

Chapter 1: The High School Mountain Bike Program

Section 1: Why Mountain Biking?

Many people are surprised to hear that the NorCal High School Mountain Bike League is working to establish mountain biking as a high school sport, alongside traditional school sports such as soccer and basketball. Why mountain biking, they ask? There are a multitude of cycling disciplines, and it may not be obvious why mountain biking makes the most sense for a youth program. Here are some of the reasons why mountain biking is changing the face of high school athletics:

It Builds Self-Esteem

Research shows that regular involvement in physical activity increases self-esteem. As a coach, you'll see that as your riders improve and achieve their goals, they will become more confident people. In particular, the opportunity to practice and gain competency in a skill contributes to young people's self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Many high school riders find themselves shedding excess pounds and making better dietary and lifestyle choices, both of which foster a more positive self-concept.

"As a freshman, my daughter was struggling in school. She was failing most of her classes and after switching schools twice she joined a mountain bike team. Suddenly her life had some focus; I believe the mountain bike team saved her life."



Health-Related, Academic, and Social Benefits

Students on your mountain bike team will experience a range of benefits. They will become more interested in a healthy lifestyle: one that includes regular exercise, healthy eating habits and smart decisions regarding drug and alcohol use. They will often experience a greater sense of obligation to their schoolwork. Many students have increased their interest in academic learning and improved their grades through positive involvement in an extracurricular activity. Socially, students on your team will have the opportunity to socialize with a diverse group of peers, make new friends, develop healthy relationships, and often, youth who never quite "fit in" will find a place where they are welcomed and accepted.



It's Something Different than P.E. and Mainstream Sports

At most schools students can choose from mainstream sports like baseball, football, soccer and basketball, or more up and coming sports like lacrosse, field hockey or crew. Yet, despite all of the sports offered, most students are not involved in any athletic activity. Some of the most important life lessons – lessons that are learned through sport – are being missed. Cycling presents an opportunity for a vast array of important lessons, and often proves to be a tremendous builder of self-esteem among students who are often on the fringe, underachieving, and full of pent-up energy. Often these are students who do not thrive in P.E. classes and have never been interested in mainstream sports. Whereas these students were once falling through the "athletic cracks," they now have a place to experience the lifelong benefits of a physically active lifestyle.

Skill Development

The sport of mountain biking calls for a wide variety of skills such as agility, balance, and focus. It requires both upper and lower body strength and cardiovascular fitness. It also demands a strong mind, as well as critical-thinking and decision-making skills. It develops an ethic of self-discipline and self-care.

Self Reliance in the Modern Age

As in modern life, succeeding as a mountain biker depends upon advanced technology. Learning how to maintain your bicycle and repairing flat tires and broken chains during a race builds confidence and problem solving skills that lend themselves to other professions that involve machines and technology. In the fast changing world of new devices and software, self-reliance and an ability to learn, adapt, and generally utilize technology to your best advantage is invaluable on virtually every career path.

It's About the Team *and* the Individual

High school mountain bike clubs/teams allow young people to participate in a sport in which they are an integral part of a team and



experience the benefits of team sports, such as having a coach, teammates and a network of support and camaraderie. But mountain biking is also an individual sport in which the main goal is to become a better, stronger rider. In contrast to other team sports in which only a

handful of athletes participate at one time on the court or field, in mountain biking everyone can be on their bikes, improving their abilities at the same time.

Connection to the Outdoors

As mountain biking is done on dirt trails in the outdoors, it helps to develop young people's connection to our natural environment. In this day and age of video games and media saturation, it is critical that we help foster this connection. Riders can be taught to become stewards for the environment and responsible trail use.

Life-Long Enjoyment

Cycling is a life long sport. Due to the relatively low impact cycling has on joints, one can look forward to a lifetime of riding bicycles. How many high school football or soccer players still put on their cleats later in life and play the game? More often, they enjoy their former sport from the comfort of the sofa. Cycling can be a life-long passion. All one needs is a bike and the desire to ride.



