



Bicyclists from the Saturday Ride religiously stop for coffee at the Aptos Center.

Pedal Power

With record holders and ex-Olympians zooming through our streets, this county is a mecca for cycling

by Tom Stevens

LEGS ARE BIG IN APTOS.

Arms, backs, shoulders — those are valued, too, of course. And a set of steely abdominal muscles always makes a nice addition to a torso. But if you're in Aptos, you're basically talking legs.

That's because the mid-county town borders the two hottest cycling areas west of Boulder, Colorado: the forest trails of Nisene Marks and the sparsely traveled roadways of the Freedom-Corralitos region. Virtually everyone who rides in either place passes through Aptos at some point — and wants coffee and pastry afterwards.

"There are *always* bicyclists around here," laughs server Linda Hall of Kelly's French Pastry, one of two cafes that anchors the Aptos Center strip mall on Soquel Drive. Adds owner Dena Hope of the nearby Pacific Coffee Roasting Company: "Especially Saturday mornings. I'll have fifty to a hundred riders come in for coffee and pastry, and always a glass of cold water."

Those coffee-swilling bipeds are part of a venerable Santa Cruz County tradition called "The Saturday Ride," an impromptu training loop inaugurated 20 years ago by former U.S. national cycling team members Danny Nall and Norm Gall.

Every Saturday, rain or shine, brightly attired local cyclists ("lycraheads" to their envious detractors) gather shortly before 8 a.m. at the Santa Cruz Small Boat Harbor. After some cursory small talk, they pull on their gloves, goggles and caps, step into their toe clips, and blast off for three or four hours of high-octane roadwork that may take them as far south as San Juan Bautista and back.

"It's not a race," declares world-ranked triathlete Krista Whelan of Santa Cruz, a Saturday Ride regular when she's not swimming two miles in Kona or running a marathon through the Swiss Alps. "It's a training ride. We have the occasional

crash, but on the whole it's pretty tame."

Ah, that sounds pleasant enough — a leisurely little spin down the coast with a few dozen friends, stopping for coffee and conversation afterwards at some sunny outdoor cafe. But before you heave that dusty, 35-pound ten-speed down from its hanger in the garage, you might ponder the terms "training ride" and "tame."

Beaten by the best

Training for what? Tame by whose standards? In Whelan's case, The Saturday Ride is just part of her preparation for a grueling international tour that includes the world's toughest triathlons and "duathlons" (running and cycling). Whelan rides "200 to 300 miles a week" training for this professional endurance series, so even a "hundred miler" on Saturday is just a fraction of that.

On any given Saturday, the surging, thigh-banging, speed-shifting Saturday Ride pack might also number such local cycling stars as ex-Olympian Andy Paulin, top-ranked pro road racer Paul Willerton, professional woman triathlete Terry Schneider, and the legendary "Fast Freddy" Markham, co-holder of the world land speed record for human-powered vehicles.

All are residents of an area whose proud cycling tradition makes Santa Cruz County one of the world's top draws for riders and equipment makers alike. Among the latter are such renowned names as Giro (helmets); Kestrel, Bontrager and Carbonframes, Inc. (frames and components); Easy Racers (recumbent bikes); Monolith and Rock Lobster (mountain bikes); and Team Angst! (unforgettable jerseys).

What are they all doing here?

"This is a great area for road racing and mountain biking," says veteran local triathlete Patrick Gilbert, whose NorthWind Promotions stages more than a dozen local foot races and cycling events each year. "There's such a variety of terrain here, from the coast to the mountains. For

road bikes alone, you've got rides like Ice Cream Grade, San Juan Grade, Hazel Dell and Eureka Canyon. Then there's Skyline Boulevard — some guys will ride that up to San Francisco, then come back along the coast on Highway One.

"Also, all the best cyclists live in Santa Cruz," Gilbert adds with a knowing chuckle, "so anybody who wants to go out and get beat up on a bike can do so on any weekend."

For mountain bikers and "off-road" cyclists, the county boasts the forested trails of Nisene Marks and the ridge roads above that park, the lung-searing inclines of Swanton Road, and the punishing coastal scrub of Wilder Ranch State Park.

Toughened by such challenging terrain are riders like Santa Cruz County local Darryl Price, one of the stars on the ever-growing NORBA (National Off Road Bicycling Association) professional circuit. The NORBA tour has become such a draw that top riders can earn six-figure incomes from winnings and endorsements.

And "earn" is the word, says spokesman Paul Tozer of Santa Cruz-based Bontrager Cycles. Top off-road riders like Price, Tozer says, routinely fly down suicide cliffs at speeds of up to 60 miles per hour during events like Mammoth Mountain's "Kamikaze Downhill."

"If you're on a bike and something fails catastrophically, that's your face, gone!" says Tozer, who adds that even non-competitive off-road cyclists

enjoy "jumping off loading docks" and otherwise pushing the envelopes of their equipment and mortality.

