Newsletter – February 2019

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Early Bird Racing

Colleen and Andrew Chew

Every January, new and returning racers gather in Fremont on Sundays to learn and practice the fundamentals of road racing with coaches and mentors. The Early Bird Racing Series has been an NCNCA (Northern California/Nevada Cycling Association) fixture for the past 30 years. The program's curriculum has been honed throughout the years by NCNCA legends such as Larry Nolan, Laurel Green, John Cheetham, Dan Smith, and our very own Coach Matt McNamara. Now known as a BRP (Beginner Racing Program), the curriculum has recently been adapted at the national level by USA Cycling. To think that it all started right here in Northern California!

This year, Pen Velo had a strong presence at each of the sessions, with many returning Cat 3's and 4's as well as some new racers including Jamey Ewing, Lukasz Pason, and recent new PV members Eugene Chan and Alex Sohn. Hats off to all our new racers, especially those trying it for the very first time! Coach Matt served as one of the Early Bird coaches, while seasoned racers Erik Salander, Andrew Chew, and Yvonne Walbroehl participated as mentors.

The first week of the BRP was rained out, so we began the program on January 13, week two, working on intermediate pack skills. Attendees practiced riding together in close quarters, rotating through pacelines, and overcoming any fear of Botts Dots. Racers who braved the rain to attend the next session were rewarded with a crucial lesson on safe and efficient cornering techniques, and finally, we put it all together in the last session, focusing on formation and anticipation. Through an organized drill, racers had a chance to experience the ever-changing peloton as it shifts throughout a typical race— bunching up as much as five abreast, then stringing out and speeding up in preparation for a sprint.

For those who missed the Early Birds this January but are still curious about road racing, there are BRP clinics scheduled at the following upcoming races: Merced Criterium (February 24th) and the criterium at the Madera Stage Race (March 2nd). Each BRP's curriculum is designed to be stand-alone as well as cumulative, so don't worry about missing any of the prior sessions. Follow the links on ncnca.org's road schedule calendar for details on the aforementioned BRP races and give it a try!

The PV tent was a gathering place between races

PV riding the break

PV in the mix

Meet Yvonne Walbroehl

My first introduction to cycling was as a child – I grew up in Fairfax, VA (a suburb of Washington, DC) where we rode our heavy steel one-speeds all over the neighborhood. But from the time I turned 16 and got my driver's license, the bike gathered dust in the shed and was eventually sold at a yard sale. I didn't ride a bike much again until I was in graduate school at the University of North Carolina, when I found that a used bike was cheaper than a bus pass. It was then that I first became a dedicated bike commuter.

I finished my Ph.D. in analytical chemistry in 1986 and took a job in Michigan, where bike commuting was much more weather-dependent. After several years in Michigan and a year in Strasbourg, France, I relocated to Mountain View, CA, in 1994. Bike commuting fell by the wayside as I became more involved in my career as a chemist and group leader at Roche Pharmaceuticals while at the same time playing guitar and singing in a few local bluegrass groups. In 2002 I co-founded the bluegrass band Cabin Fever. In its early days, Cabin Fever played two or three nights a week at pubs all around the area. On top of a full-time-plus job, there was just not much time for exercise (or anything else!).

Eventually Cabin Fever started playing fewer (but better) gigs, which gave me a little more time for other activities. In 2003 I decided to re-dedicate myself to bike commuting. I bought a Trek hybrid bike and rode it to work the next day. I was really out of shape – my 6-mile commute took me over 45 minutes the first time! But I kept at it. I lost 10 pounds and felt better than I had in years. And I got faster! Fast enough that I decided to get a new Trek 5200 road bike and started doing weekend rides with the Velo Girls.

Racing had never really been on my radar. I was not an athlete in the past. In school, I was the kid who was always picked last when sides were chosen for any team. The idea of me being an athlete seemed laughable. However, the Velo Girls were very active on the race scene in those days and I was convinced to try a cyclocross race in the fall of 2004. I borrowed a bike for the race, took one skills clinic and raced. My skills were pretty shaky, and I finished a lowly 26th of 35 in the women C's. But I was hooked and joined the Velo Girls race team the following year. During the next five years I dabbled in CX, cross-country MTB and road racing. My focus was mostly on dirt at first – I upgraded to Cat 2 in MTB and Cat 3 in cyclocross during that time. I joined Pen Velo in 2010 after my previous team (Protech Racing) disbanded and turned my attention to the road.

Early retirement gave me the time that I needed to train seriously for road racing. Success on the road took a while, but eventually road racing supplanted cyclocross as my primary racing focus. I've been working with Coach Matt for several years – under his guidance I finally earned an upgrade to Cat 3 on the road in 2011. Since then I continued to improve as a road racer with a primary focus on time trialing. The results eventually came and I'm now at a point where I'm competitive with the best riders in the district in my age group.

