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A league of their own

By Steve Herendeen
STAFF WRITER



Traci Knoll, training on a stationary bike at the Berkeley YMCA, is among the many girls flocking to the sport. THERE'S A high school sport that has come whizzing along trails, bouncing down hills and sloshing through streams right onto the prep scene.

It's the Northern California High School Mountain Bike League, and it's growing in leaps and bounds despite its grueling schedule, pricey participation expenses and strenuous physical demands.

Workouts are tough, including one that guts five hours from every Saturday or Sunday. Competitions often require athletes to wake up at 5 a.m. and drive long distances, or camp out in tents the night before.

Boys and girls can train all season, and often the only tangible things they have to show afterward are cuts, scrapes and a faceful of mud. Once in awhile, there's a broken bone or two.

On top of all that, mainstream athletes often consider it nerdy, and the California Interscholastic Federation doesn't even sanction it. The promo film for the sport shows a spent kid throwing up in front of everyone, for crying out loud.

The NorCal league was started six years ago by Matt Fritzing, a Berkeley High math teacher who once competed for the Cal road team and raced in Europe. He just sent out a memo asking if anybody was interested in starting a cycling team.

A handful of boys replied, but they said they were all mountain bikers. Fritzing said OK, and the NorCal league was on its way.

This year's season kicked off March 5 with the Central Coast Invitational at Fort Ord. The league now has 20 teams. Berkeley, El Cerrito, Albany, Burlingame and Woodside high schools have individual teams, while Oakland has a combined team from a handful of area schools.

All told, the league stretches from the East Bay and Peninsula to Monterey and boasts about 300 kids — including an ever-growing number of girls — who compete in grueling 12- to 18-mile races over hills and trails during the six-race season.

The interest in high school mountain biking been so strong and steady that Fritzingler quit his teaching job at Berkeley last June to run the NorCal league full time.

"It's feeding itself now," says Fritzingler. "We did a lot of outreach, but most of the growth has been kind of organic. A lot of it is word of mouth."

It can be an expensive sport (bikes, helmets, pads and entry fees can add up to a huge chunk of money), but most schools offer some sort of scholarship plan. Sponsors in the cycling community — including big fan Mike Sayers of the Oakland-based Health Net Pro Cycling Team Presented by Maxxis — help by donating money, bike parts and clothing.

"We piecemeal people together with the equipment they need to participate," says Berkeley coach Austin McNerny, whose team is giving out 12 scholarships this year. "It's a struggle, but it works."

Keeping them safe

Mountain biking can be dangerous ("Anything that requires a helmet is dangerous," says El Cerrito director Michael Mejia), and bikers sometimes break bones.

Fritzingler says he counted three broken collarbones over the last three years, but it is a misconception that mountain bikers come screaming down hills hell-bent-for-election like some extreme sports competitor.

"Safety is paramount to us," says McNerny, who points out that injuries are just as common in football.

"Rarely do the kids go faster than 10 mph, and we don't allow jumping," he says. "Our rules are stiff because a lot of schools are looking at us with a skeptical eye. Once there's a really bad injury, it's just fuel for not having it at the school.

So what draws these kids to biking? Lots of things, actually.

There are no tryouts, so everybody makes the team if they promise to commit the time. Coaches put riders through their paces, but there is no yelling or screaming. Participation, self-improvement, camaraderie and the enjoyment of the sport is stressed. Pressure to win is not.

"We encourage people to improve themselves," says El Cerrito coach Jeremiah Holland. "We're creating lifelong cyclists. The goals are to have fun, be safe, make friends and push your body."

If there is a parallel to mountain biking, it's probably cross country. A cross country runner is essentially a loner competing in a team atmosphere. The battle is really within oneself to improve — for oneself.

"Only one person wins in a race," says Mejia, "but everyone succeeds."

That's what Michael Barragan found. He's a sophomore at El Cerrito who played baseball all of his life until he discovered mountain biking.

"Mountain biking is fun ... so much better than baseball," Barragan says. "In baseball, if you drop the ball, it's game over. In biking, if you finish last, so what? You finished."

Fellow Gaucho David Miller, another sophomore, was a pitcher for many years. He is now a mountain biker, enamored with the hard work and sense of worth he gets from it, win or lose.

"You can push yourself to the limit in biking," he says. "It's painful, but you get a sense of accomplishment. I got some aspect of that when I pitched, but I don't find baseball fun unless I'm pitching.

"I finished dead last in a race last year," he adds, "but I still felt good about myself."

Andy Goessling is the fastest kid on Berkeley's team. He also rides for the junior road racing team Tiene Duro, out of Lafayette. He'd like to turn pro one day.

"The thing I enjoy is that you don't rely on the team. You're doing your own thing out there, but in a team atmosphere," says Goessling, who estimates he rides six days a week and puts in about 200 miles.

"It's taken over my life," he says. "Once you get out there, it's addicting."

Nadine Budbill is the girls' coach at Berkeley and a member of the NorCal board of directors. She runs several camps for girls, but even she was amazed at what she saw in her first year of coaching in 2005.

"I was shocked to see 16- and 17-year-olds getting up at 5 a.m. to go far and do races," she says. "But there is something powerful about being on a bike and in the woods. There's something infectious about it, and the passion and commitment these kids have shown is incredible."

Especially among girls, who are flocking like lemmings to the rugged sport. Some estimates say girls will outnumber boys in the NorCal league in another few years.

Traci Kroll, a sophomore at Berkeley, played soccer, hockey, softball and rode skateboards for years. Mountain biking, however, has given her much more than any of those other sports.

"Mountain biking is by far my favorite sport," she says. "You're out in the fresh air and nature, and you're competing against other girls. I've made a lot of friends. I'm more social and outgoing now."

"Plus, it's given me the body I've always dreamed about," smiled the 5-foot-4, 108-pounder as she struck a pose. "I'm all muscle."

Budbill agrees that fitness and better health are big draws to the sport.

However, she thinks the appeal — especially for girls — goes beyond that.

"It's an incredible tool for empowering people," she says. "It's about going down a steep hill or over a rock and being afraid, but having people around you, supporting you and teaching you the skills to conquer those fears."

Additionally, the women apparently really do dig scars.

"Culture says girls need to look pretty," says Budbill. "But the girls are proud of their bruises and scrapes. They're a thing of pride. There's a story with every scar."

Mountain biking is just different.

"The kids know they're part of something special," says Holland. "They're in a sport where all of society isn't pushing them. There are kids playing soccer who don't know why. Some kids play sports and really want to play less than their parents want them to.

"We don't have that," he says. "We don't have parents pushing their children to join the mountain biking team. What we have are kids negotiating with their parents so they can be on the team."

That team aspect is key. It would be hard to find a closer-knit group than members of a mountain biking squad. Win or lose, first or last, teammates are there urging, cheering and supporting each other.

"The only way you could let down your team is to not show up," says El Cerrito's Barragan.

"Or not support the other members of the team," says Miller. "We all wait for our teammates at the finish of a race."

And that sometimes takes awhile.

"The one who gets the most applause at a race is the kid who finishes last because we respect the effort," says Mejia. "(El Cerrito bikers) have finished every race we've started the last two years. It's been rainy, cold, windy and muddy, equipment has broken ... but they finished.

"You don't have to win to be a hero on the club."

For more information on the Northern California High School Mountain Bike League, go to <http://www.norcalmtb.org>.

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