

2009 NorCal High School Mountain Bike Racing Series
ROUND THREE – NorCal – The Mountain Goat Challenge, Fort Ord, Monterey

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MONTEREY, Calif. – Celebrations, festivities, warm temperatures, and hard racing marked the third round of the five-race NorCal High School Mountain Bike Racing Series, at the new venue of Pilarcitos Canyon in Fort Ord.

365 high school mountain bikers from **33 schools** came from as far as Redding to compete in this race, a testament not only to the quality of the event, but to the commitment these riders and their families show to the sport.

“One thing that always gets me is these kids stop to check on each other when there’s a crash. The kids and their families and the coaches are the life of the series. We just help to bring it all together on a challenging and fun course, in an organized structure, while keeping it enjoyable and safe,” said Justin Morgan of the NorCal League.

Team Talk

In Division I, Drake Pirates increased their lead thanks to wins by Sofia Hamilton and Roman Brockley, and a fine third place by Leah Catlin. Drake now has 11619 points, to San Rafael Bulldogs on 11497, with Nevada Union Miners holding third on 11350.

In Division II, a close battle rages between Marin Catholic on 5887, and San Marin on 5885. Victoria Yoham and Ryan Erler led the charge for Marin Catholic, while Herculaas Botha and Justin Ayala kept their team right on the pace. The impressive Monterey Bay Kingfishers team, now on 5775, was kept in the hunt thanks to great rides by brother and sister Carter and Ashton Williams, as well as Chase Myers.

The Course

A new 8-mile loop that comprises a chunk of Sea Otter Classic trails provided a race course that riders variously described as fast, hilly, technical, not too technical, and almost everybody said it was fun. A climb of around two miles started the lap, and this helped break up the field, but some fast and technical descents gave the bike handlers something to work with, in addition to big smiles and white knuckles all round – in other words, it was classic mountain biking terrain.

Varsity Boys

Once again John Bennett (El Cerrito) proved unbeatable, finishing with a time of 1:41.12 for the three laps. Will Curtis (San Rafael) came in 2:59 back, ahead of Nate Byrom (Nevada Union) at 4:05. After that the riders were closely spaced, with Matt Dion taking tenth at 11:24. This was on a testing course that tended to pull groups apart. Bennett said it best in commenting on his ride: "There are a lot of fast riders here; I just had a good day." Which says it all – all it takes is a good day and those gaps close fast. Talking about his experience racing in the pro ranks of the national series, Bennett said "It's a big step up. We're by no means near the front yet. Hopefully in a few years..."

One rider absent for a second race in a row was Christian Fernandez (Los Gatos). He placed second in Round One. Bennett now has a commanding lead in the series with 1650 points. But Byrom, 1593, and Curtis, 1585, are in a fierce battle for second, and Niko Kaplanis (San Rafael), on 1567, is quite capable of getting back into the mix.

Varsity Girls

A spirited ride by 2008 champion Christine Weir (Nevada Union) kept the phenomenal Shayna Powless (Independent) to a 30 second lead in the two-lap race. Powless made her gap over Weir on the first climb on Lap One, but after that first climb Weir pulled Powless back on the climbs and kept the pressure up by matching her pace on Lap Two. "That was hard, I'm dead right now," said Powless at the end. Having raced mountain bikes since the age of six, Powless seems in her element here, and says her goal is to keep on winning. So far she is three for three in the series, on 1650 points, with Weir, on 1605, looking likely to take second with two races remaining. Lauren Catlin (Drake), who reportedly was riding with a gashed (and stitched up) knee, finished third, 3:43 back, and with 1563 points looks solid for third place in the series.

Junior Varsity Boys Division I

A field of 59 started this close-fought race, in which Freshman Bryan Duke (Salinas) dominated once more, winning the two-lap race with a time of 1:10:10. "It was pretty hot out there, and there was a lot of climbing," he said. It was a straightforward win for him. "About half way up the first climb I attacked, and looked back and saw a 10-second gap, so I kept attacking. After that I didn't see anybody." Jimmy Winne (Woodcreek) finished second, at 2:04, with Chris Bennett (El Cerrito) third at 2:36. This win gives Duke three for three in the series, and 1575 points. Winne lies second with 1536, while Bjorn Fox (Redwood High) and Jeff Shen (Salinas High) are tied in third on 1475.

