



Elaine Ruff founded the United States Women's Motorcycle League (the WML) in 1996 and was the Executive Director until the beginning of 2000.



Elaine Ruff Interview – January 2, 2014

WMXA: *How did you get involved in the Women's Motocross effort and eventually become Founder and Director of the WML?*

ELAINE: I was Vice President of a motorcycle aftermarket company. I was one of a handful of women in an executive position at that time. During the 1991 World Mini's in Las Vegas, I was approached by two woman riders, Tami Rice and Nadine Holbert. I spent the afternoon listening to their stories about how the industry had shut woman riders out, the discrimination that was occurring at the time, the fact that the AMA rule book stated that the highest level a woman could obtain in motocross racing was an amateur status and so on.

To be honest, I felt like I had just gone back in time – how could this be happening in the nineties? These women were passionate about their sport and dedicated to making a change. They needed help, so I agreed to do what I could. I had no idea that we were about to turn the industry on its ear!



WMXA: *Was this when the United States Women's Motocross Team was created?*

ELAINE: Yes, this was actually a marketing effort to draw out some participation numbers for the female market segment. I had been told by many of the executives of Honda, Kawasaki and Suzuki that the female participation numbers were so low that it just was not worth the investment. So when Tami Rice told me she had received an invitation from a promoter in Italy to send our "US Team" to participate in an all-women's motocross event in Fienza, Italy in 1992, I thought this was a great opportunity to see if what the industry believed to be true was true. With the help of Kat Spann, owner and editor of Tex MX (later to become Southern Dirt Bike Magazine), Tami Rice (**Director of the WMXA**), Nadine Holbert, and our sister company in Italy, this came to fruition. The Team consisted of Tami Rice, Nadine Holbert, Kristy Shealy and Dee Ann Wood.

Anyone that knows women's motocross history knows we were darn lucky. I had no idea that we had just sent over to Italy "*The Dream Team*". They placed four of the top five places. The United States Women's Motocross Team was born. I began a strategic marketing campaign, sending out information about the Women's MX Team, race events, sponsorship, etc. My first lesson in reality – many of the industry media outlets wanted nothing to do with news about women racing motocross. At the time the industry was truly a "good ole boys club" and it was the opinion of many of the leading industry magazines (and promoters I may add) that women had no business racing motocross. At the time it took some "leverage" to get the media to open up to the idea of professional women motocross racers. It took a media powerhouse like Kat Spann to get the news out there. Eventually the other media outlets began to follow suit.

Later, I teamed up with Jim Trimble, owner of Trimble and Company, to help create a marketing plan and direction for the women's motocross effort.

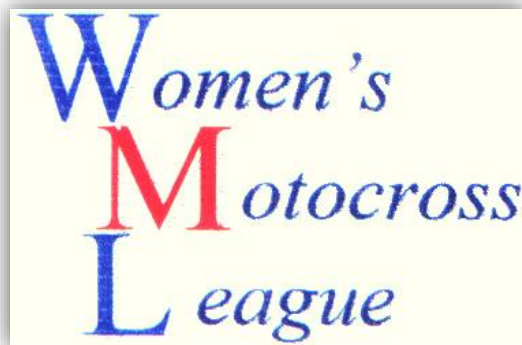
WMXH: The U.S. Women's Motocross Team went on for several years correct?

ELAINE: Yes, for about 3 years. The talent on this team over the years included: Dee Ann Wood, Kristy Shealy, Cindy Cole, Tami Rice, Nadine Holbert, Jodi Hollow, Corina Chinen, and Lisa Henderson. It is these women (those pioneers of the past) that truly deserve most of the credit for today's opportunities. I gave them a platform in which to showcase their talents. Kat, Jim and I provided the needed "business" tools. But, without their spirit, dedication, and incredible talent, it would have taken much longer for the opportunities to arrive. I hope that today's women riders understand the importance and significance of their contributions and how difficult it was to break through the "good ole boys" barrier in this sport. And in the spirit of their sister motocross racers, they continued to advance the opportunities of this sport through their grace, hard work, and generosity. T.E.A.M stands for "Together everyone achieves more." This mission statement of the U.S. Women's MX TEAM and the WML was embraced and honored – and helped open doors for all women MX riders.

WMXH: So when was the WML launched and why?

ELAINE: The U.S. Women's Motocross Team, as I said before, was a platform to showcase the female motocross racer. With that team, we were able to introduce, educate, and change the industry with regard to how they saw the female market segment. With the U.S. Women's Motocross Team and the response to team activities, we were able to show that the participation rate of less than 1% of women (these numbers were given to me by the OEM's) was actually over 10%! That is a huge amount of the market to ignore and the companies started to question their own data. The data was coming from bike registrations. Any woman knows that often the bike is registered in the fathers or husband's name. This discovery opened up a vast amount of valuable marketing data on the female market segment. How many times does one discover an overlooked market? Heck, I felt like Christopher Columbus discovering a new world. Once we looked over the numbers, we realized that in order to continue supporting the female market segment, it required that they have their own ranking organization.

On April 30, 1996, the U.S. Women's Motorcycle League "WML" was launched. I contacted Ed Youngblood, president of the AMA, and asked him for his support of the effort. A true visionary, Ed took on the task and his participation was invaluable. The first thing he did was to have the rule book changed from women only being able to achieve an amateur status to that of professional. He supported the idea of the WML being a member ranking organization (as trying to get the AMA involved to do this then would have taken too much time). The WML launched as a nonprofit organization whose members were worldwide. And as the numbers grew, the voice of change got louder, and as the voice became louder – more doors opened. It was a rush!



WMXH: *What role did Debbie Matthews have with the WML?*

ELAINE: Debbie owned a motorcycle apparel shop called Racers Choice back then. She joined the effort as a volunteer after the WML was created. She stayed on as a volunteer, then race coordinator, then co-director until the middle of 1999 when she left to pursue other things.

WMXH: *You must be pretty happy with how the women's racing program has evolved since then.*

ELAINE: Are you kidding? I am ecstatic! I feel like one of those involved in the women's suffrage movements sometimes. Dealing with the politics in the industry was like trying to get woman the right to vote all over again! Like I said, I thought I was in a time warp – you would have expected such resistance in the 40's and 50's – but the 90's? The effort to get women motocross racers recognized and an equal playing field took a lot of very dedicated people. It was a fight that required many late hours, personal and financial sacrifice, resilience and most of all, unwavering dedication. I was lucky to be involved in such an industry changing effort. I think it is important to understand where the industry was and to recognize those that fought for today's opportunities.

That is why I am so excited that they are creating a web site to ***support the History of Women's Motocross!***

For more info on the history of women's motocross, please visit www.WomensMXHistory.com.