

Former Olympic bobsledder lights up Arizona track cycling

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By Sarah Muench/Clipped In AZ

The odds of a woman in her 40s breaking world records in track cycling is about as likely as Arizona getting a velodrome.

But Scottsdale's Gea Johnson (FASTER Performance Center), 45, is vying to compete at the masters world championships in Manchester in October after smashing her own world records and giving the cycling community hope for a much-needed training facility.



"I'm sure she can win the 500 [meters] no problem, and she can win the match sprint," Johnson's coach Lionel Space said about her chances in Manchester, adding that funding is the hard part.

Johnson beat women half her age to the podium in August in the USA Cycling Elite Timed Track National Championships and won gold in the USA Cycling Masters Track National Championships, all without a home track to train on. She has set two world records for her age group in the 500-meter time trial and flying 200-meter time trial. She broke one of her own world records twice – the 500-meter time trial, with her fastest unrecorded time of 36.76 seconds breaking her previous world records.

But getting to Manchester, England for a chance at worlds will require thousands of dollars in funding that Johnson hopes to raise before Oct. 6.

“She’s planning on going in anticipation that the money will come from somewhere,” Space said. “If that happens between now and a month from now, she’ll be able to go. [Masters world championships] is nice to have on your resume.”

Real-life bionic woman?



Although she has only trained and competed in track cycling for three years, Johnson is no stranger to being a top-tier athlete.

She made a trip to the 2002 Olympics for bobsleigh, ranked second only to Jackie Joyner-Kersey in heptathlon for four consecutive years and won medals in international weightlifting competitions.

So why track cycling? Why now?

“I picked it out of a hat, so to speak,” Johnson said. “In my 40s I was still talented; I still had all of my abilities. I needed to do something not as harsh on my body. [When you’re older] you can still do everything, you just have to treat your body a little differently.”

Johnson’s injury list is about as decorated as her resume of accomplishments. Although it seems no one can keep count of her surgeries, Johnson, her own mother and Space all seem to settle on 14 or 15.

“Most people would have given up after five,” said Sally Redd, Johnson’s 71-year-old mother. “She just keeps going and going and going and going.”

Two procedures, in particular, on a ruptured hamstring sustained from the 2002 Olympics and on a ruptured patellar tendon in a separate incident, could have ended her career.

Odds would say Johnson shouldn’t be here.

But special operations, years of rehabilitation and her own determination and perseverance have allowed her to continue, Johnson said.

“Anything that I did [growing up] – my mom would always say I can accomplish anything if I put my mind to it, always believe in yourself and never give up,” Johnson said. “For some reason, I’m still able to do what I’m doing. All I can say is that it works for me. I have a long way to go, but at least I know I can still do it. I just want to be my best, and when I make a decision to do something, I do it.”

And Johnson did just that in the 2010 USA Cycling Masters Track National Championships when a collision during a sprint left her with a broken wrist and elbow. Minutes later, Johnson got back in the

saddle and won a bronze medal. The next day, she wrapped her arm in duct tape, fought through the pain and took two more bronze medals.

“Duct tape was the only thing we could find that would help,” Johnson said. “Duct tape is just like my lip gloss – I never leave home without it.”

From beach cruiser to track bike

When Johnson was selecting a new sport, she narrowed it down to cycling and rowing, but a past shoulder injury decided her fate.

“The last time I had ridden a bike was in Manhattan Beach on a beach cruiser, and I crashed into the bushes,” Johnson said. “I didn’t know anything about cycling.”

Strada Racing took Johnson under its wing and then she began working with Space. Without a velodrome in Arizona, Johnson trains on a flat, straight stretch of road working on her starts and her explosive final sprints, Space said. Johnson also travels to California to get experience on bankings and turns on velodromes.



“Every opportunity we get to train on a velodrome, we utilize every moment,” Johnson said. “It’s not easy [training off the track]. I rely on my other sports. I pretend and visualize that I’m training on a velodrome. I don’t let it scare me when I’m on a velodrome. I just have to say, ‘yep, I can do this,’ and act like I’ve done this before.”

Space, who is working to drum up support for a velodrome in Phoenix, said someone like Johnson can benefit greatly from a velodrome, citing that practicing G-forces and holding a line at full speed is “something you need to practice.” Space said that if Johnson wants to continue to shatter records and become the best, she’ll need to move closer to a velodrome, or Arizona will have to get one.

A recent Arizona Department of Transportation study on the economic impact of cycling in Arizona said “a velodrome could be an important complementary asset for bicycle tourism in Arizona.”

“I don’t think that [competitors] realize we don’t have a velodrome,” Johnson said. “I don’t think they understand what we go through. We just work really, really hard. We have to work that much harder.”

Track without the field

Johnson said most cyclists would “cringe” when knowing how she trains, with two hard sprint workouts in a training week, lifting weights with a focus on legs once a week and riding easy for 40 minutes a couple of days a week, although she admits she should ride more.

“My coach calls me a weight lifter on a bike,” Johnson said. “We are very unconventional in the cycling world. I kind of train like I did as a track athlete. I am a sprinter, a full-on, explosive sprinter. I know my strengths and weaknesses.”

When Johnson’s helmet broke in the USA Cycling Elite Timed Track National Championships, it covered her face and blocked her view.

“All my experience in track and field and [other sports], it has helped me in the next sport,” Johnson said. “My helmet broke in Elite and I couldn’t see. I reflected on my time as a bobsledder, but I didn’t panic. I was still able to get bronze.”

Space said Johnson learns something every time they work together, and she always finds a way to get the job done.

“She is really good at being able to deliver the goods no matter what,” Space said. “If she’s already tired and hot, she will find a way to pull out all the stops and do well.”

What’s in store



Johnson said she plans to continue track cycling.

“I’m very dedicated, I have perseverance and persistence,” Johnson said. “It’s overwhelming to me what I’ve overcome. I’m a fighter. If I work hard and believe in myself and I never give up, I know I can be my best.”

When asked about the possibility of going to the Olympics for track cycling, Johnson doesn’t rule it out, but acknowledges she will need to train more on a velodrome. She believes having a velodrome in Arizona would fuel interest among road cyclists, and the sport would grow and farm young, talented racers.

“But why not?” Johnson said of her Olympic possibilities.

Redd, Johnson’s mother, who Johnson calls “her best teammate,” said she wouldn’t be surprised to see her daughter competing at age 50.

“Nothing is ever out of the picture, I can tell you that,” said Redd, who admits she is now addicted to watching all cycling events, even those her daughter isn’t competing in.

But Redd, who selflessly lends her support for all of her daughter’s endeavors, said she wanted to make one thing clear about Johnson for this article: “She gets her looks from her mother.”

To help Johnson go to the World Championships in Manchester, contact her at geajohnson@yahoo.com.