

BY STEPHANIE PEARSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLINE YANG

ALEXANDERA HOUCHIN IS ULTRA CYCLING'S UNDERDOG

AND SHE
**HAS NO
PATIENCE
FOR
HATERS**



THE SUN IS BEATING DOWN FROM A RELENTLESSLY BLUE SKY ON A LATE-MAY AFTERNOON IN EMPORIA, KANSAS.

Alexandera Houchin is joking with her friends and supporters at the starting line of the 2019 Dirty Kanza XL, despite the fact that she's just ridden her bike a few hundred miles through rain and mud from Iowa, napping under a highway overpass to get here on time. The laughter masks her misgivings about this race. It's not because the DKXL is a notoriously difficult 337-mile ride through the steep and sharp Flint Hills of Kansas. It's the race's name, "Dirty Kanza," that gets her. Kanza is a nickname for the Kaw Nation, the "People of the South Wind," who lived in this region long before white settlers arrived. To preface that with "Dirty" shows a disrespect of the history of place that is ironic to Houchin, whose mother is Ojibwe.

The next 36 hours are brutal: 260 miles into the race, one of Houchin's flat pedals snaps, and she has to walk her bike for 10 miles before she finds a rider who lends her a clipless model. She spends the last 80 miles with one clipless and one flat pedal under her steel-toed leather work boots. A week later she'll blog about her guilt for participating in a race whose name she believes dishonors the Kaw Nation buffalo hunters who lived along the Kansas River and were ultimately wiped out by flood, smallpox, conscription into the U.S. Army, and white settlers.

"It's fucked up," she says a few weeks later at her home in Minnesota. She's referring to Americans' general ignorance of Native history and the irony that she's ridden her bike thousands of miles through U.S. public lands, almost all of which were taken from their original indigenous inhabitants.

"A lot of people don't understand the indigenous connection to place is fundamental to our spirituality," she says. "When you take that away, you take away our ability to connect with our spiritual practices and our place in the world."

Houchin has spent the last decade trying to re-establish her own spiritual connection to her roots and the world, charting a very untraditional path for an Ojibwe woman. She may have struggled through the DKXL, but in July, on a rigid titanium singlespeed 29er, she rode 2,700 miles from Banff, Alberta, to Antelope Wells, New Mexico, in 18 days, 20 hours, and 26 minutes, becoming the first woman to win back-to-back Tour Divide races. She also beat the women's singlespeed record, held since 2015 by Alice Drobna, by a full day. Then, in early August, Houchin was the first woman finisher of the 2019 Colorado Trail Race, riding the 525 miles and 70,000 feet of elevation gain from Durango to Denver on her singlespeed in six days, one hour, and 34 minutes.

The records are impressive, but Houchin will be the first to tell you that she's not the fastest cyclist out there. She does, however, possess superhuman grit and determination that has allowed her to persevere against odds that would force others to crumble—on or off the bike.

"So many cyclists are just going for results and take meaning from that," says fellow ultra competitor Lael Wilcox. "But Alexandera pursues her dreams. It's not just about her race schedule. It's about her experience along the way."

And Houchin's nonconformist approach, which has broken rules and shattered stereotypes, is changing the face of ultra-cycling.

LAST WINTER ON a subzero evening in Duluth, Minnesota, about 30 miles from the 154-square-mile Fond du Lac Reservation where she lives with her mother, Christine, Houchin stood in

front of a packed house at a local distillery. She was presenting a slideshow about her first women's Tour Divide win in 2018. It may have partially been the effect of gin-infused artisan cocktails on the crowd, but Houchin was so disarmingly honest and warm that she earned a standing ovation.

"I grew up in a trailer park; never, ever dreamed of going to college; was really overweight; and never dreamed about being an athlete," the 30-year-old told the gathering of roughly 60 supporters. "I never got a hand-up. It was all about deciding to chase these dreams and goals. If I can do it, anybody can."

