

Ferocious felines



Meet the members of the Las Felinas (female felines) Bike MS team

As Tanny Peña and her team left mile after mile behind during her first Bike MS® event in Maine last August, she tried to put her pain aside and enjoy the countryside views. Mostly, she thought about the efforts many people with multiple sclerosis make every day and pushed herself even harder.

“I play a movie in my head and tell myself, ‘You don’t have long to go. You started, so you must finish,’ and ‘Keep going, keep on pedaling,’ ” she said. And so, Peña ended up riding 145 miles — 70 more than she had planned — during a weekend in which temperatures reached the 90s.

“At an event, you try to give 100%,” said Peña, who is inspired by the stories she hears from fellow bikers and others with MS during the fundraisers.

Peña, 31, is part of Las Felinas, the female felines, a new team from northern Massachusetts composed mostly of Latinas. As they pump their bicycle pedals during the National Multiple Sclerosis Society’s charity cycling event, they find camaraderie and stress relief, as well as joy in raising money for a cause they’ve made their own, even though none of them has the disease.

Team members say they get as much out of the experience as they put in. Bike MS not only gives them a chance to practice the sport and spend time together, but also offers a well-organized ride, a welcoming community and the opportunity to be part of something worthwhile.

“The message is ‘We’re all in this together,’ ” said Natalia Hood, 38. She joined the team to lose weight and ended up learning lessons in resilience that she says keep her from taking things for granted.

Grit on wheels

The team was born during the pandemic, after José Guzmán-Soto, 37, encouraged his wife, Jhaneyri Mata, to give cycling a try since she could no longer go to the gym. Little by little, Mata, 36, started to find the rides easier and more enjoyable, and soon she was getting her friends to join in.

Guzmán-Soto had participated in Bike MS since 2016 and had been touched by the struggles faced by people with MS, including a colleague’s son. After he and his wife brought Las Felinas together, team members read up about the disease and joined efforts to raise funds and generate awareness about MS during the Great Maine and Cape Cod getaways.

According to a 2020 USA Cycling survey, only 19% of riders identify as female and 6% as Latinos. Las Felinas, mostly women of Dominican and Peruvian roots, also have three male members who proudly sport the team’s leopard-spotted blue jerseys. Team members encourage the many beginners on the team, set the pace and help those who want to learn to use their bicycle gears better.



Las Felinas members at a Bike MS event

As soon as the snow starts to melt in New England in March, the dozen members on the team begin coordinating their daily training sessions through WhatsApp. They modify their route according to what those who join can manage that day, then off they go to enjoy the ride and set family and work responsibilities aside.

Peña tries to make it every day. She wakes up at 4 a.m. to get ready, leaves her 11-year-old daughter with her sister and hits the road for about an hour before she goes to work at a day care center.

“If I don’t exercise, I feel like there’s something missing,” she said.

Also, as a single mother, she values the team’s emotional support. “We get together after a ride and tell each other, ‘Let me know if you need me. I’m here for you,’ ” she added.

Female power

When Hood first heard about the group, she had an extra 65 pounds she’d gained during pregnancy and a brand-new bike she’d barely touched. At first, she was concerned she’d hold

other cyclists back and was reluctant to leave her newborn to go ride.

“Sometimes, when you devote yourself to your family and children, you forget about yourself,” she said.

But in Las Felinas she’s found a good fit, friends who feel like family and a chance to put aside her daily juggle, relax and recharge.

“What I love about it is that there are a lot of women in the group and many have children,” Hood said. “Most groups are male.”

Female unity goes far, said Mata, the group’s leader, who has noticed they get others’ attention at events and hopes that it will motivate other women in the area to team up.

While Las Felinas push themselves to clock better times, get stronger and go farther, they also take the time to stop for coffee along the route, listen to each other and even blow off some steam. And after Sunday rides, they often gather for breakfast or a barbecue.

“When we’re riding and going down the hill,” Mata said, “I tell them, ‘Let it all out! Scream out loud!’ We’ve shouted, cried and every once in a while, when someone is feeling bad or depressed, we say, ‘Let’s go slow today, let’s chat.’ And by the end, she feels better.”

In addition to raising almost \$3,000, Las Felinas brought a lot of energy to the Great Maine Getaway, said Jen Dowdy, Bike MS director for the Greater New England market. “Their teamwork was fantastic, they stuck together, they supported one another, especially with those first-time riders,” she added.

Guzmán-Soto, who trains the group, sees in Las Felinas greater team spirit than in the other groups he rides with, which are mostly male.

“They’re still competitive, they want to improve, but I’ve noticed that if someone falls back, everyone waits,” he said. “Nobody is left behind.”