FOCUS ON WINNERS: MARLA STREB

Three-time US national mountain bike champion Marla Streb is now the general manager of the Luna Chix, a California-based professional women's mountain bike team, having retired from competition herself in 2009. As well as coaching her colleagues, she is devoting time to a new clothing range, launched in April 2010 under the name Luna Sports. Like the team, it's for women only.

A clothing (and cycling) champion

The Luna Chix is a professional cycling team with the support, resources and pay-structure to rival most. It sent two Olympians to Beijing in 2008 and has celebrated many global, pan-American, and national victories since its riders first took to the road in 2002. But perhaps what's sets it apart most clearly is that, as the name suggests, it's a women's team—in fact it's been the world's No.1 women's mountain bike team for most of the last two years (based on World Cup Team and International Cycling Union points standings) and is the most successful team in North American mountain biking history.

Until 2009, one of its stalwart riders was Marla Streb, a three-times US national mountain bike champion in her own right, and an important enough team player to take up the role of general manager when she stopped racing competitively. Something else the team and Ms Streb have turned their attention to this year is the launch of the inaugural collection of high-end cycling and athletic apparel to come to market under the new Luna Sport label, a start-up founded by the company behind the team.

Marla Streb came to racing relatively late in life (28) after years of studying molecular biology and a spell in Costa Rica designing Singletrack Jungle, a mountain bike trail through the rainforest there. Nevertheless, in the course of her competitive career, she confirms that she has witnessed important changes in the clothing that top cyclists get to wear. "Fabrics wick and breathe better now than in the 1990s," she says, "but one of the big changes is better fitting for women now. I used to have to hem my jerseys before 2000 when they were all designed for men. I wanted to look like a woman, not a motocross racer."



The Sparks SL which combines two-and four-way stretch technical fabrics finished with a high collar.

Luna Sport/Ethan Scott

Not everything has to change; for example, she thinks it's fine for people still to wear chamois bike shorts for support and Lycra for stretch, although she says it's "unfortunate" that many companies still use elastic and hook-and-loop—there are better alternatives, she insists.

There is a phrase in common use in corporate America that companies have to "eat their own dog-food", which means believing enough in your own products to choose them for your own use. Ms Streb is happy to do this, to trust Luna Sport clothing when she and her team-members ride in the wide variety of terrains, environments and climates they encounter. On a recent ride in the tropics, in Puerto Rico, she wore a sleeveless

Main image: Luna Pro Team manager Marla Streb.

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The loose-fitting Moon Buggy short, designed by Marla Streb, features a woven nylon shell and removable cycling brief liner.

Luna Sport/Ethan Scott

cycling jersey from the collection called the Sparks, featuring two- and four-way stretch technical fabrics (a fabric called A.D. Fit, which is 92% recycled polyester and 8% spandex, and, on the back panel, one called NashTex, which is 50% recycled polyester, 50% regular polyester). "It stood up well," the athlete says. "It was very hot and humid, but the jersey 'breathed' well."

On the same run in Puerto Rico, she wore the casual shorts called Moon Buggy and says they were ideal for an entire day of riding as well as for socialising. "They have a woven nylon shell and removable cycling brief liner (which I did remove during lunch)," she explains. "Also, we jumped into a river during our ride, and the shorts dried within 15 minutes."

The power of flattery

It makes a difference that the Luna clothes are designed for women. Everything in the collection is designed from scratch to flatter a woman's body, Marla Streb says, adding: "That's very important to our riders, who have all had to wear men's clothing in a size extra small. Luna Sport is fit not too tight, but just right. The clothing is made using fabrics women love, like merino wool, silk, and recycled polyester, and it features the sharpest colours (the colour-choices for the Sparks top are sun, rouge, denim and an option in a purple the company insists on calling 'violicious') . Also, Luna Sport is not over-the-top girlie, like some of the other women's lines, but smart, functional and cute."

The Luna Chix, and a number of other brand ambassadors and professional cyclists are busy sending the company feedback on the current collection, which the general manager says should help Luna Sport continue to improve. A plan to expand into running and activewear apparel is also part of the near future. One of her suggestions is that the company should make a line for children (girls, of course) part of its expansion, but she has a vested interest (no pun intended): she wants to kit out her two daughters in style.

The inclusion of natural fibres and recycled polyester will be an ongoing part of product development; Ms Streb says everyone involved in Luna (the team as well as the sports clothing brand) is "very passionate" about incorporating recycled and sustainable, natural-fibre fabrics and trims into the line as much as possible. "Personally, I'm incredibly impressed with the performance of our natural fibre fabrics," she adds. "For example, I'll sleep in my 100% merino wool Baseline top, ride trails during my morning commute, work in it, ride trails back home, and wear with the family into shower time. And no one has complained yet."



The Marla-di-da bike jersey has a looser, more relaxed attitude, modelled here by Team pro Katerina Nash after Marla Streb, crashed into a huge boulder a couple of days before the photo shoot.

Luna Sport/Ethan Scott