

# Cyclo-cross: Dudley's Lizzy Gunsalus, 16, pedals up on international scene

By Bill Doyle

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DUDLEY — Lizzy Gunsalus remembers the first time she tried to ride a bicycle without training wheels.

Then 5 years old, she rode her Ariel Little Mermaid bike from Walmart with white tires down the driveway and begged her father not to let go. He did let go, however, and she fell.

“I cried,” she said recently in an interview at her home, “and I literally did not want to do it again.”

Just three days later, however, she hopped back on her bike and successfully rode it after her father unleashed his grip. She basically hasn't stopped riding since.

The Union Cycliste Internationale ranks the Shepherd Hill Regional junior No. 1 in the world in cyclo-cross among 16-year-olds, No. 7 in the 17-18 racing age division and No. 78 among elite women of all ages.

Cyclo-cross races last 30-60 minutes on bicycles with wider tires and different brakes than those on road bikes, with more traction to better cope with courses made of grass, dirt, sand, mud, asphalt and obstacles that require the riders to carry their bicycles at times.

Gunsalus has been a rising star ever she since won USA Cycling cyclo-cross championships at age 11 and 13. Lately, however, she's opened even more eyes.

Competing in the 17-18 age group as a 16-year-old, she placed second in the Pan American Championships in Midland, Ontario, in November, and she finished third in the USA Cycling Cyclo-Cross national championships in Tacoma, Washington, on Dec. 15.

Then a week before Christmas, she flew by herself from Boston to Brussels with a five-hour layover in London to join her Team USA teammates to race in the Helen 100 Azencross DVV Cup race for junior women in Loenhout, Belgium, on Dec. 27. Missing Christmas at home for the first time and taking her first trip

overseas turned out to be well worth it. She surprised herself by finished first in the 30-minute race that attracted 65 riders from 16 countries.

“I was like, ‘What is happening right now?’ ” she said. “I was like, ‘This is not real.’ It was kind of cool.”

It was also cool that she defeated rival Madigan Munro of Boulder, Colorado, for the first time. Munro placed fourth. Gunsalus’s prize package included 200 euros — about \$223 — and she spent much of it on Christmas presents. She chuckled when she listed her other prizes — a recipe in Dutch that she couldn’t read, tomatoes and walnut oil.

Gunsalus was motivated to ride at a young age because her father, Mark, and her brother, Greg, rode BMX races together on Friday nights and she wanted to join them. Mark, 57, doesn’t ride as much as he once did, but he won New England cyclo-cross championships in 2010 and 2011. Greg, 19, is a sophomore at Quinsigamond Community College who races in professional cyclo-cross events.

Gunsalus’s twin sister, Tina, doesn’t ride bikes, but she runs cross-country and track for Shepherd Hill. She ran a leg of Shepherd Hill’s 1,600-meter relay team that captured a state title last spring. Gunsalus’ mother, Pamela, teaches science, technology, engineering and math at Knox Trail Middle School in Spencer.

Nearly every day, Gunsalus trains on roads or on a cyclo-cross course she and her brother built in their yard.

On Tuesday, she and her father will head to Hoogerheide, Netherlands, so she can race in the Telenet UCI Cyclo-Cross World Cup on Sunday. That’s a race for elite women of all ages, including Olympians in track, mountain, BMX and road cycling. Cyclo-cross is not an Olympic sport. The minimum age for the World Cup is 16 so she’ll be one of the youngest competitors. When she was in Belgium, she placed 42nd in a World Cup race open to women of all ages.

Gunsalus said she’s more excited about racing in the UCI Cyclo-Cross World Championships on Feb. 1 in Dubendorf, Switzerland. The championships will include the 17-18 age division for girls for the first time. Her mother and sister will join her and her father for that event. The family plans to visit the Alps after the race.

Gunsalus is only 5-foot-3 and weighs just 115 pounds, but she stands tall in her sport.

“It’s balance and skill,” her father said, “and knowing how to finesse the bike, knowing what tire pressure to run and how to go into a corner and what line to choose. It’s very instinctive for her.”

Gunsalus said the race courses in Europe are usually muddy, but the races are well attended. More than 20,000 people cheered on the riders in Loenhout, and several times that attended the world championships in Denmark last year.

“Cyclo-cross in Belgium is like the NFL,” she said.

Thanks to cyclo-crossing, Gunsalus has traveled not only to Europe, but throughout the U.S., including to Montana, Utah, Nevada, Arkansas and California.

“I never really think about it until people talk to me about it,” she said, “but I’m really fortunate and grateful about everything I’ve seen and gotten to do.”

She even has sponsors. Cannondale-Cyclocrossworld.com pays for her bike in cyclo-cross events and CCB Racing has recently signed to sponsor her for road, gravel and mountain bike events.