



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file photos

ABOVE: The men's pro race gets under way atop Beach Hill during the 2001 criterium. **BELOW:** The crowd cheers riders on a sprint last year.

Road rally

Bicycle Races

Cyclists, fans gear up for Santa Cruz Criterium

By **KAREN KEFAUVER**
SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

David Gill vividly remembers crashing his bike at the Santa Cruz Criterium.

For one thing, he was wearing a dress. He wiped out on the first corner, skidding on the ground on the notorious hairpin turn on Beach Hill.

"It was impressive," Gill recalled. "I got up and did a little curtsy."

He is quick to point out that the rest of his four-man team were also wearing dresses, and that they were relay-riding a Schwinn cruiser as part of a one-time fundraiser at the race.

"Other people wore tutus," he recalled.

When this Sunday's 34th annual Santa Cruz Criterium rolls out, there will be no dresses, but there will be plenty of action throughout the day.

"This is not your standard criterium," explained Gill, Director of Team Santa Cruz, the race team for the Santa Cruz County Cycling Club.

"You need to be really on top of your game. A lot of crits are flat and have four corners. That's boring. This is not boring; it has lots of elevation and that great hairpin turn where a lot of people crash."

Organizer Robert Leibold of Velo Promotions expects a field of 400 racers to compete in different categories, from beginner to professional. Starting at 8 a.m., nine races will be launched from the start/finish at Beach Hill. The 9-mile loop begins at Third and Main streets and includes Front, Spruce, Laurel Extension.

As for crashes, Leibold said that through the years, there have been broken bones and ambulances, but nothing worse. About 30 volunteers will patrol the course to protect racers and the crowds.

Scores of spectators will cheer racers. Many camp out with beach chairs to monitor the breath-taking turn near the start. The men's pro event, starting at 2:15 p.m., draws some of the biggest crowds.

"This is not a big dollar race," said Leibold, noting that there are prime prizes. Prime (pronounced "preem") are prizes awarded to riders who win a single lap. The beginning of a sprint for the prime is announced with a bell. The prizes are donated by individuals and businesses.

With a prize purse of about \$3,000, money is not the attraction for this event.

"It's a classic race because it has been going on for so long," said Leibold. "There is tough competition and a challenging course."

The Santa Cruz Criterium is the first race of three road events in Santa Cruz County. (The others are the Watsonville Criterium, July 20, and the University Road Race, Sept. 1).

It's a short course with a long history.

The race was launched in 1968 and Robert Leibold took charge in 1971. At



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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

Racers round the hairpin curve towards Front Street during last year's race.

criterium

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that time, the UC Santa Cruz graduate had helped form the Santa Cruz County Cycling Club and later helped establish the Surf City Cyclocross Series.

"I'm an organizer type of person," he laughed, taking a brief break from organizing the 56 bike races he puts on year-

round through Velo Promo.

"A crit like this is really the primary spectator event in cycling. The riders do multiple laps. It's really colorful and people walk around the course to watch. We also

If you go:

What: 34th SANTA CRUZ CLASSIC CRITERIUM

When: Sunday, April 14, 2002 (Register at 7:30 a.m., first race at 8 a.m.)

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will have good announcing from Casey Kerrigan of Oakland, a former racer and race official."

"The course is pretty unique because it has been run so often. Everyone has done it once."

That includes Tour de France winner Great Lemond — who claimed a victory here in '79 — and Eric Heiden, Olympic speed skater turned cyclist.

Almost everyone, that is.

"We haven't gotten Lance Armstrong yet," Leibold admitted, "but we have had his teammates in the U.S. Postal Service almost every year."

The turnout for locals will be strong, including participation from teams from the Spokesman, the Bicycle Trip and the Santa Cruz County Cycling Club. Leibold has noticed an increase in women racers, especially in the last two years.

Doug Smith will race this Sunday. He doesn't expect to win his event, Masters 35, category 4/5. In fact, at age 49, there isn't a separate category for his age group.

"I go out there anyway, because it's fun. It's a great local race," said Smith, who will race for Team Santa Cruz, along with about 10 others.

Returning to the Santa Cruz Criterium for the third time, he knows what can wreak havoc on the course: "Someone making a screwy line in that top turn, that sharp right-hander. I can smell brake pads almost every lap."

Smith wouldn't miss this hometown race.

"It's a really neat spectator course. People wander up from the Boardwalk and say, 'Wow! Look at this. I've never seen a bike race before. With the cheering, the laps just seem to go by really fast.'"