

ELYSA WALK, GIANT USA GENERAL MANAGER

BY AVERY STONICH



When you meet Elysa Walk, you'd never guess that she's the head of a giant company in a male-dominated industry. Pretty and approachable, she comes across as your new best friend or your daughter's soccer coach. But dig deeper and you'll learn that Walk has climbed to the top of the bicycle industry, maintaining a hectic travel schedule while raising two teenagers, serving on multiple boards, and finding time to stay fit.

We sat down with Walk to learn how she handles the demands of a high-powered job, lessons she has for ambitious women, and what she learned about herself during a 560-mile bike ride in Taiwan.

“MY LIFE IS MUCH RICHER BECAUSE OF CYCLING.”

WHAT KIND OF BICYCLING IS YOUR FAVORITE AND WHY?

Mountain biking is my favorite. I love bicycling because it provides freedom and peace of mind. I also like being outside, connected to the world around me.

WHAT IS THE HARDEST THING YOU'VE EVER DONE?

A few years ago, I did the Tour of Taiwan with the heads of the Giant subsidiaries worldwide. We rode 560 miles over eight days. I was the only American and one of only a few females.

This ride pushed me to the limit. It was the convergence of extreme physical output in a foreign place, unfortunate weather, an unsettled stomach from weird food, and being jetlagged. I was exhausted from fighting the cold, rain and wind. My confidence was shattered. I had a nagging voice in my head questioning if I could go the distance.

But I did it, and I learned that facing something that seems impossible and overcoming it can be deeply invigorating. You can do it if you take one step at a time. Overcoming challenges makes us stronger. When I came home, I felt like my capabilities had increased tenfold. I saw that the bicycle had changed me.

TELL US ABOUT THE BOARDS ON WHICH YOU SERVE.

The Outdoor Industry Women's Coalition (OIWC) board is really rewarding because of my unique position being a female in a leadership role. I broke through a lot of challenges in my younger years. OIWC gives me an opportunity to help other women increase their skills.

I'm Treasurer of People for Bikes, which is the bike industry's preeminent advocacy organization and works to unite bicyclists, create more safe places to ride, and get more people on bikes. I'm so impressed at what they've done to get more bike lanes and infrastructure built.

I've also served on the board of Bicycle Product Suppliers Association and on the advisory board for Women Bike.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST ISSUE FACING BICYCLING?

Not having safe places to ride. The more cities and towns add infrastructure, the more people will get on bikes. It will also improve safety.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO GET MORE WOMEN INTO CYCLING?

Giant is launching the first women's-only brand—Liv, so we can speak to women in ways that they enjoy and will respond to, instead of “bike guy speak.” It's about inviting women into the sport, nurturing them, and providing an inclusive experience.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED IN A MALE-DOMINATED INDUSTRY?

There was this assumption that I couldn't run a successful, profitable company since I wasn't a bike guy and I didn't race at an elite level. But I was hired to run an organization, and to maximize revenue and profit dollars. That's more in the line with a skill set than a specific industry.

My biggest challenge was gaining confidence in what I believed was right. It took me a couple of years, but I got it. And we've seen growth ever since.

WHAT'S YOUR ADVICE FOR WOMEN TRYING TO BREAK THROUGH THE GLASS CEILING?

Tell people that you want more responsibility. In male-dominated fields, women are often not considered for bigger roles. Take risks and don't be afraid. Read a lot and grow your skills and industry knowledge so you can add value to your company.

HOW DO YOU BALANCE THE DEMANDS OF YOUR JOB AND FAMILY?

I integrate my family into my work life wherever I can. I've taken my son on work trips where there's good mountain biking. Those are some of our best memories. I'll ask my daughter her opinion on kids' bike colors and get her the cruiser that she weighed in on.

HOW DO YOU STAY FIT?

I'm on the road eight to 10 days a month. I have a morning run routine when I travel. It's this oasis that sets me up for the day. 