Chasing the dream was a crawl at first. Houchin grew up in Janesville and Evansville, Wisconsin, southeast of Madison, the daughter of a half-Anglo, half-Mexican father and an Ojibwe mother who had been adopted to an Anglo family at a young age and was not told the details of her indigenous identity. She divorced Houchin's father when Houchin was 4, and mostly fell out of touch with her daughter.

"We weren't wealthy, but I never had to go hungry and my dad was a super good dad," Houchin says. According to her mother's sister, Denise Rae Ruefer, Houchin was an unlikely athlete. As a kid, she would play hide-and-seek outside with her older brother and cousins until long after dark. But the older she became, the more she focused on artwork, school, and studying and less on playing outside.

Gym class was not her thing. "Alex came home from the very last day of gym class in high school and was thrilled she would never have to take it again," says Ruefer.

Houchin always knew that she was big. "Everybody in my family was big," she says. "My [paternal] grandmother weighed 400 pounds. We shared food and loved each



▲ HOUCHIN RIDES OUT HER FRONT DOOR ON THE FOND DU LAC RESERVATION IN MINNESOTA.

other. It was such an integral part of my life."

But it wasn't until watching her performance on videotape of a synchronized swimming competition in seventh grade that Houchin began to realize that other people saw her as fat. "That was the first time I heard people in the crowd say things like 'moooooo' and 'Free Willy!' I realized they were talking about me, and it was definitely traumatizing. And pretty much from that point on, I told myself that I was fat."

Overwhelmed by the struggle with her weight and the feelings of abandonment by her mother, she started dieting, riding a seesaw of calorie restriction followed by bingeing. Houchin vividly remembers the first day, when she was about 16, that she stuck a finger down her throat to vomit. As she sat in her basement watching the sitcom "Arrested Development," Houchin ate an

entire tray of taco dip and the accompanying bag of tortilla chips. "About one-third of the way in I knew I was eating too much, but I knew I couldn't stop," she tells me. "I started hating food, but it felt so good to eat that I couldn't stop, and it just got out of control."

Houchin hated what the food was doing to her body but, she adds, "no one can abstain from eating. Society tells women so much about how we are supposed to look and that's how these eating disorders develop, because you can't just stop eating."

Around the same time, Houchin had also started hanging out with a rough crowd. A friend's older boyfriend introduced the girls to hydrocodone, which led to more prescription drug abuse. Houchin used fentanyl patches, Vicodin, and Oxycontin—anything to stop her addiction to food. When it became difficult to find prescription drugs, Houchin and her friends started snorting heroin. She nearly failed out of high school.

"I really hated myself back then," says Houchin. "And drugs made me hate myself less. I was really overweight and unhappy with my life."

Her turnaround came from an unlikely place: a night job in the basement at the UW Health University Hospital in Madison, where she distributed IV solutions to patients. To get to her job, Houchin had to ride her bike, a heavy old Schwinn Collegiate that she bought from her grandparents. The 10-mile commute each way took her two hours.

"I was working all the time and when I got home all my friends would be passed out," she says. "I was like, 'Huh. This is it?'"

After a few weeks of coming home after an exhausting day of work to find her friends

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wasted, Houchin knew that she wanted more out of life. Luckily, opioids never had the same hold over her as food. It took her several months, but she was able to get clean without counseling or detox, largely by getting away from her user friends. Houchin moved from Janesville to an apartment in Madison, paying double rent for months because her roommates wouldn't allow her to break her former lease. During this extremely stressful and financially precarious time, Houchin curtailed her food intake as a way to save money and regain control of at least one thing in her life—eating.

“I had my journal where I would write down everything I ate and I started memorizing calories in things,” she says. She ate one can of 300-calorie Progresso soup per day, losing 80 pounds in three months.

Houchin's Schwinn gave her a measure of freedom, but it was stolen from a bike rack on the UW campus. To replace it, she searched Craigslist for a new bike and found a fixed-gear. She didn't realize that it didn't have brakes, so the first time she rode it, she got a pant leg stuck in the chain, crashed, and ripped her pants off. She eventually learned how to ride the bike and drew attention from a fixie-riding Jimmy John's sandwich delivery guy who had never seen a girl ride a brakeless bike. He got her a job at Jimmy John's, which led her to the Madison cycling scene, and catapulted her into a life on bikes.

