

Santa Ynez Valley News

Mountain bikers form youth team, want big race in Buellton

'Dirt Club' aiming higher

By Julian J. Ramos / Staff Writer / jramos@syvnews.com | Posted: Tuesday, December 20, 2011 12:00 am

Kicking up dust is a must for members of the Santa Ynez Valley Dirt Club.

For more than a decade, the group has hosted the Santa Ynez Valley Classic mountain bike race, formerly known as the Firestone Walker Classic, and the founder and organizer of the competition hopes to make the Valley a destination for recreational and competitive mountain biking.

Mike Hecker, who grew up in Buellton, has organized the springtime mountain bike race event for the past 13 years. His company, SG Productions, has promoted almost 100 road and mountain bike races in Santa Barbara County.

At the moment, he is talking with Buellton city officials about a possible cycling race on Avenue of Flags next year. The inaugural "Avenue of Flags Criterium" is tentatively scheduled for Saturday, March 31.

A criterium is a cycling race typically held on a small road course in a downtown area.

Hecker is also serving as a coach and mentor for a recently formed high school mountain-biking club in the Valley. When the team begins practicing, it will be on the Dirt Club's courses and trails on a private ranch off Zaca Station Road, he said.

The team for boys and girls is not affiliated with any particular school, and high school-age students from any public, private, or home school can join, said David Tonello of the nonprofit Santa Ynez Valley Cycling Club (SYVCC), who is the head of the new high school team.

Interested high school students can contact Tonello at 406-2973 or abcycling@aol.com.

The team has six riders on the roster with hopes to recruit more.

"I'll do whatever I can to help make it happen," said Hecker, who is also a SYVCC board member, of helping the team grow.

In recent years, the SYVCC has hosted regional finals for Southern California high school mountain biking teams and combined Northern and Southern California high school mountain biking championship races.

On a part of the 1,200-acre local ranch, the club maintains 14 miles of trails, including a slalom course and two downhill trails. The trails are all hand-built by grooming existing cattle trails.

Beginning in January, weather permitting, Hecker intends to open the Dirt Club grounds every weekend. Cost will be \$15 at the gate for adults and \$10 for minors with an adult or guardian.

There are also annual memberships on sale for \$300 which include a club jersey, access to the club's courses and trails, discounts on club events, and discounts at Dr. J's Bicycle Shop in Solvang and Main Street Cycles in Santa Maria.



Hecker believes the private facility could become a recreational outlet for visitors who are interested in combining mountain bike riding and wine tasting in the Santa Ynez Valley in the same weekend.

He noted the Dirt Club is 10 minutes away from every hotel in the Santa Ynez Valley and easy to get to.

“There’s definitely a niche, a need in the Santa Ynez Valley,” Hecker said, for mountain-biking or cycling destinations.