Cloning Fast Freddy

Besides providing steady work for local orthopedic surgeons, the coalescence in Santa Cruz County of a critical mass of go-for-it road racers and dirt riders has not escaped the keenly goggled eye of cycling-related businesses.

Need someone to road test a fila-

ment-wound, carbon fiber, \$2,200 Tetra-Custom road bike frame? If you're Santa Cruz-based Carbonframes, Inc., you don't even have to dial long distance. You just decide which ex-Olympian or professional road racer you want and flip through the local phone book.

When recumbent bike designer Gardner Martin of Easy Racers needs a world-class set of quadriceps to pedal one of his unorthodox prototypes, he doesn't even have to open the phone book. The self-taught engineer ("I have a Ph.D. from *Popular Mechanics*") just hollers into the back room of his Watsonville shop for frame welder Frederick, a.k.a. "Fast Freddy," Markham, 35, proud owner of the most propulsive legs in the hemisphere.

Riding solo, Markham pedaled one of Martin's low-slung bikes to a top speed of 65.4 miles per hour in 1986, thereby winning the DuPont Prize for the world's fastest human-powered vehicle. That record has since fallen to a Colorado racer, but Markham pedaled back to the top last fall as half of the team that propelled Martin's tandem bike *Gold Rush* to another 65 mph world record.

Asked what drives him to squeeze himself into one of Martin's low-slung space pods and pedal himself to the brink of unconsciousness, Markham replies: "Speed! Life in the *Gold Rush* starts at 40 miles an hour. That's where it ends on a regular bike."

"If we could get a clone of Freddy in the back seat, we could break 70 miles an hour," deadpans Martin in his soft Virginia drawl. "I've got the Stanford Medical Center working on it now. They took a scraping of Freddy's leg three years ago, and now they've cloned a giant leg from it. Trouble is, we can't fit the leg into the bike."

Now in his 20th year of propelling bicycles to speeds some cars can't reach, former Olympian Markham rides several hundred miles a week, including "extended" Saturday Rides down to Santa Barbara with his longtime training buddies. Why this maniacal regimen?

"All these young guys are pushing us now," laughs Markham. "They're forcing us to do 300 or 400 miles a week when we used to get by with 150 or 200. I'm up against the wall!"

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Bicycles

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Pushy whippersnappers notwithstanding, Fast Freddy has his own training motive: He wants to shatter the tandem speed record he set last year with Canadian partner Sam Whittington. "When we hit 65, we were far from tapped out," Markham says. "I think we can break 70. It's one of the last solid, even numbers left to fall." Markham has been scouting high desert roads in Utah for a late summer assault on the record.

Fat Hats and homeboys

Records of another sort — sales records — may also fall this summer for another local cycling enterprise, Soquel-based helmet maker Giro Sport Design. A new California law requiring all school-age cyclists to wear protective headgear is sure to benefit the nation's helmet manufacturers, but only if the kids actually wear the hats. Will they do it? Or will they be as defiant as Santa Cruz motorcycleists and fling their helmets off a cliff?

If you're Giro, you don't just build a hat kids *have* to wear; you create one they'll *want* to wear. Noticing that all self-respecting '90s youths wear their ball caps gangsta-style (with the bill in back), the company recently bought a Half Moon Bay inventor's design for a helmet that resembles an oversized gangsta cap. Look for the new "Fat Hat" helmets — 100,000 of them to start with — at bike shops this spring.

"This is the Boulder of the west!" proclaims Carbonframes Inc.

spokesman David Kelly, one of many Santa Cruz County "home boys" now making their marks in the cycling world. A Harbor High graduate, Kelly earned an engineering degree from Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, then joined the Silicon Valley/defense industry rat race as a Sun Microsystems engineer.

Now that the Cold War is over, Kelly says, some of the local talent that helped build U.S. spy satellites and laser weapons is now working on lighter, faster, stronger bicycles. Using computerized imaging systems, Kelly and other Silicon Valley refugees now design and build \$2,000 customized frames for the likes of three-time Tour de France winner Greg LeMond. Total weight of the latest, space-age frame: 2.5 pounds.

Another local talent is Gardner Martin, whose Easy Racers shop in Watsonville has now sent out into the world "close to 2,000" factory-made recumbent bicycles and perhaps twice that many "home built" — models marketed for assemble-it-your-

self hobbyists.

Martin uses aerodynamic plastic "farings" (wind screens) and some carbon fiber structural components to lighten and streamline his performance models. But in the end, he says, it all comes down to legs.

"Two of our bikes have done the Markleyville Death Ride," Martin says with parental pride.

"That's five major Sierra passes in one day — more than 15,000 feet of elevation gain.

But you gotta be in shape.

The bike don't go up the hill by itself."

By the way, the second person to conquer the 130-mile Death Ride on a recumbent bike is another Santa Cruz County home boy, music teacher Ron Bobb, who plays bassoon for the San Jose Symphony when he's not popping wheelies in the High Sierra. Since the first person to complete the circuit was a one-armed man, Bobb is in the Easy Racer record books as "the first

two-armed man" to finish the Markleyville Death Ride.

Is this county famous, or what?

