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PHOTO : DEBBIE MCKENZIE

AGAINST THE ODDS: Cyclist Stephanie McKenzie, one of the winners of a 2007 Variety Gold Heart Scholarship.

Diabetes no hurdle for young cyclist

By Aroha Treacher

Remaining focused and determined has paid off for one Auckland youngster, who has not let diabetes get in her way.

Sprint cyclist Stephanie McKenzie, 14, was one of 11 recipients of the 2007 Variety Gold Heart Scholarship.

The scholarship is a first for New Zealand because it covers music, arts and sport for sick, disabled or disadvantaged children.

"It didn't really register," says Stephanie. "But it's going to help me out a lot."

Each scholarship is worth up to a maximum of $5000 per year for three years.

Stephanie is currently recording times faster than her Australian counterparts and her next goal is to compete in the Junior Youth Olympics.

"I'm also wanting to go to the World Juniors. The Olympics is the ultimate goal," she says.

Stephanie spends around 20 hours per week training but manages to keep up with her studies.

Claire Nelson, Stephanie's year-10 dean at Lynfield College, gave her the scholarship application form and is pleased she won it.

"She's a very balanced girl and is getting good grades. She's working really hard and not using cycling as an excuse," says Nelson.

The highlight for Stephanie is having cycling gold medallist Sarah Ulmer as her mentor for one year.

They have yet to meet face to face, but are keeping in touch through emails.

"We're just getting to know each other and finding out how she can help me," says Stephanie.

"I'm hoping to meet her in the future and go on a ride together."

Receiving the award will help Stephanie cover the costs of managing her diabetes.

It will also help with competition travelling expenses within New Zealand and with bike costs.

Mum Debbie McKenzie is "stoked" at what her daughter has achieved.

"We're all really proud and amazed that she won."

Innings all over for straight bats

CURVED: The new standard.

The old adage of playing with a straight bat is being consigned to the annals of cricketing history.

Modern cricket bats have departed from the straight and narrow and are taking on the curved shape traditionally associated with bats from the subcontinent.

The bowed style of bat, long favoured by Indian and Pakistani bat makers, has become so popular that the major English and Australian manufacturers have jumped on the band wagon.

Virtually all of their bats now feature a bowed blade.

What sets this style of bat apart is the pronounced curve to the blade, and the thick edges.

In comparison, the traditional "English" style bat has a straight face and relatively thin edges.

New Zealand bat maker Marty Graham, who runs MG2 Cricket, puts the appeal of the bowed blade down to the success of Indian players such as Sachin Tendulkar.

He says a bowed blade gives a bat a better "pick up", making it feel lighter.

The scooped blade also makes it easier to hit over the top.

Mike Mead, of retail store Cricket Express, has also noticed the prevalence of the bowed blade.

"You struggle to sell a straight bat these days," he says.

According to Mead, Kookaburra's Genesis bat – its only straight blade offering – did not sell well last season.

He says buyers are attracted to the bowed design as it is the shape most professional players are using.

Another factor may be the outsourcing which is prevalent in cricket bat manufacture.

Many of the big English and Australian brands, such as Kookaburra and Slazenger, have their bats made under licence in India.

Graham sees the adoption of bowed blades as part of the evolution of the cricket bat.

Meads is not so sure and, citing the unpredictability of customers, says it is impossible to predict whether straight blades will return to fashion.

– Ross McNaughton

STRAIGHT: Old faithful.

Kiwi talent to help breakers stand tall in black

By Niko Kloeten

The New Zealand Breakers are hoping the addition of homegrown talent will help change the fortunes of the Australian National Basketball League (NBL) side.

Tall Blacks Kirk Penney, Paora Winitana and Phill Jones have been signed alongside Australian veteran Tony Ronaldson and Americans Wayne Turner and Rick Rickert, completing a new-look Breakers roster.

Breakers general manager Richard Clarke hopes recruiting New Zealand players will translate into increased attendances this season, as well as improved results.

"We've always wanted to sign top New Zealand players, but it's been a matter of who's been available. We've signed [Penney, Jones, Winitana] because they are good players as well as Kiwis," he says.

The off-season moves by the Breakers have received strong praise from Matt McQuade, an analyst for the Australian NBL website.

> "This should be a heck of a season to be a Breakers fan."

McQuade says Ronaldson's upside off the court as a leader is just as valuable to the Breakers as his production on it.

He describes Penney as "New Zealand's closest thing to Andrew Gaze from a pure talent perspective".

In his off-season report card, he gave the Breakers an A- for recruiting – and this was before the American signings.

After Turner and Rickert were announced, McQuade was even more effusive.

"You simply have to love what Andrej Lemanis is doing with his team. Last season, he signed the premier import in the league in Carlos Powell," he says.

"This year, not only does he nab Wayne Turner, a superior point guard with NBL bona fides, he also picks up a quality big man in Rickert to fill the Breakers' hole in the paint.

"This should be a heck of a season to be a Breakers fan."

The Breakers tip off their season against the Cairns Taipans at the North Shore Events Centre on September 20.