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# Once the unlikeliest of athletes, a Fond du Lac woman is now a champion bike racer teaching others the joy of the sport

Nothing about Alexandera Houchin's background would predict she'd end up among the country's best ultradistance, off-road cyclists.

By Rachel Hutton (https://www.startribune.com/rachel-hutton/6370540/) Star Tribune
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In 2018, Alexandera Houchin biked 2,745 miles from Banff, Alberta, to the Mexican border, crisscrossing the Continental Divide. Carrying her own supplies, she'd traversed the Rocky Mountains on terrain so rough that at times she had to carry her bike. Through inclement weather and on minimal sleep, she'd made it in 23 days.

When Houchin arrived at the finish line of the <u>Tour Divide (https://tourdivide.org/)</u>—the country's most grueling, off-pavement, self-supported cycling race — she found no ribbon to break, no television cameras or cheering crowds. As the women's division winner, all she saw was a desolate stretch of two-lane and a border station staffed by an agent who said he couldn't leave his post to come take her picture.

So Houchin treated herself to an orange soda from the vending machine and sat on a folding chair to wait for her ride.

"It was super anti-climactic," she admitted, but somewhat fitting for a competitor who's competing only against herself, whose reward truly is the journey, not the destination.

The unlikeliest of athletes — Houchin used to hate exercise, abuse pills and heroin — had coaxed her body into a remarkable display of strength and endurance, both mental and physical. The following year, she repeated her victory. This time, she was five days faster, and made the trip on a bike with only one gear.

Now, the only woman to win back-to-back Tour Divides has returned home to the Fond du Lac Reservation near Cloquet, Minn., where she hopes to share the joy she's found in outdoor recreation. As a cyclist and advocate, Houchin is just getting started. Life, like an ultra-race, isn't a sprint. And she's particularly suited for the long haul.

"The reason I seem to excel at these races is because the longer the race, I get stronger as I go and feel better as I go," Houchin said.

#### Learning to ride

The male-dominated, spandex-clad sport of cycling can exude an air of exclusivity. Most riders are white. Gear can be expensive and technical.

When Houchin, now 31, arrived at the start of her first Tour Divide in 2018, the other racers likely underestimated her abilities.

Here she was, an Indigenous woman wearing cutoffs instead of the typical padded bike shorts; work boots in place of bike shoes that clip to the pedals; and a hip pair of chunky specs. (Another competitor once joked that she looked like she was hanging out in a coffee shop before being inadvertently swept up in a bike race.)

Nothing about Houchin's background would predict she'd end up among the country's best ultradistance, off-road cyclists.

She grew up near Janesville, Wisc. Her parents divorced when she was young. As a teenager, she began abusing prescription pills, which soon led to heroin.



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Alexandera Houchin stumbled into bike culture when she accidentally purchased a fixed-gear bike. That led to new jobs, new friendships and Houchin had been overweight since she was young. But she didn't see that as a bad thing until middle school, when she watched a video of her synchronized swim team's performance. As Houchin dove into the water, kids in the audience mooed. Suddenly, she saw herself as others did. "I remember being, like, 'I am so fat and I hate myself,' "Houchin recalled.

By the time she graduated from high school, Houchin weighed more than 300 pounds. She moved to Madison and got a job delivering supplies in a hospital. She was also bingeing and purging, at one point losing 80 pounds in three months.

Until then, Houchin says, her relationship with exercise was like a Venn diagram of two circles with no overlap. In school, she'd nearly failed gym class. Other than synchro, she hated anything athletic.

But once she got her job, and needed transportation to work, she acquired a secondhand Schwinn, which she spray painted purple, chain and all. The 10-mile ride took two hours.

Then a bike thief changed the trajectory of Houchin's life.

Houchin bought a replacement via Craigslist, not realizing she'd purchased a fixed gear — a bike with one gear and no freewheel, so you can't coast. Houchin didn't know such bikes existed; nor did she notice that this one didn't have a brake. Her first attempt at riding it led to a ripped pant leg and a crash.

But Houchin didn't have the money for another bike, so she forced herself to learn to ride it. One day, a guy at a bike rack told Houchin he'd never seen a girl on a brakeless "fixie" and welcomed her into a group of local riders. Soon she was delivering Jimmy John's sandwiches while honing her bike-handling skills amid downtown Madison traffic.

Later, Houchin got a job as a bike messenger, the only woman on the courier crew. That led to a job as a bike mechanic — the first woman to work in the shop — and then to welding school, to learn to build bikes. Pretty soon, bikes "took over everything," she said.

## The long haul

Houchin's first long ride was the 100-mile trek from Madison to Milwaukee, with her fixie friends. She loved it so much that she decided to bike from Madison to the Fond du Lac Reservation, where her mom had moved a few years before.

Houchin's mother had been adopted by a white family and didn't find out about her tribal affiliation until she was an adult. Houchin enrolled in the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa when she was 19 and hoped that an extended visit would help her learn more about her Ojibwe identity.

Still riding her fixie, with her tent and sleeping bag wrapped in trash bags, and directions printed from MapQuest, Houchin biked some 300 miles to Minnesota.

"I didn't know what a reservation was, besides whatever I read about in newspapers or magazines," she said. "And I got here and it was nothing like I imagined it."

