



On the

right track

for Games medal

Robyn Wong tops Wellington's Mt Victoria on her Games bike. Pictures: Anthony Phelps



Commonwealth Games mountain biker Robyn Wong is a woman at the top of her game.

Phil Murray reports

Two years ago Wellington Chartered Accountant Robyn Wong was the only New Zealand woman mountain biker selected for the Athens Olympics and finished a creditable 16th.

This month she heads for the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne with a good chance of a medal: of all the riders in the field only the two Canadians are ranked ahead of her worldwide. It's not too bad for someone who only took up the sport at the age of 28. Not only had she not ridden competitively before then, she had not even considered it.

Wong grew up in Masterton, where she attended St Matthew's Collegiate School. She loved all sport and dabbled in many, though she tended to focus on netball, tennis and athletics.

She was good enough at netball to make the Wairarapa under-21 team, and also competed at inter-collegiate level in cross-country running.

She continued playing netball when she moved to Wellington to attend Victoria University. Even though she focused primarily on her studies, she reached premier two level, as a centre with the Wellington East club.

"They actually changed me to goal attack, which at five foot four isn't really heard of," she said. "But I was agile in the circle and was more of a feeder for the shooter!"

She also got involved in another "tall person" sport, basketball, which is popular in Wellington's Chinese community.

"It was pretty social and it was fun, even though I wouldn't really call myself a 'social' sports person," she said.

After leaving university she went to Whistler, Canada, on a student work-abroad programme, intending to stay just two months.

"I worked on a skifield, took up snowboarding, and decided I didn't want to come back," she said.

She cancelled her return air ticket and stayed in Whistler for the rest of the ski season. Then she travelled through the United States with friends and finally arrived in Britain, where she was based for the next few years.

In London she contracted to Credit Suisse First Boston and Bankers Trust, working in finance as an inter-company accountant and involved with process improvement in the bond operations area.

Away from the office she played netball for a while there, for a London New Zealand team, but the emphasis was definitely more social than serious.

Back in New Zealand in 1995, after four years of OE, Wong focused firmly on her career as a Chartered Accountant, in the National Bank's finance department as a management accountant and then as a financial analyst. During her five years at the bank she was also involved in financial modelling, project evaluation, and a major activity-based costing project.

She went on to work at TelstraSaturn as an investment analyst, was responsible for the 10-year business plan, assisted in managing the \$900 million debt facility and associated treasury issues, and was involved with the merger to TelstraClear.

Her cycling career began when some friends encouraged her to go recreational mountain biking with them.

"On weekends we would go out and have a little potter around. At first I felt, 'No, I couldn't do this!'," she said.

But it grew from there. The group started entering races like the Karapoti Classic, north of Wellington, and Wong

found that she was quite good at her new hobby.

"Then Mud Cycles in Karori came to me and asked if I would like to be sponsored. I thought I had better do something to justify the sponsorship, so I entered the national series expert class, which is one level below pro class.

"I won the class and was selected to go to the Oceania championships in 1999 as a developing rider. That was on the Sydney Olympic course, as a trial run. "I just loved it."

The next year, at an age when many sportspeople are winding down their careers, Wong got serious and turned professional. "I was happy with what I was doing career-wise, and I just saw this as a new challenge. It was something new I could have a go at," she said.

Five years later, she was competing at the Olympics.

Her first overseas stint, in 2001, was six weeks in Canada and the United States, where she did as much road racing as mountain biking.

Since then she has gone every year to Europe, where the mountain bike racing

is more frequent, more prestigious, and with better fields.

She still competes on the road in Europe, as part of the New Zealand endurance team, which is a group of elite and development track, mountain bike and road riders. The team rides in tours lasting from three to 10 days, which for Wong generally means some form of competition every week while she is there.

"One week I came off a 10-day road tour in France on a Sunday and the following Sunday I was competing in a World Cup mountain bike race in Belgium. Then the following weekend there was a World Cup race in Germany. It can be pretty demanding ... there is a lot of travelling."

Wong says she is fortunate that working as a contract consultant provides her with the flexibility and income needed to devote six months of the year to overseas competition.

Between 2003 and 2004 she contracted to Fonterra and the Ministry of Social Development in management accountant/financial analyst roles but since the Olympics has changed directions somewhat and gone down the consultancy path with

AMR Consulting and Stimpson and Co, completing assignments for the National Screening Unit and Hutt City Council. She is currently at Vehicle Testing NZ.

Wong received a Sport and Recreation New Zealand (Sparc) grant after her fine effort at the Olympics, and Bike NZ paid for the endurance team's accommodation in France and travel to races last year.

That is a far cry from four years before, when she had to fund herself, and she and her partner at the time, Christian, travelled Europe in a campervan.

"That was tough, because we were on a budget and were always thinking of what it cost to travel and eat," she said. "But it was also a great way of doing it. We made the best of it and I loved it. Being able to have Christian there was important, but it did cost a lot of money."