Junior Varsity Boys Division II

With Round One winner Tony Smith (Marin Catholic) now riding in Varsity, Andrew Taylor (Contra Costa composite) recorded his second straight win, completing the two laps in 1:14:37, a mere 33 seconds ahead of Evan Shorter (Oakmont). Justin Ayala (San Marin) was third at 5:10. A Lap One attack took Smith clear of the field of 38. "I rode away on lap one, at the top of the first climb. Then I just rode my own race," he reported. Shorter pulled back almost 30 seconds on the second lap, but Smith's lead was too great.

Smith, a student at Pleasant Hill Adventist Academy, rates mountain biking as his favorite sport, but also enjoys snowboarding and road riding. He is emerging as a strong favorite for the series title.

Junior Varsity Girls

One of the closest finishes of the day was between Ruth Winder (Independent) and Victoria Yoham (Marin Catholic). Winder claimed her first victory of the series, just 13 seconds ahead of the fast-finishing Yoham who had bested Winder in the two previous races of the 2009 season. Courtney Crosta (Woodcreek) was third at 6:48. The two went clear of the 27-rider field on the first climb, and Winder opened a gap on the first singletrack section and was more than a minute clear going into the second lap. But Yoham came back on Lap Two. “She’s pretty strong on the climbs,” remarked Winder. The two remained together until the funnel into the final singletrack section where Yoham slid out on a hard right-hander. “We knew the first rider into that singletrack would probably win it so we were battling it out... I saw she was OK, which was good, and then just went as fast as I could,” said Winder. “My goal was to win one race,” said Winder, who now has retrained her sights on the leader’s jersey. Yoham holds a narrow lead in the series with 1565 to Winder’s 1555

Sophomore Boys Division I

With Round One winner, Max Houtzger (Redwood) now racing in JV, Roman Brockley (Drake) had it all to himself today, and stormed away to his first NorCal League win by 4:53 from Luke Watry (Berkeley) and Zander Slavitz (Redwood), at 5:38. “It was superfast out there, I loved it!” He said at the finish. After hitting the lead on the first climb Brockley “didn’t see anybody – except when I looked back,” he quipped. As for the series, Brockley said “I’m feeling good, I should do well.” He now has a solid 80 point lead over Justin Stefan (Folsom), who was fifth today. Watry moved up to third in the series.

Sophomore Boys Division II

A sprint finish was narrowly avoided when series leader Carter Williams (Monterey) threw his chain just minutes before the line. This opened the door for Noah Hanagan (Independent), of Shasta High in Redding, who didn’t need to be invited in. Early in this two-lap race Williams and Hanagan had pulled away from the 33-rider field. Williams opened a small lead half way around lap one, but Hanagan came back to him, and on the second lap poured on the pressure. Williams hung in, though, and it looked like a sprint finish was in the cards until the top of the final climb when Williams briefly lost his chain. Hanagan was delighted to claim his first NorCal League win. “It feels really good. Good mentally, but bad physically,” he joked at the line. “It would have been a real toss-up if not for that dropped chain,” said Williams, who paid tribute to Hanagan’s strength today saying “he had me hanging on by a thread.” Ryan Erler came in third, at 3:52. The win elevated Hanagan to second place in the series on 1453, theoretically still within reach of Williams on 1480.

Sophomore Girls

Sofia Hamilton (Drake) celebrated her first NorCal League win, finishing 45 seconds clear of series leader Morganne Endicott (San Ramon) in a field of 23. Lana Nilsen (Salinas) came in 3:05 after Hamilton. Hamilton and Endicott rode for much of the one-lap race together, before the Drake rider launched a serious attack on the final climb, only a few minutes out from the finish. "If there's lots of climbing I'm good... I'm more of a climber than a technical rider." Said Hamilton, who added she is hoping to win some more races in the series.