SHORTLY AFTER HER Tour Divide win, Houchin is at home on the Fond du Lac Reservation, which she calls “the Rez” and where she's lived for the past two years. She became an enrolled member of the tribe at the age of 18. (To become an enrolled member, Houchin had to provide proof that she has at least one-fourth Minnesota Chippewa Tribe blood by producing a state-certified copy of her birth certificate with both parents' names on it. It was a complicated process—her mother didn't even know her true identity when Houchin was born.) Still recovering from the race, Houchin suggests a leisurely 10-mile fat-bike spin so that we can catch up while pedaling.

Wearing Birkenstocks, cut-off jeans, and a striped cotton T-shirt, her usual riding kit save for her signature steel-toed boots,



▲ HOUCHIN (LEFT), JENNY ACKER (CENTER), AND JILL MARTINDALE AT THE START OF THE 200-MILE MARJI GESICK RACE IN 2019.

Houchin is waiting for me at the Pine Valley trailhead, a public, wooded park adjacent to the Reservation. Her long brown hair is pulled into a high ponytail, unrestricted by a helmet. Her arms and shoulders are a canvas of tattoos, from a bike hub and crank arm to the symbol for the neurotransmitter serotonin because “I'm a chemistry major, and one can never have too much serotonin,” she laughs.

“I love it out here,” Houchin says. She pilots her bike through waist-high cattails under the shadow of towering pines. “It's like adventure city.” But more than the tough training ground the dirt roads and forest provide, Houchin says it's finally a place where she feels at home.

“I belong here more than anywhere else,” she says. “There's significant power in that. The women look like me. I can go to events where they still have pipe ceremonies, traditional food, and language. There's nowhere else in the world where my tribal language still exists.”

It wasn't until recently that Houchin had access to her ancestry. “Everything before I arrived here had tried to keep me from being an Ojibwe woman,” she says. Her mother, Christine, was removed from her home and adopted as a child, her Ojibwe identity kept from her by her adoptive parents. It was only 12 years ago, after decades of trying, that Houchin's mother finally tracked down her birth mother. She lived on the Reservation, but six months after they met, Christine's birth mother died. Though Houchin never met her maternal grandmother, she still feels very connected to the Reservation.

“This is where generations and generations of people related to me live. It's ‘Nagchiwanan,’ ‘the place where waters end.’ That's why my ancestors stopped here.”

AFTER THE RIDE, Houchin pilots her Honda Element around the Reservation. It's densely forested and beautiful, with several massive lakes; on the shore of one sits the groomed powwow grounds. There are miles and miles of dirt roads through the woods and, in the town-like center, a school, health clinic, admin buildings, a gym, and a police station, which is next to the subsidized housing complex Houchin calls “The Compound,” where she lives with her mom. A canoe sits out front, which her mother uses for gathering wild rice from nearby lakes and rivers.

Houchin explains that the Reservation is where she hopes to settle for good and make her impact. Most of Houchin's life for the next few months will be devoted to finishing her double major in American Indian Studies and chemistry at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. She'll finish her undergraduate degrees in spring 2020. Then she'll apply to the University of Minnesota dental school in Minneapolis. Dentistry has held a particular fascination for Houchin for years because her dentist was the first person to realize that Houchin had a

serious eating disorder. (Bulimia often results in tooth erosion from regurgitated stomach acid.) She wants to pay it forward by becoming the first tribal-member dentist on the Fond du Lac Reservation so that she can serve as a similar kind of safety net for kids.

HOUCHIN'S EVOLUTION FROM overweight, near-high-school dropout to record-setting ultra-endurance cyclist took more than a decade. "One thing led to another," she says. "I thought 'Oh, I can ride my bike to work.' Then I realized 'Oh, I can ride my bike to a town far away.' Then I thought 'I can ride my bike to a different country.'" Her first experience with long-distance touring came in 2017. Her job at Jimmy John's had led to a bike mechanic position, which led to a job as a messenger. That's where she met another courier named Andrew Umentum, her eventual partner on a 50-day tour from Tucson to Canada. Houchin's plan was to ride north, then race her first Tour Divide back to Arizona.