There is also the matter of the cost of the eight bikes that take up a large portion of her garage. The two prize exhibits, a feather-light carbon fibre Scott mountain bike and an even lighter Scott road bike, have a combined value of \$17,000. She estimates the other six to be worth about \$10,000 in all. ▶

Robyn Wong the Chartered Accountant ... consulting gives her the income to compete overseas half the year:



Wong has been described as an enigma in the sport, one who performs extremely well on the big occasions overseas, but not so well at home.

She laughed at the description, and had a simple explanation – she peaks for the big events, which carry world ranking points and prizemoney, and generally uses the lesser-ranked New Zealand series as build-up for those events.

As an example, though she is the top New Zealander on world ranking points, she finished only third in the recent national championships in Nelson, but felt happy with her form leading up to the Games.

“We have to make sure we peak at the right time. Hopefully there is still more to come from me,” she said. “It is hard, because since I have been racing internationally you do season on season on season. Last year I came back from the northern hemisphere and had just one week off, then began building up for the Commonwealth Games. Then straight after the games we go back overseas again and do the northern hemisphere.

“So it is just a matter of establishing your priorities and what you want to peak for.”

When asked to nominate her career highlight so far, Wong had no hesitation in naming the Olympics.

“Just hearing that I had been chosen was amazing,” she said. “I was overseas when the team was named and I only found out when my brother rang me from Auckland.

“Going into the race I had pretty high expectations of myself – as I usually tend to do. I was hoping for a top 10 finish, but given the heat, and the course, which I didn’t think suited me, I was pretty happy with 16th.”

She was also overwhelmed by the incredibly strong spirit that developed among the New Zealand team at the games.

“Being such a small country, and with everyone so proud to be a New Zealander and to represent the country, was just amazing.

“It was just so special to feel that we were all part of the one team and were in it together.”

Wong took particular pride in representing the New Zealand Chinese community at such an elite event as the Olympics.

“Not a lot of people think of Chinese excelling in sport in this country, particularly in a minor sport such as cross-country mountain biking, so I was very proud to be there,” she said.

The Wellington Chinese community was equally proud of its favourite daughter’s achievements, and held two successful fundraising events – one in 2003 to help Wong qualify for the Games, and one in 2004 to help her get there.

While Wong admits that the Olympics may never be bettered as an experience, there is a feeling that a Commonwealth Games medal might at least challenge it, and when interviewed just over a month before going to Melbourne she was pleased with her build-up.

She had just completed a three-day training camp in Auckland with the New Zealand women’s endurance squad, and had put in some solid training rides around Wellington. “I think we are on the right track,” she said.

Her current world ranking of 28 would make her third-favourite going into the event, behind two Canadians.

The top Canadian rider, Olympic silver medallist Marie-Helene Premont, was the only woman to beat the legendary Gunn-Rita Dahle last year, twice, so will start as the hot favourite in Melbourne, but Wong rates her chances against the other, 10th-ranked Kiara Bisaro.

“I have beaten her before, so I think a silver is possible. A medal is the aim, anyway,” she said.

The course in Melbourne will be very flat and fast, placing an emphasis on speed rather than technical expertise, which Wong feels will not suit her entirely. “I really prefer steeper hills, whereas the hills in Melbourne are really going to be power climbs,” she said.

“I think it is likely to be a close race, with not much separating the leading riders. I will just have to hope to be there at the end.”

The black uniform which Wong is so proud to wear won’t do her any favours if Melbourne turns on a scorcher for the two-hour event. The skinsuits that the riders wear on fast courses provide aerodynamic advantage but are warmer than the conventional zip-down jerseys, which allow more air circulation, and of course black holds the heat.

Wong is aware that at 35 age is not on her side, but she has no intention of making Melbourne her swansong from top competition.

Her late start to the sport is certainly in her favour, in that she feels she still has a lot of kilometres left in those legs, and her enthusiasm for the training grind needed to succeed is still strong. She is also heartened by studies showing that women get stronger in endurance events as they get older.

“There are quite a few older riders,” she said. “One of the top Canadian riders, Alison Sydor, who finished fourth at the Olympics, is 40, Gunn-Rita is in her early 30s, and a number of other top riders are in their 30s, so I don’t feel too bad.”

Indeed, rather than feeling past it, she feels there is still room for improvement, and is hoping to produce the ride of her life at the Commonwealth Games.

While the Melbourne Games have been her primary goal since Athens, she will refocus quickly afterwards, for the world championships in Rotorua in August.

There is also the matter of the next Olympics, at Beijing in 2008.

“That is a little way off yet,” she said, though her smile indicated it was something that has already been given plenty of thought.

This late bloomer does not appear ready to pass the baton just yet.

- Robyn Wong’s Games ride is at 10.30am (Melbourne time) on 23 March.