

Melbourne to Warrnambool Cycling Classic 2015

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LARGEST EVER WOMEN'S FIELD TO TACKLE THE MELBOURNE TO WARRNAMBOOL

BY MONIQUE HANLEY

A record women's field of 25 will line up on Saturday for the 100th edition of the Lakes Oil Melbourne to Warrnambool road cycling race.

Covering 278.6km, the event is almost double the distance limit for women as set by the UCI and will be a show down between traditional road races and ultra-endurance athletes.

Race favourite and the only female starter who has successfully finished the race, Nicole Whitburn, is pleased to see the growth in female numbers.

"I think it's fantastic that there is a Women's category," said Whitburn, who received her finishers' medallion in 2008.

"The inclusion and the resulting talk throughout the cycling scene has been fantastic. I am getting asked on nearly every training ride if I am racing, and who else is racing. The support has been great."

Women have been permitted to enter the race since 1979, when Cheltenham 'housewife' Pauline Walters lobbied race organisers to be allowed an entry. Despite not finishing in her first attempt, she returned in 1980 alongside Great Britain champion Beryl Burton to become the first women to finish the "Warny."

Since then, only 14 women have been recognised as official finishers.

"The Warny is a very different race for females compared to males: it is far longer, faster and more intense than any other race on the women's calendar," said Whitburn.

"For that reason alone I think it is a tough ask to expect to finish it on your first attempt. It combines so many unknowns into one race; weather, distance, pace, and stress from riding in a huge bunch."

One rider with high hopes is 2013 Oceania Road Race champion Amy Bradley, who has marked the Warny in her calendar from the start of the year.



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"The Warrny has been a goal that has been the back of mind ever since I was a feeder for a rider in 2009," said Bradley.

"The race is basically Australia's closest event to a one day classic in Europe, so to win that and be the first name on the honour roll of the new women's category would be massive."

In early 2015 Cycling Victoria put a call out for interest in a new women's category and introduced support systems to help guide the women in their preparations.

A number of ultra endurance athletes, including 'Everesters' – riders who climb the equivalent altitude of Mt Everest, 8,848m, in a 24 hour period – responded to the call out and will present credible threats to the women's category title.

"When I found out that it is the longest race in the Southern Hemisphere and that women were allowed to race, it was a no-brainer - it was a challenge that I wanted to take on," said Pascoe Vale's Justine Barrow who became an Everester in March.

Like many women who have signed up, Barrow's motivation to compete is underpinned by the challenge as well as the opportunity to make a statement about women's cycling.

"Racing 279 km at men's race pace will definitely be the most challenging thing that I have ever done (and pretty scary). I also hope that my participation, and that of the other women competitors, will show others and race organisers that women want to, and can, participate in long endurance events."

Bradley agrees. "This is a huge opportunity to prove that women can race longer distances. We don't always have to race crazy long distances, but at the same time we don't need to be always restricted by the archaic limits set by the UCI."

We'll wait and see how it goes but it is a big step forward for Australia and hopefully the rest of the world will see something pretty inspiring."

For Whitburn, it is the memory of the medallion around her neck that will be her driving force. If she succeeds, she will be only the second female to have two in her collection after Kate Nichols in 2004 and 2006.



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"Getting that second medal on the 100th anniversary would be pretty special."

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ROD MORRIS

Caribou Publications
0401-760-912

KIPP KAUFMANN

Cycling Victoria
0430-303-577

