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Top Cyclists Eye Capitola Racing

The hilly terrain and winding, narrow streets of Capitola Village will provide the tricky and treacherous course of six spectacular bicycle races Saturday.

Several hundred cyclists, including many of the top licensed amateur racers in the West, will vie for prizes in Capitola's third annual Criterium. The opening race begins at 9 a.m. Saturday launching a weekend of bicycle racing in Capitola and Santa Cruz.

A criterium is a multi-lap race over a short course — and well suited to spectators, who can easily walk the whole course and change their vantage points.

The faint-hearted might prefer a tamer viewing point than the top of Capitola's San Jose Avenue, where the helmeted racers, hunched over their wispy bikes, must manage a 120-degree turn shortly before plummeting down a steep hill.

If there's not much wind off the Monterey Bay to fight, the racers fly past the crowd and cottages at speeds close to 40 miles per-hour, according to Bob Leibold, race promoter.

Considering the difficulty of the course, past races have brought surprisingly few injuries, says Leibold. Recently, one rider in the pack skidded to the ground, bringing with him 14 others — but the main damage done was to their standings in the race.

The elegant Victorian homes of Santa Cruz' historic Beach Hill will be the backdrop of the following day's 12th annual Santa Cruz Criterium. Considered less hazardous than Capitola's course, the Beach Hill circuit nonetheless has one of the sharpest turns in American bicycle racing and a four-block section of bone-rattling rough pavement. The first of four races starts at 10 a.m. Sunday, April 30.