

Cycling fest hits 25-year mark

Bicycle Races
Events start Thursday
at Laguna Seca

By James Raja

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SALINAS » Adam Craig learned how to ride a bike in the backcountry of Maine. The small-town trails were ideal playgrounds for high-energy kids and Craig negotiated the rocks, roots and ruts as well as any grade-schooler.

More than 20 years later, Craig's skills have taken him around the world. He's competed in China (Olympic Games), Italy (World Cup), Scotland (Single Speed World Championships) and in

nearly 40 races in seven disciplines and 13 years of racing at the Sea Otter Classic.

Now an 18-time national titlist, Craig's versatility epitomizes what this festival of cycling will again represent beginning Thursday in its 25th anniversary edition.

Competition begins at 8 a.m. at Laguna Seca Recreation Area with the women's category 1 and 2 criterium and dual slalom practice. The event will conclude Sunday with the junior men's 13-14 road race at 2:15 p.m.

The four-day event will offer nearly every kind of cycling for nearly every skill level of cyclist of any age. It's also where a pro

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The Sea Otter Classic at Laguna Seca attracts a wide variety of riders and competitions. Stephen Cleeton, 50, from Morgan Hill, practices for a slalom event in 2012.

IF YOU GO

What: 25th annual Sea Otter Classic

Where: Laguna Seca Recreation Area, Salinas

When: Thursday-Sunday

Cost: \$12 in advance or \$15 on-site for a one-day; \$40/\$50 for four-day pass. Military (active or retired and family members) various discounts (photo ID required). Children 12 and under and registered athletes free.

On-site tickets sales: Laguna Seca Area entrance gates and the athlete registration building (Trackview Pavilion/Red Bull Energy Center)

Details: www.seaotterclassic.com.

Parking: Free

Race hotline: (800) 218-8411 or (831) 373-2331.

Classic

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rider like Craig can compete in nearly every event offered simply because he can. This year, he plans to ride in several mountain bike divisions.

"I remember battling in 2000 with the then current national champion Steve Larsen at my first race as a pro at 18," said Craig, 33, who lives in Bend, Oregon. "I managed to put the wood to him for a top-20 finish while sleeping in my rusted out Ford Escort."

Even Craig's choice of accommodation as a poor, fledgling pro fits the Sea Otter Classic's image.

Participants and fans fill the surrounding hotels, but many also choose to camp, filling the hills surrounding the track at Laguna Seca.

The Sea Otter Classic's origins have been well-documented. It debuted in 1991 with co-founders Lou Randolph and Frank Yohannan of Pebble Beach, now the president and CEO, begin-

ning new careers. The two-day mountain bike race began on April 6, 1991, and about 300 athletes and 150 spectators showed up for the Laguna Seca Challenge. Its headquarters were two canopy tents — one for officials, one for athlete registration.

Two years later, the event assumed its current name and logo — the facial sketch of the prominent Monterey Bay marine mammal.

In some editions, the event's title has included a title sponsor's name (it's currently Subaru) and sometimes not. Regardless, the event has evolved as much as a cycling festival and expos as its competitors have evolved as athletes.

Discount merchandisers to niche manufacturers of newfangled gadgets and electrolyte drinks annually migrate to the raceway infield to sell their wares. Experts offer demonstrations. Advocacy groups and food vendors conduct business on the infield while an estimated 9,000 athletes compete in about 200 races.

The majority of participants are age-group amateurs who pedal in recreational rides called gran fondos to high-speed downhill events and niche categories like tandem mountain biking. But the Sea Otter Classic has attracted Olympic gold medalists, Tour de France riders and world titlists in several disciplines.

"We get an awful lot of positive feedback every year from fans who say that it's really cool that they can walk around and meet the pros who are just lining up for a race or just coming back from a race," said Yohannan.

Cadel Evans of Australia, who retired in February, won two Sea Otter Classic mountain bike titles before transitioning to road racing. He won the 2011 Tour de France.

Chris Horner, 43, who in 2013 became the first American to win the Tour of Spain, will return to the event this year after an 11-year absence. He'll race as the elder statesman among several young teammates on the entry-level pro team

Airgas-Safeway.

A decade ago, American Alison Dunlap, the 2001 mountain bike world titlist, and Alison Sydor of Canada, a three-time world titlist, exchanged Sea Otter Classic wins for several years.

Floyd Landis, whose 2006 Tour de France win was erased via a doping suspension, last competed in the Sea Otter Classic in 2004 when the event's road stage race expanded outside of Laguna Seca all the way into Redwood City.

And only a few years ago, Americans Mara Abbott and Coryn Rivera, both now among the most successful women riders in the sport, rode early in their pro careers at the Sea Otter Classic.

"The everyday cycling enthusiast can go by and talk to a world champion or an Olympian in a casual setting," said Yohannan. "(The public) can talk with the mechanics or the corporate reps about a new product. And I think that's very important part of the whole Sea Otter culture."