

LITTLE LAMB CHOP

Lea Davison loves tight pants, but we're not talking about spandex. Her obsession has to do with an Internet sensation named Leslie Hall. (Go ahead and Google "Leslie and the LYs 'Tight Pants Body Rolls' video." I'll wait.) I happen to know from personal experience that Davison knows all the words and all the dance moves for this particular video, which only proves that the 2012 Olympian is as quirky and down-to-earth as she is fast. That's saying a lot considering the Vermont native just won the National XC Championship and then went on to a top-ten finish at worlds.

Davison spent her youth ski racing, and proved to be a natural talent. In high school she discovered that she had a knack for running, and went on to win two cross-country state championships. In addition to a collegiate slalom skiing title, she also won both the short track and cross-country national championships as an athlete at Middlebury College. Since then, Davison has been rising steadily through the ranks, eventually landing a spot on the 2012 Olympic team to compete in London, where she placed 11th. She currently rides for Specialized Factory Racing.

But Davison's contributions to the sport extend far beyond her performance on the bike. In 2007, along with her sister Sabra and friend Angela Irvine, she formed a group called Little Bellas. The non-profit mentoring program focuses on weekend and summer mountain bike programs for girls and has expanded to include national events. Davison is passionate about advancing women in the sport

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and is a founding member of USA Cycling's Women's Committee.

I spent a weekend with Davison earlier this year during the launch of Specialized's new women-specific full-suspension mountain bike, the Rumor. Besides changing my life (for better or worse is up for debate) by introducing me to Leslie and the LYs, Davison was always quick with a joke or a laugh, proved that you actually can smile through a set of LT intervals, and shredded the hell out of the fruit bowl at the Harbor Cafe during the all-important Santa Cruz brunch scene.





You came back from a pretty serious injury and ended up at the London Olympics in 2012. Talk about that journey. The path to London definitely started in 2010 when I tore my labrum in my hip and had a decision whether to race that season or get surgery right away and have a long build up to the next season. I decided to get surgery just because I wanted to put everything in my favor to make the Olympic team. Thankfully it worked out. Because of that injury and that recovery time, it was the first time in eight years that I had a season off. I started working with Bill Knowles, this fantastic athletic trainer in Vermont, and I think that created all this new motivation and gave my body a much needed rest. It also gave me a chance to really focus on strength, which was definitely my weakness.

So that next season [after the injury] I built up and I won the PRO XCT Series, which meant that I automatically qualified for the Olympic Long Team. You know, that last season was definitely a stressful one—I crashed at the start of Czech Republic, which was the third World Cup and third opportunity to qualify for the Olympic team. But I got lucky too, because I didn't get seriously injured in that crash. It was a very close competition. Georgia [Gould] sealed the deal

by being ranked top ten in the World Cup, but they picked me as a discretionary selection. It's almost sort of surreal when they call me up at the beginning of races now and call me an Olympian. I'm like, 'Who are they talking about? Wow, that really did happen.'

You were 11th in London. Were you happy with that result? Have you thought about Rio? I was so close to the top ten—within a minute. I was proud of how I rode. It wasn't my absolute best performance, but it was a very, very solid race. Halfway through the race, when I realized that the podium was probably out of reach, I thought, 'I want to go to Rio.' It's definitely a goal for me, but there is so much racing between now and then. It's such a wild concept because I race against the same girls all the time and it's just one day—just one race out of four years—so who knows what's going to happen. You could be training for four years for that one day and then there are so many things that you can't control. You just do the best that you can.

You're obviously a natural athlete, and it seems like you could have had a lot of success as a ski racer or runner. Why did mountain biking rise to the top? My youth was focused on ski racing, for sure; I wanted to make the Olympic team and the U.S. Ski Team for ski racing.

Then in high school I discovered cross-country running, so I kind of dipped my toe in the water of endurance sports. I discovered mountain biking and it was the perfect combination of both of those sports. Through cross-country running I found out how to push my limits, and I had this fantastic coach who really taught me how to suffer. Through ski racing I got a lot of the descending skills and those same feelings on the mountain bike, so it just kind of clicked. I won my second national mountain bike race that I ever did, and my coach came up to me afterwards and said, 'Hey, did you know you just qualified for the world championship team?' and I said, 'Wait, there's a world championship for this? This is awesome!' I remember watching the pro women race short track and it was like, 'OK, I can do this for a job. This is exactly what I want to do.' I was 18 at that point and I just decided to go for it.