I've also tried to give back to Pen Velo, first with the website and more recently with volunteer recruitment. The accomplishments that I am most proud of are: recognition by Pen Velo with the Bill Fallis Award in 2016, winning the NCNCA Time Trial championship in 2017, and winning the NCNCA W55+ Women's Series in 2018. Thanks are due to all the teammates (and competitors) who have been supportive over the years. Norma Hilton in particular has been a steady presence – we've been teammates for 14+ years on three different teams and have had a few interesting adventures along the way!

What's next? It's hard to believe that this will be my 10th season with Pen Velo! I'm looking forward to another season on the road with our growing W55+ team. After a few too many injuries, I've retired from cyclocross - but maybe I'll do some gravel racing or dip my toes in at the track. I'm not sure yet, but I'll find some way to continue the adventure!

Cyclocross at Golden Gate Park, Nov 2010 (photographer unknown)

MTB Racing at Toro Park, July 2017 (photo – Jeff Vanderstucken)

District TT Championship, Loyalton, June 2017 (photo – Craig Huffman)

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Meet Tom Dillion

As a youth my main transportation was an old Schwinn Varsity. I liked to ride it fast, or so I thought, but I knew nothing of bike racing until a fateful day in 1985. The first CoreStates US Pro Championship was being held in Philadelphia, and I happened to be downtown. I can still feel the electricity of coming upon this scene. Crowds packed the barricades near the art museum. The opening riff of Separate Ways blared on the PA as a massive peloton screamed down Benjamin Franklin Parkway. And up close the speed! Damn! We stayed to see Eric Heiden take a thrilling sprint finish, and I was hooked. I knew I was going to be a bike racer.

I joined the Pennsylvania Bicycle Club and started hanging out at Cycles BiKyle in Bryn Mawr. Kyle assured me that I needed a sweet Italian ride, so I took my savings and bought an Atala kitted out with the short-lived Campagnolo Triomphe. I found a group of like-minded juniors, and the next summer we spent every weekend borrowing the family minivan and driving to races from Virginia to Massachusetts. Such fine days and such fine races! The National Capitol Open. Nutley. Somerville. I remember every corner.

I got my first taste of riding in California when the Princeton team came out to San Luis Obispo for the first collegiate nationals in 1988. This was the only time I've been in a race with a helicopter film crew, and it felt like the big time. With the magic of YouTube you can still find a grainy Content to Win, the, uh, acclaimed documentary covering the race. We didn't see a lot of the front of those races and you've got to look hard to find us, but again I was hooked and knew I'd be back. California was the place to ride your bike.

Fast forward through many years and miles and friendships on the road, and then again through many more years with no road, when family and work commitments and lack of a cycling tribe kept my legs from turning. It was December 2008, we had returned to California, and I was 35 lbs over my college weight. Extrapolating recent trends, I would weigh 400 lbs in ten years. This had to stop, so I took a three month leave from work and started riding off the pounds.

I got a power meter to help track my workouts and became an early Strava member. These added new dimensions of number geekery to my cycling (a geekery that culminated in the creation of SUFFERvision). They also taught me something I never appreciated before: while my threshold was modest I had a surprising amount of short power (e.g., with a year of training I had an 800W minute). I began to think I should race again, so I joined PV, renewed my license with a downgrade to Cat 4, and pinned my first number in many years at the fabulous Ronde van Brisbeen.

I was gratified to have a nice result in this and other early races, but mostly I couldn't believe I'd been away so long. The action and thrill! The wind and speed! The instinct and decisions! To hear a shift and a shout and the sound of sprinting wheels. To rail a corner elbow to elbow, with pedals, saddle, and bars a part of you. To speak with your legs a barbarous word that cannot be unspoken. To bury yourself for a teammate or explode towards a finish line. How had I been missing any of this? I just love a bike race. Just saying it makes my heart race. That's it. I love to race my bike.

So that's what I've done as much as I can for the last 10 years. USA Cycling shows about 240 race starts during that time, despite some prolonged periods of non-racing due to injury. I guess I've been fortunate that few of my injuries have been from crashes. In all these races I think I've hit the ground twice. Once with a slip on wet pavement at Santa Cruz and once in a spectacular bike-splitting pileup at 2016 nationals (on a course most acknowledged as obviously dangerous). Knock on wood.

This has been a period that's included so many proud and fun moments with PV teammates, and I can't wait for the next one. Because we all know in our hearts a day with a bike race is just better than a day without.

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Ken Salvail
January 5 -- Sacramento Cyclocross Race #5 – Lange Twins Winery
Field: B 55+ -- 1st Place

Chris Cowart
January 11 – CCCX Ft Ord
Field: 45B 2nd place (3rd overall in race series)

Steven Clifton
January 26 -- Santa Barbara County Road Race
Field: M60 1/2/3/4 – 2nd Place

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