

# The Golden State's Cycling Talent Hothouse By Mark Johnson



From left: Leila Carillo, Zachary Valdez and Amanda Duarte at the finals in Los Olivos this May. Photos by Michael McClure.

Thanks in large part to the influence of the Northern California High School Mountain Bike League, Lucas Euser is living the dream. After getting his start racing mountain bikes in high school in the Napa Valley, the 26-year-old cyclist now lives in Girona, Spain, and races all over Europe with the Garmin-Slipstream pro team.

"If I didn't have mountain biking I wouldn't be where I am today," Euser says. He was first introduced to bike racing in 2001, through the High School Mountain Bike League. "It involved the same passion, the same love for the sport that I have today," he recalls.

Founded in the Bay Area in 2001 by Director Matt Fritzing, a U.C. Berkeley engineering graduate then teaching at Berkeley High School, the high school mountain bike racing organization opened a Southern California chapter in 2008. Together, the two chapters have created a formal racing season accessible to high school riders across the state. In addition to four races each in southern and northern California, the two leagues come together for an annual championship event at the end of the season.

To help cyclists develop riding skills before the racing starts, the leagues also hold winter day camps around California. Coaches learn the ropes at league-sponsored clinics and an annual summit meeting. In June 2009, the Southern California league—which got off the ground with a grant from Easton Sports—is hosting a camp at Lake Tahoe, where riders will be invited based on their season-long rac-

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**—Matt Fritzing**

ing results. With the addition of 12 southern schools, the number of participating California high schools is now 47; and the total number of athletes is nearly 600.

Fritzing started the league because he saw a need for a more structured way to introduce high school students to bike racing. "The whole idea is that if you want kids to be good baseball players, you don't just throw them into a baseball game. There is progression. Mountain biking gives kids the safest opportunity to learn the sport away from automobiles. The speeds are lower, the surfaces aren't as abrasive. It makes for a more fun and affordable entry point for the sport."

At the conclusion of the final series race on May 6 in Los Olivos, Southern California League president Quinton Easton said

Fritzing's work up north had streamlined the creation of a Southern California counterpart. "His formula and experience created our success, it's that simple."

Amanda Duarte won every Southern California league race she entered this year, and the 17-year-old student at Granite Hills High in San Diego agrees that mountain biking offers a less harsh introduction to racing than road cycling. "Cross-country riding is a little bit safer than road riding. You've got a lot of dirt that can soften your fall. And I've found it's easier to clean trail dirt from your road rash than the grit you get on the pavement. Dirt is a lot more forgiving."

Besides offering a more fun entry to bike racing than kids might find on the road, the California Mountain Bike League gives riders a place to belong. Finding a sense of community is a source of high angst for teenage students—a drama shared by their parents, too. When speaking to the young racers, it's clear that the league is delivering them into a world where fitness, community, persistence and mutual respect are common values.

Even when speaking from his home (an ocean and a continent away from California), Garmin pro Euser says mountain biking grounded him in high school and taught him values that guide him today.

"Mountain biking helps you find that community of cyclists at an early age and in an easy way. It's a good place to learn, to find that sense of community." Euser adds that the ability to flog himself across Europe's old-world merciless lanes and mountain passes in the in-

terest of his team leaders started out on the mountain bike. "What I love about the sport is that I can sacrifice myself and somebody else on my team is going to do good. To fully visualize that and see that happen is pretty cool, and it proves that it's a team sport. That's all stuff I learned back in my high school mountain bike series."

Today's high school racers show a barely-contained enthusiasm for their dirt-racing peers. Fifteen-year-old Leila Carrillo is a San Juan Capistrano ninth grader whose dad introduced her to cycling. Of the new Southern California League, Carrillo effuses, "It is so awesome. I can finally get on my bike and meet a whole bunch of new people—especially people on my team and from other schools. Everyone just hangs out, especially at the races, just talking at the start line. It's all good."

As for advice for other 15-year-old girls who might be apprehensive about mountain bike racing, Carrillo says, "It's a whole bunch of fun. Maybe the first couple of rides you might start to hate it because it seems so hard and fast, but once you get the technique and skills, it gets so much more fun."

Participating in high school mountain bike racing also teaches kids lifelong time-management skills. Carrillo, who also participates in track and field, says she rides five to six hours a week, yet manages to keep both her fitness and her grades up.

Ricky Reidl is another Southern California mountain bike racer who balances running with mountain biking. The Palos Verdes 10th grader did his first mountain bike race a year ago. "I rode the whole summer and got hooked." When he learned about the league, he was excited, but didn't expect others to share his enthusiasm. His first race changed his expectations. "I was thinking, OK, there's going to be like 20 people there. I showed up and there were like 100 guys there. That was really cool. I really hope it just continues to grow."

In his first year racing, Reidl earned two first places, a second and a third. That consistency placed him at the top of the overall season standings in the Southern California Freshman/Sophomore division. The tenacious rider also did the Sea Otter mountain bike race this year, and says, "It was the toughest race I've ever done."

It's clear that Reidl's short cycling career has already infused the teenager with a lifetime passion for bike riding. While he isn't sure if he'd ever get into road racing or even pursue a career as a pro cyclist like Euser, he says that "as far as bike riding goes, I'll do it my whole life." Like the high school leagues he represents, his enthusiasm is spreading. Reidl mentions a friend who plays football, but after trying out mountain bike racing with the Southern California League, is considering putting the pigskin down and focusing on the bike. "We just love it so much." ■

To learn more about the leagues, visit [socialdirt.org](http://socialdirt.org) and [norcalmtb.org](http://norcalmtb.org).



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