

Cyclist Ayesha McGowan is pedaling towards history

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Cyclist Ayesha McGowan does not take baby steps.

In 2015, eight months after her first road race, she set a lofty New Year's resolution: to become the first African-American female pro road cyclist.

"I was looking to see who was out there and who'd done it before," she told Excelle Sports. "I couldn't find anybody, so I just decided to do it myself."

Some two years later, the Atlanta-based McGowan, 30, continues to pedal hard toward that goal.

"I've been throwing myself into bigger and bigger races," she said. "Sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't."

Among the times it did? Her third-ever race, when she won a category 4 state championship in New York.

Now a category 2 competitor, McGowan spent this summer cycling in Europe, where she was in the pack with top cyclists, such as former world champion Marianne Vos. She notched two top-10 finishes during her ten-race tour.

"Being able to keep up in races with world tour level women, that was a really reassuring experience," she said. "It gave me confidence ... that my hard work is paying off."



<https://youtu.be/P-GmUppqT30>

But there are also those times when diving into the deep end doesn't work out. For instance, during McGowan's first criterium at category 2, officials pulled her from the track before she could get lapped. Numerous relatives had shown up to cheer her on in what should have been an hour-long event in Athens, Georgia.

"I'd flown across the country, all these people came to see me, and I raced for 13 minutes," McGowan recalled with a laugh.

She attributed her failure to a lack of mental preparation before the race and at the starting line.

"It was a completely different level of competition than I was used to," McGowan said. "Whereas some races take a bit to get going, once the whistle blew everybody was going, and if you weren't with them then they were gone."

After that, McGowan paid more attention to arriving at races early to warm up, being thoroughly hydrated, and starting each competition aggressively. She has not been pulled from a circuit since Athens.

"You either win or you learn, and I learned a lot," McGowan said. "That race reminded me: Every single race is important. Every single race deserves your full attention. You can't slack off on anything."

That's especially true as McGowan applies to join domestic cycling teams this fall — the next step on her path to getting a contract for a world tour team.

She also isn't slacking on advocating for more diversity in cycling. She speaks at [public events](#) and chronicles her race and training progress on a [blog](#) and [Instagram](#). Earlier this year, she organized a virtual ride series, "[Do Better Together](#)," which encouraged participants to set personal cycling goals and support each other in achieving them.



Ayesha McGowan cycles through Stone Mountain, Georgia in April 2017 as part of her "Do Better Together" virtual ride series.

Monica Garrison, founder of the national cycling advocacy group [Black Girls Do Bike](#), has followed McGowan's activities for several years via social media. She called it "amazing" to see McGowan's efforts as an athlete and drive for increasing the profile of African-American women in cycling.

Though the sport's lack of racial diversity is obvious from picking up cycling publications or watching races on TV, it's tough to put concrete numbers on the problem. Representatives from USA Cycling, the sport's national governing body, did not respond to Excelle Sports' inquiries about demographics and diversity initiatives for this article. A spokesman previously told [Vice Sports](#) that the organization does not track racial statistics in the sport.

McGowan called the whiteness of pro cycling "an invisible problem." She said she has not experienced direct racism — though sometimes microaggressions — as a competitor but that ignoring communities of color does a disservice to potential cyclists.

"Even if you're not actively discriminating, nobody's really actively trying to solve this problem either," she said.

By putting herself out there as an African-American woman passionate about racing, McGowan is showing other black women and girls what's possible. According to Garrison, that kind of advocacy makes a real impact.

“I see it with my own young daughter. She rides because she sees me riding. I see it on a larger scale with our Black Girls Do Bike chapters around the country. We have found that knowing there are women of color organizing to ride ... inspires women to ride who otherwise might not.”

McGowan said that for many of the women she connects with — whether in person or online — the biggest barrier to trying a race is self-doubt. Sometimes, helping them past that can be just as challenging as a sprint on her Cannondale.

In either scenario, McGowan shows no signs of letting up.

“I need forward motion. I need to always be doing something or working toward something purposeful,” she said.