Freshman Boys Division I

Another of the most hotly contested classes of racing, 52 riders contested this two-lap race, which saw Isaiah Rapko (Berkeley) take a narrow win, a mere five seconds ahead of Kyle Luther (Folsom). Series leader Steven Baldock (Nevada Union) placed third, 2:56 back. Rapko, who had taken an easy solo win at Round Two, decided to ride in a group this time "It's funner," he explained. "I sat in on the first long climb, but honestly the pace felt too slow, so half way around the first lap I attacked." Round One winner Steven Flores (Salinas) was having an off day, ultimately to record a dnf, and Luther was the only one to stay within range of Rapko – who thought he had the race in the bag until the final corner. "One Lap One I could kind of see him, but he seemed far back. Then on Lap Two I didn't see him at all, until the final corner when I looked back and saw him about ten seconds behind!" Rapko said. The Berkeley Freshman, who has competed creditably at the national level in cyclo-cross, thinks he can win the series, but regards Luther as his main competition. Baldock is the current leader of the series, with 1461 points, but with one result to throw out, Rapko who is now on 1360 points, but with two wins, is a fair bet if he can maintain his form.

Freshman Boys Division II

A new face on the scene provided the third winner in as many events. Nick Casaccia (Independent), from Bellarmine High, raced to a convincing win, 2:57 ahead of Herculaas Botha, who led in a four-rider group also containing Eric Reinhard (Novato), Eliel Anttila (Branson) and series leader Chase Myers (Monterey Bay). Botha's drive for the line paid off and he now wears the series leader's jersey. Casaccia is known on the Central Coast Cyclo-Cross circuit, where he wins races too, but was delighted to be here racing mountain bikes. "It's my favorite thing to do!" He said at the finish. His strategy for this race was simple: "I just tried to get as much space between me and the others as I could," he said. As for the future: "I want to go as far as I can with mountain bike racing – college or farther." Myers was disappointed with his result, but is not ready to be counted out. "There are still two more races to go," he said.

Freshman Girls

The prodigiously talented Sofia Gomez (Los Gatos) continued her winning ways here, making it three for three in the 2009 series. Her closest rival in the field of 15 was Rainee Chandler (Salinas), at 3:18 in this one-lap race. Ashton Williams (Monterey Bay) came in

third at 6:34. Gomez stayed behind Chandler as far as the feed zone and then attacked to rapidly open a large gap. "I'm really excited to be winning, it's amazing... I'm looking forward to the rest!" said Gomez. At this race she rode with her mind on lost school friends as Los Gatos high goes through a tragic period in its history, with seven student deaths in two years. "I put everything into this ride for my passed friends," said Gomez.

The NorCal racing program:

March 1, Central Coast Invitational, East Garrison at Fort Ord, Monterey, California

March 15, Granite Bay Invitational, Folsom Lake, California

April 5, Mountain Goat Challenge, Pilarcitos Canyon at Fort Ord, Monterey, California

April 26, Granite Bay Invitational II, Folsom Lake, California

May 17, State Championship, Boggs Mountain, Cobb, California

About the NorCal League

The NorCal High School Mountain Bike Racing League, founded in 2000, is a non-profit organization open to students from both public and private schools. The League exists by virtue of a range of fundraising activities as well as generous donors and sponsors including the founding sponsor of the SoCal League, **Easton Sports Development Foundation II (ESDFII)**, the founding national sponsor, **Specialized Bicycle Components, Clif Bar, Inc., Shimano, Fox Racing Shox, Gary Fisher Bikes, Bikes Belong, Ritchey Bicycle Components, Crank Brothers, Creation Engine, Hincapie Sportswear, Mike's Bikes, The Pedaler, Paradigm Cycles, HappyGoFun, Mountain Hardwear, WTB, and Touchstone Climbing Gyms**. The League provides coaching and camaraderie to help students achieve both competitive and non-competitive cross-country mountain biking goals in a safe and enjoyable manner. Each season includes a Coaches Training Conference, winter riding camps, the six-race series, and a variety of summer camps. For more information on the League visit www.norcalmtb.org or call (510) 653-2453.