"We definitely put ourselves in some crazy situations," says Umentum, who now lives in Green Bay and manages the nonprofit Green Bay Bicycle Collective's community bike shop. "One of our mottos was no backtracking regardless of how crazy shitty it got. Overcome whatever is in front of you."

Houchin's goal was to traverse as much Native land as possible and Umentum, who worked a stint as a cartographer at National Geographic, wanted to follow watersheds. Those two objectives led to a half-baked plan to cross Wyoming's Hobbie Creek south of Jackson in May. To Umentum it looked like a "quaint little creek" on the map. In reality, it was a raging whitewater river fed by an unusually high snowpack that was quickly melting. The two tried to cross, but when they were halfway between the banks,

▼ **HOUCHIN STOPS BRIEFLY ATOP CARNERO PASS DURING THE 2019 TOUR DIVIDE. SHE WON THE RACE AND SET THE NEW WOMEN'S SINGLESPEED RECORD.**



the current pulled Houchin downstream.

"I was scared shitless," says Umentum. "And I'm pretty sure she was just laughing. She's always positive, which is contagious and a great thing to have on a bike trip. I don't know if I've ever seen her down."

Houchin's plan to race the Tour Divide derailed after she parted ways with Umentum in Whitefish, Montana. They had so much fun that, after he left, she was too lonely and broke—she had \$45 left—to be motivated for the ride back south.

"I told everyone back home I was going for the record and I totally believed it," she says. "It felt so bad to quit. In everything I try to live and breathe what I say, and I didn't. That's when I decided I needed to make a big comeback for myself."

The following year, 2018, when Houchin would turn 28, she decided to do eight races, one of which was the Tour Divide. She was the first female finisher that year. The win was redeeming, but to Houchin, it was more the transformation that took place during the race that made a lasting impact. "Doing these races, it's just you against the elements," she says, adding that you also have to be totally self-sufficient. "There are serious consequences if you mess up," says Houchin. "And that's why I love it: the water, the dirt, being outside, being a grubby, smelly human."

The 2018 win also presented opportunities, including a sponsorship from Chumba, a handcrafted bike company in Austin, Texas, that had given Houchin a deal on its Rastra, an aggressive trail bike that she used for the Tour Divide. After she won, Chumba became Houchin's official bike sponsor, providing her custom bikes for every race she entered, including the 2019 Tour Divide, when she broke the women's singlespeed record. But the opportunities from those wins have also caused conflicting emotions.

"I'm torn," Houchin says, about the dichotomy between her love for racing and the time and effort she needs to put into training, versus her bigger-picture goal of finishing college and earning her dentistry degree.

"I could be a lot better bike racer," she says. "But it's pretty important to me that I make an impact in Indian country by giving back to my community."

Eddie Clark

"I COULD BE A LOT BETTER BIKE RACER. BUT IT'S PRETTY IMPORTANT TO ME THAT I MAKE AN IMPACT IN INDIAN COUNTRY BY GIVING BACK TO MY COMMUNITY."

HOUCHIN WEARS A figure-hugging emerald green mini-dress and steel-toed boots and recites a welcome in Ojibwe at Zeitgeist, a theater in downtown Duluth four months after her second Tour Divide win in 2019, then launches into a poetic story she wrote in the third person that speaks to her rebirth as an Ojibwe woman. Her mixture of brainy intellect, goofy camaraderie, and brawny survival-of-the-fittest mentality is at its finest in front of a crowd, and she gamely fields questions about her eating habits on trail (Snickers, beef jerky, Power-Ade mixed with Mountain Dew, and more gas station fare); what she packs (almost nothing); and how she paces herself over ultra distances (slow and steady is her mantra).

