, an intervention by a coach is appropriate.
 - If you speak to your athlete, do so sensitively, privately and use "I" statements. ("I am concerned you are not eating enough to fuel your performance." etc.)
 - Do not judge or criticize. Offer support and understanding
 - Be prepared for denial and resistance
 - Help them seek help
 - For full information about the coach's role visit [The National Eating Disorder Association's Coach and Trainer Toolkit](#)