An Environmentally Friendly Transportation Alternative

The more people leave their cars at home and jump on their bicycles, the healthier our environment will be. The presence of high school cycling clubs helps to mainstream the sport. When cycling clubs become standard fare to future generations, we cultivate a society where cycling is more accepted and supported. We have the opportunity to engage young people in a life-long cycling lifestyle that is good for our planet.

Youth Appeal

Of all the cycling disciplines, mountain biking has an image which most appeals to youth. Young people who might have shied away from the skinny tires and spandex of road cycling won't think twice

about wearing baggy mountain bike shorts and jumping around on a fat tire bike.

But isn't it Dangerous?

Forget what you've seen on T.V. and in magazines. Mountain biking is not all about daredevils careening down hills. The average speed attained on a mountain bike ride rarely exceeds 10 miles per hour. Mountain biking is a sport that gets young people into the woods and away from the dangers of automobile traffic associated with road cycling. There are risks associated with mountain biking, but with proper skills instruction and sound risk management practices many of those risks can be



proactively managed and mitigated in a cross-country mountain biking program. For more information on the risks associated with mountain biking and how to manage them, please see Chapter 3 on Risk Management.

One eye opening statistic for reluctant administrators comes from the New York Times in May of 2006: "Emergency room visits for cheerleading injuries nationwide have more than doubled since the early 1990s, and the rate of life-threatening injuries has startled researchers. Of 104 catastrophic injuries sustained by female high school and college athletes from 1982 to 2005 — head and spinal trauma that occasionally led to death — more than half resulted from cheerleading, according to the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research. All sports combined did not surpass cheerleading." As mountain biking has inherent dangers, coaches are encourage to contrast it with other sports, rather than claim the sport is "safe".

Some Notes

A note to other cyclists: The growth of mountain biking at the high school level has caused a proportional increase of enthusiasm for the

other cycling disciplines. As mountain biking takes hold as a sport in our public high schools, there will continue to be a significant increase in the number of juniors participating in the other cycling disciplines.

A note to road racers: One of the most common questions the NorCal High School Mountain Bike League receives, especially from road racers, is: "When are you going to start a high school **road racing league**?" While the idea may be exciting, the League's experience with high school aged students (especially with most 14 and 15 year olds) calls to question the appropriateness of training and/or racing on the road:

- Going for a training ride on the road just isn't considered fun by most of the teenagers out there;
- Riding on the road is actually more dangerous, the speeds are twice as fast and the pavement is very unforgiving when one crashes – and they DO crash. Never mind the added stress of cars, which threaten catastrophic injuries. Ride with a few 14-year olds and you will understand that the stress of keeping these riders together and riding safely on the road is going to make coach retention difficult;
- Because of tactics (drafting, team work, sprinting, breaking away, blocking) road racing is very complex and unforgiving. Retaining young riders after they get "dropped" from their first races is a tremendous challenge;
- Entry-level road racing bikes are much more expensive than entry-level mountain bikes;
- Some young road racers do succeed at a young age, many of these youth have a rare combination of talent, initiative, access, and drive.

The upshot is that many League racers are well on their way to being top road racers and following in the footsteps of the many professional road racers that started as mountain bike racers.

important to acknowledge students' interests and the validity of these cycling disciplines, you should also be clear that those activities are not the main focus of your club. The following are some reasons why we discourage mountain bike teams from including these activities:

- The majority of insurance claims due to injury at cycling competitions results from down-hilling;
- The bikes and protective equipment are more specialized and expensive;
- The skills required are very specific;
- It's not the best entry point for the sport of cycling;
- It requires cross-country skills;
- It's not appropriate for public schools because few schools would approve;
- It requires specific venues, very much like downhill skiing.