"I'm competitive, but I also like to open and smell the roses," she tells the audience. "I get to the top of a mountain pass and I'm like, 'Oh my god, guys! Let's just hang out and eat beef jerky and some chips.' Really, in a 3,000-mile race you don't have to be rushing, rushing. If you climb 5,000 feet to get to this mountain pass, why wouldn't you want to bask in how amazing it is?"

And those feelings of awe and camaraderie lead her to view her competitors for what they are: fellow humans sharing the journey.

"I just met Alexandra at the start of the DKXL," Lael Wilcox says. "I'd heard about her for the past year, so I went over to say hi. She immediately gave me a huge hug."

"It's awesome she's riding her bike, pursuing long distances, and is one of the 5 to 10 percent of women who show up," says Wilcox. "Alexandra's results aren't that awesome. But she's out there riding, sharing her story, and that makes her a different kind of role model."

Houchin says she feels the compulsion to race because she needs the external pressure. "I don't do anything unless I have to. If I was just touring, I wouldn't ride into the night, sleep-deprive myself, and climb as fast as I could," she says. "That is what has allowed me to tap into my deeper self to see what I'm actually capable of."

During last year's Tour Divide, Houchin rode through a fierce thunder and lightning storm as other competitors hunkered down, because the Ojibwe believe that "thunderbirds" are important messengers from the spiritual world. Houchin has only recently learned these stories, but her ability to tap into them has not only given her strength overcoming challenges in the wilderness, they've also given her confidence in her identity.

"A lot came from learning my Ojibwe spirituality," she tells me. "It's helped me find confidence in my identity. I've stopped feeling like a victim of my circumstance and have connected to something deeper."

Houchin's openness about her past—on her blog, in interviews, and while giving speeches—has also made her more vulnerable to criticism. She is vehemently opposed to social media, but people still find her. She recently received an email from a man who had read about her in the local paper and wrote that he was "tired of you Indians who have everything and take government welfare."

Houchin has no patience for the haters.

"I definitely have earned my respect in a lot of places," she says. "I already know who I am, so if you don't think that I can or whatever, that's fine," she says. "It's your business, but I don't give a fuck."

OVER SOUP AND sandwiches after the ride, the conversation turns to obsessions. Has she exchanged one obsession—food—for another? "Biking isn't as much of an addiction as it was when I was doing my bike-messenger job and worked as a bike mechanic," she says. "Bikes and biking were all I did." In fact, when she's not participating in an ultra-endurance event, Houchin doesn't ride all that much, preferring to train by lifting weights, running the empty, pine-lined roads, and, in the winter, doing Nordic skiing. She still loves to ride her bike. She just doesn't want it to become a burden.

"If I want to ride my bike, I ride it. If I don't want to, I don't," she says. "Biking is awesome, but I also like doing a million other things."

As for healthy eating, Houchin still struggles. Last winter, after Houchin reached out for help with her bingeing and purging cycles, her doctor told her that her only chance for recovery was to check into 24/7 inpatient therapy for a month. Although Houchin says she recognizes the severity of her disorder as well as the potentially fatal consequences if it were left unchecked, she chose not to enroll in treatment, citing lack of time and money. But the doctor's words lit a fire, and she's been dealing with recovery on her own time and in her own way. For starters, opening up publicly about her struggles has given her a measure of support. Houchin isn't against intensive therapy, but at this point in her life she's chosen a path that allows her to keep up with her rigorous schedule of school, training, and, recently, full-time work in the kitchen at a nearby retreat center.

Houchin realizes that her place in the world of ultra cycling is unique.

"It's really interesting to be in the top 10 or 20 ultra-endurance cyclists as a woman. But I'm also a chubby woman, a woman wearing steel-toed boots, and a woman on a single-speed bike," she says, grinning. She remembers what one fellow competitor told her at the end of the 2018 Marji Gesick 100, a tough race in Michigan's upper peninsula that Houchin finished in 17 hours and 14 minutes.

"He said, 'You need to get the award for looking like you were going out for coffee and instead got sucked into a bike race.' We had a good laugh at that," she says. "When I cross the finish line, people seem almost stunned. Maybe it gives them hope that they can do it. I don't know. I'm just doing me the best way I know how." **B**