Next, Houchin rode to Boulder, Colo. She started bike touring every summer. In 2015, she made her first trip along the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route — the route for the Tour Divide race — in 45 days. It was by far the hardest thing she'd ever done, yet blissful. Despite her exhaustion, it felt freeing to be out in the elements, to see such beautiful terrain and so many wild animals.

So in 2017, Houchin did another six-week bike trip. She then tried her first race, a 400-miler. Though she was cycling as fast as possible, Houchin was passed by one rider who had stopped to frolic in hot springs, and another who was in his 70s. She came in nearly last.

Needless to say, at the start of her first Tour Divide, the following year, she was never expected to win.

#### Difficulty and discomfort

Bikepacking races, where riders carry all their own rations and overnight gear, feature routes that range from gravel roads to single-track — steep, rugged trails studded with rocks and roots. "You're walking your bike up for hours and then 'yeehawing' down," Houchin explained.

The difficulty and discomfort can be extreme.

"The first five days of the Tour Divide are excruciating to the point where I feel like my thighs are going to explode," Houchin said. "It's so bad that I can't squat. I can't do anything." (She often rides to the start of a race, to get the initial soreness out of the way.)

Mechanical issues are inevitable. Houchin has broken pedals, busted a dropper seatpost, and once snapped off a wheel spoke that then lodged in her gear cassette. Her on-the-fly repairs would make MacGyver proud.

Additionally, the Tour Divide takes riders through mountain snow and scorching desert heat. To endure unpleasant conditions, Houchin said, she thinks back to a winter race in Wisconsin — she rode in the freezing rain, through snow the consistency of mashed potatoes, for 22 hours — and reminds herself that it could be worse.

To keep her spirits up, Houchin has conversations with her body: literal, out loud, pep talks for her muscles, like I'm so grateful you're such a beautiful body! Or Triceps, you're doing a good job.

She finds these rides to be spiritual, a way for her to practice ceremony and honor her relationship with other elements and beings.

"As I'm biking, I get to a mental place of really being in relation to the manidoog [Ojibwe for 'spirits'], the trees, the wind, the rocks, to everything."

This head space makes the hardship worth it. "You get to this point of, like, sheer exhaustion, where you don't even have the capacity to have a filter, or to worry about what somebody thinks about what you look like," Houchin said. "You're just eating and drinking water and going forward. And I love that. I have no doubts about who I am or what my role is in this world."

### Shifting gears

A year ago last spring, when Houchin received her undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota Duluth, she saw her role as bike racer and future dental school student.

But then the pandemic derailed her plans. She expected 2020 would be her first "Triple Crown" year, of racing the Tour Divide, Colorado Trail and Arizona Trail in succession. COVID canceled those races, postponed her dental school admissions test and delayed her ability to accrue the required clinic volunteer hours.

So Houchin switched gears and took a two-year fellowship with <u>Lead for America (https://www.lead4america.org/)</u>, to transfer what she's learned from cycling into advocacy for her community.

She's now creating a nonprofit that promotes outdoor recreation through experiential learning — the traditional Anishinaabe way of knowing, she notes. She hopes to provide community members with outdoor equipment and a comfortable space to learn how to use and maintain biking and camping gear, and then share that knowledge with others.

Last year, Houchin got funds for a small fleet of fat bikes (with extra-wide tires) and in December started hosting group rides for five local Ojibwe women. In March, the group did its first race. (Houchin decided to skip the Tour Divide this year, but she plans to race the 500-mile Colorado Trail in July and the Arizona Trail in October.)

Fond du Lac artist <u>Sarah Agaton Howes (https://www.startribune.com/from-blankets-to-phone-cases-this-minnesota-designer-creates-ojibwe-contemporary-art-for-all/565852612/)</u> said she would never have tried the sport if not for Houchin's support.

"Sometimes you need somebody to shine a light for you," she said of Houchin's role.

As the parent of an 11-year-old daughter, Agaton Howes said she appreciates how Houchin's bravery expands the possibilities of what women can do.

"My mind is blown by the fact that she's a woman, and she goes and does this by herself," she said.

Another of Houchin's riding group, Hannah Smith, hadn't been on a bike for years before Houchin introduced her to fat biking.

"Alexandera and people like her in this community definitely are breaking down barriers of access and comfortability and offering encouragement and their expertise," she said.

Benya Kraus, the executive director of Lead for Minnesota, describes Houchin as a leader who listens to the community, and who is humble and nimble enough to be responsive to its needs. Kraus noted that there's a throughline connecting Houchin's bike racing to her outdoor recreation work, her volunteering at a community garden and learning about tribal government. Recently, Houchin was chosen to represent Fond du Lac on the board of the Northland Foundation's Maada'ookiing program (https://northlandfdn.org/special-initiatives/maada-ookiing.php), which provides grants for projects that support Indigenous communities.

Houchin says biking has not only been a vehicle for her to travel and exercise, but a tool for her to learn even greater life lessons, in gaining confidence and loving herself.

"I don't know how I got to be so lucky to find something that I love so much and has helped me become such a better version of myself," she said.

Whatever Houchin endeavors next, it will be rooted in what she learned on the bike: to persevere, to roll with the punches and respect life's interconnectedness.

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