There is often pressure within high school clubs to include road racing and downhill in a club's activities. It is the League's goal to bring mountain biking into the public schools as an official sport: no different than football or track and field. We feel that our best chance requires a focus on cross-country mountain biking and that as we achieve our goal it will benefit all forms of cycling. Some clubs have a contingency of downhillers and/or road racers, but those activities are not sponsored by the school club. Coaches should take measures to draw very clear lines to team members and families. To include all disciplines within a cross-country team would jeopardize not only your program but high school mountain biking in general (see reasons above).

Section 2: Why Start a Mountain Bike Program at Your Local School?

Why should there be a mountain bike team at the school in which you work, the school your child attends, or at a high school in your community? Why should you be the one to make it happen? Below is a list of compelling reasons. If this is not enough to convince you, talk to someone involved with an active team (a coach, student, or parent) and we trust you will be fully persuaded.

Leading a Team is Fun and Rewarding!

Leading a high school mountain bike club or team is downright exciting. It might even be one of the most rewarding experiences of a lifetime. It is incredible to watch the youth on your team develop skills, confidence, and a love for the sport. They finish their first race. They climb onto the podium for the first time. They make new friends. They adopt healthier eating habits. They support each other in moments of frustration and triumph. And you are there for it all and they (or their parent) thank you for providing them with a life-changing experience. When you start a mountain bike club for high school students, you create an opportunity for them to get inspired about their lives. Chances are you'll also get inspired.

Personal Health Benefits for Coaches

Forget about sitting on the sidelines blowing a whistle – when you are a mountain bike coach you get to ride! While you may not achieve professional racing fitness, you will find the regular exercise will help you be a fit, trim endurance athlete. Most teams thrive best when they have coaches of varied abilities, from beginners to experts – because any sizable team also has a great variety of abilities. As a bonus, you just might find that you, too, are feeling better and better! Perhaps you start riding your bike more, eating better, and feeling happier. The regular exercise creates momentum in your days; you rarely feel lethargic or unmotivated. Providing a great experience for young people makes you feel that you are doing meaningful work.

It Creates Community

When you start a high school mountain bike club, you put in motion a community of diverse individuals and families. It provides an opportunity to become a highly valued member of your community, and with that comes great rewards. For many, this new community



can help expand a personal business, whether cycling related or not. Inevitably, the experience will build meaningful and lasting connections and relationships.

“Coaching young racers is a great way to take a break from your own racing while staying involved and keeping fit. Many find it deeply rewarding on may levels and only dabble in racing afterwards. Coaches consider these rewards our best-kept secret.”

-Matt Fritzinger, League Founder & Executive Director

Section 3: How to Start a Mountain Bike Program

Who Can Start a Team or Club?

Administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members can start a cycling club at their local high school. While it is not necessary for the person who initiates the cycling club to be a school “insider” (teacher or administrator), this is often very useful. It is entirely possible for a parent or community member to initiate a club. Students are also encouraged to form clubs of various types and generally only need to find a sponsoring teacher. A teacher or administrator within the school possesses certain advantages, such as knowledge of the school community, bureaucratic systems and channels, and has convenient and regular access to the student body. If you are an individual, such as a parent or community member, it is highly recommended that you find an ally, someone on your side, within the school system. This may be a sympathetic teacher or an administrator whom you discover has a passion for cycling.

Sadly, some school administrators have not been willing to approve a mountain biking club, citing liability as their main concern. In this case some communities have formed independent clubs, however, schoolteachers need to be careful about how they go about doing this so as not to burn bridges.

Requirements

Extensive cycling experience is not necessary. Learning as you teach can be one of the most effective ways of both learning and teaching. One should simply have the desire to go mountain biking with kids and learn more about the sport. You should have some spare time. It doesn't have to be a lot. Most clubs meet three days a week in the months before and during the racing season, riding twice a week after school and on a weekend morning. Some clubs may begin with less riding. Consistency is what matters when you are working with young people. It's important to follow through with the plans that get made, so try not to plan too big. It's best to start small and trust that a successful program will naturally grow each year. You should enjoy working with kids. Your main objective should be having fun and riding bikes.