After a couple of near misses, you finally nabbed the national championship. How did that go down? This was a definitely one of my targets this season. I've been close, coming in second for the past two seasons, so I really, really wanted to wear that national champion kit. How it went down? I was leading on the first lap and there was a group of us together

at the front. Coming into the technical, rocky descent near the start/finish line, Georgia flatted her front tire, which caused her to crash. Some of the other girls were held up behind the crash, so I had a lead. I just took it and ran (or rode) with it. I got in a rhythm and went. My lead increased for the first couple of laps and I held on tight. I am still thrilled to be wearing the national champion jersey; I get excited every time I put it on. I knew I could do it since I had been having solid results leading into the race, but I also expected a battle.

Talk about your work with the USAC Women's Committee a little bit. What are the goals for that group?

It was newly formed last fall when we were at the Mountain Bike Committee Summit. Jojo [Pettersen] and I were sitting there talking about equal prize money and women's initiatives, and she says, 'Why don't we form a Women's Committee for USAC?' I think it's a great evolution because USAC has been stuck at this 13% number for years now—only 13% of USAC members are women. So our mission for that committee is to grow that number.

A lot of interesting conversations come up. I get off these calls [with the committee] completely floored and inspired. The recent call was about our top-five goals that we would like to see happen in the next five years. My number one goal was to have USAC hand down a mandate saying if there is a UCI race in the U.S., then they have to have men's and women's races. So Tour of California or Tour of Utah ... all these races where there could be girls on the sidelines watching and asking, 'Where are the women racing?' So if girls aren't seeing women racing, how do they even know that it's an option for them? And I'm all about top-five equal prize money; it doesn't have to be across the board, just the top five.

What about everyday riders? How do we get more women on mountain bikes? You see a lot of women at charity rides and that's a non-threatening environment to get on a bike, so we need transitional races or events to get these women to keep riding. I don't know what that looks like, maybe it's more of a social endeavor.

I absolutely love what NICA is doing, and I think USA cycling needs to work more closely with them. NICA, hands down, is developing our next top female racers. There are a lot of really good girls coming out of California and out of all of the leagues, and it's inspiring. That's exactly what we need. I would also love to see that tied in more with collegiate cycling as well. I feel like once women get to college, either they stop playing the sport they played in high school or they don't have the opportunity. That makes it a perfect time to start racing a mountain bike or a road bike. It's obvious that women want to do this stuff: Muddy Buddy races are really popular, CrossFit is really popular and, heck, that's not very different from mountain biking, so why aren't we getting this population riding?

I think we've reached a tipping point. There are a lot of good initiatives happening. We're not there yet, but I feel like we have a lot of great momentum and I feel like we just need that investment from USA Cycling, the media and from the race promoters to just push women's racing over the edge.

Let's talk about the bikes you're currently racing. Go. I'm mostly racing the Specialized Fate, but I actually raced the Epic for the Czech Republic World Cup. I choose the Epic when there's rooty, bumpy climbing. And of course if there's rooty climbing, it's going to be bumpy on the descents. The Fate can make it up and down

anything, but in Czech it gave me more traction for the climbs. It was pretty bumpy on the flats so it actually allowed me to sit and recover more. That course was a blast on the Epic—it was so much fun. For anything with steep climbs or a lot of climbs, the Fate is just a billy goat; I mean, it's so light that you can't really compare it to anything else—it's a climbing machine. Then the 29-inch wheels and the geometry make it really great for descents as well

How buttoned-up are you with nutrition? I pretty much eat whatever I want and a lot of it. I try to keep it healthy, but I love food.

Oh yeah? Favorite post-ride snack? Maple Creemees. They're delicious! It's maple soft serve! We call them Creemees in Vermont. I'm addicted to that right now. And they come with maple sprinkles that are made from maple candy. They boil down the maple syrup to make this super hard maple candy and then they crush it up to make maple sprinkles. Mind blowing.

What's the story behind your nickname, LLC? Oh god—Little Lamb Chop! When I was on Trek VW, I was definitely a rookie and I would follow Sue Haywood around and she was like my shepherd and I was a little lamb. And then it turned into Little Lamb Chop. Only a few people call me that now.

Advice for women who are just starting out and getting into mountain biking? Find a friend who you can ride with who can show you the ropes. If there's no one around, go to a bike shop and try to find a female to ride with or at least talk to. If you crash, just know that everybody crashes—I crash all the time. Even the best go down, even the best have to walk sometimes—uphill or downhill. Keep riding. Never give up. ☺

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