

Pursuits

By Cynthia House Nooney



REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

High school mountain biking clubs offer fun and exercise.

RYAN MATTER DOESN'T RECALL exactly how he learned about a new cycling league last year. Most likely, he says, it was from an e-mail or through the grapevine. What he does remember is that his interest was immediately piqued. He'd been into mountain biking for a while and had a few friends who enjoyed it as well. Although he was only 15 at the time, he was excited about the prospect of assembling a team at his high school.

With the help of flyers he distributed to bike shops and announcements made at Royal High School in Simi Valley, where Ryan is now a junior, he succeeded in forming a club for the league's inaugural 2009 season. "When I told my AP history teacher [Brian Dennert] what I was doing, he mentioned that his father [Larry Dennert] might want to get involved, and that's how we got a coach," he says.

In order to solicit sponsors, Ryan created a marketing packet for local businesses. Then he simply "talked to them about the

program." He quickly obtained sponsors whose contributions help pay for team registration fees and coaching clinic costs. "We also use the money to make sure that every rider can participate no matter their financial situation," says Ryan. Plus, his boss at Simi Cycling Center (where he works weekends) designed the team's jerseys.

Now entering his second season, Ryan feels a huge sense of satisfaction from putting so much effort into building the team and seeing the hard work pay off. Membership has increased since last year, but new members are always welcome. "We'd especially like to have more girls come out," he says.

Teammates soon discover that mountain biking can boost endurance and confidence. Ryan says that at the first practice, people were walking their bikes up the hills. However, by the time race season rolled around, the whole team was regularly placing among the top-10 finishers.

To prepare for this year's races (see sidebar), members are currently practicing three times a week for two hours. "I plan our routes; we ride all over the hills and trailheads in Simi Valley," Ryan says.

Ryan's initiative illustrates what the league is all about, says Matt Gunnell, executive director of SoCal Interscholastic Cycling League. "Clubs are put together by students, parents, administrators, or interested community members who want to help grow the sport of mountain biking," he says. "We're implementing the model and culture of our sister league in Northern California, a group that's been successfully operating for 10 years."

The cross-country league, which is distinctly different from downhill or extreme mountain biking, is open to any high school club in Southern California. Students who live in areas where clubs haven't yet been formed can enter races unattached. Local clubs include Royal High School and Channel Islands High School, with new teams taking shape in Camarillo, Ojai, and Santa Barbara. (Gunnell predicts additional clubs will be formed in Thousand Oaks within the next couple years.)

Although there are many objectives to be met, according to Gunnell, safety is first and foremost to the program. He adds that cross-country mountain biking is the safest way for kids to enter cycling. "We want to make our sport as safe as possible. Kids are taught safe riding techniques and coaches are offered rigorous training, including risk management, first aid and CPR, and how to coach youth."

Riders are also taught self-sufficiency. "That's very particular to mountain biking," says Gunnell. "Tools and supplies have to be carried, so riders need to learn the basics of simple mechanical repairs. If they get a flat tire or their chain breaks, they need to fix it. Learning these skills is very empowering for kids."

Gunnell, a former police detective, enjoys watching teens quickly advance and learn a lifelong sport. "Cross-country mountain biking is the most accessible way to get kids on bikes and this program gives me a chance to pass on something I love. When selecting race venues we go to great pains to make sure there aren't a lot of extremely long uphill and downhill portions. We want kids to work hard and be challenged but we don't want to crush their spirits. We want them to be excited about the sport and come back."

Alfredo Salcido, head coach of the mountain biking club at Channel Islands High School, says involvement in the league has a positive effect on kids. "It gives them something to be motivated about, and unlike other sports, anyone can adapt to mountain biking and exceed. Size and height don't matter," says Salcido, who is also a respiratory therapist in Oxnard. "The league does an amazing job with the races. Kids have a blast and can't wait to go back. It's cool to see them pushing themselves."

None of last year's team members had ever ridden mountain bikes, and Salcido says that they went from barely knowing how to shift gears to climbing hills without help. "Now they can go anywhere in Sycamore Canyon. [Their home field.] They've been taught proper body positioning and how to use brakes and gears. As race season progresses, climbing gets tougher, but they embrace it."

Mountain biking is one of those things that adds perspective, says Gunnell: "After a big climb for the first time, kids think, 'Wow, I did that. I'm on top of the world.' A sense of accomplishment is palpable. They see the world at their feet. A lot of kids have never experienced anything like that."

As for Ryan, he equates the challenges of mountain biking to life in general: "You have good days and bad, and on the bad days, you just have to push through." ■

Getting Involved

SOCAL INTERSCHOLASTIC CYCLING LEAGUE is a club-based sport built by volunteers for high school boys and girls, grades 9 through 12. Each rider is required to have a serviceable and safe mountain bike, helmet, protective eyewear, and full-fingered gloves.

A RIDER DAY CAMP will be held January 24 at Bonelli Park, LA County

2010 TENTATIVE RACE SCHEDULE (check website for up-to-date information)

RACE 1
Warner Springs, March 14

RACE 2
Vail Lake, March 28

RACE 3
Lake Arrowhead, April 11

RACE 4
Los Olivos, May 2

RACE 5
State Championships,
Monterey, May 16

To find out more about volunteer positions, entering races, or starting a club, contact Matt Gunnell at matt@socaldirt.org or visit www.socaldirt.org.

The governing body for interscholastic mountain biking leagues across the country is National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA). For more information visit www.nationalmtb.org.