Coaching License

The League offers a high school coaching license and currently requires that head coaches possess a current head coach license (as of the 2008/09 season). Licenses are available on three tiers: Ride Leader, Assistant Coach, and Head Coach. Ride leaders and assistant coaches are strongly encouraged to also obtain and maintain a coach license. There are five components of a coaching license: 1) Field work hours, 2) Professional development hours, 3) Wilderness First Aid (or higher) certification, 4) Background check, and 5) an exam. For more information, please see the document on licensing in the resources section of this manual.

Insurance Issues*

The bottom line is: Don't run a program without adequate insurance coverage! The League provides comprehensive liability insurance to

all teams and coaches who officially register with the League. The details of this coverage are listed below.

General Liability: \$1,000,000 Each Occurrence
\$2,000,000 Aggregate

Includes coverage for trail maintenance and repair by the club. Club rides, training rides/races and other club functions such as meetings and clinics.

Accident Medical: \$25,000 Each Person – Excess Accident Medical, no deductible

Accidental Death: \$10,000

Coverage includes registered coaches and volunteers.

Underwriting company: Lexington Insurance Company and National Union Fire Insurance Company – Member AIG Companies.

**For much more detailed information on insurance and managing the risks associated with running a high school mountain bike team, please see Chapter 3 on Risk Management.*

Organizational Status: Club or Team?

Most high school organizations will start as clubs. Students are allowed to organize clubs at their schools. These clubs vary in size and activity. You might find a DJ club that meets to spin records in a classroom once a month, or a chess club that meets weekly to practice and travel to events where they compete, representing their school. Like the chess club, a mountain bike club can also represent its school. It exists technically as a club, but can work together much like a sports team. Many clubs often refer to themselves as a team, but most high school cycling programs do not yet exist as official school teams, though several high school teams are being treated as teams within their athletic departments*.

Rules differ from state to state, but sports such as snowboarding and skiing have recently been added to the list of official school sports in some states' high school athletic sections. Some athletic departments will not consider cycling a team sport unless it becomes sanctioned by the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF). Before a sport can become an official CIF sport, there has to be a minimal number of participating schools. But there are also other restrictions, for example, having practices or competition on Sunday's is not

permitted. Regardless, forming a club is the first step towards having an official team. As your club forms, it is beneficial to know the guidelines for becoming an official team early on.

The League is currently working with administrators to become recognized by more schools as the CIF-like body that governs mountain biking. Like the CIF, the League is an independent non-profit organization that provides coaches certification, regulates practice, governs the rules for competition and practicing and also provides comprehensive risk management policies. There is no mandate that schools must recognize only CIF sports, but rather a long history of doing so.

**Being treated as a team is a great step towards mainstreaming your program for longevity and support – though initially it mostly means a few more administrative steps (fingerprinting all coaches, an additional one day coaches training course, registering all drivers involved in carpooling, etc.) New “teams” are often best advise advised to operate as school “clubs.”*

Attend the League's Annual Leaders Summit

The Leaders Summit brings together high school mountain bike coaches, ride leaders, and other adults who are interested in getting involved with the high school mountain biking movement. It offers clinics in mountain bike skills instruction and seminars that address effective coaching, training programs for juniors, working with adolescents, and more. The summit is designed to help coaches and other leaders build successful high school mountain bike programs. The summit awards CEU's (Continuing Education Units) for maintaining your NorCal League's high school coaches license.

Recruitment

Once you have the go-ahead from your administration, you may already know some students who are into mountain biking. You are now ready to make cycling accessible to the masses. One bulletin may be all that separates you from a roomful of enthusiastic and excited students. STOP! Make sure you are ready for what is to come. Make sure you have a clear idea of what you want to do and are able to do as your club begins. Be clear about how many

students you can accommodate, based on the number of adults you have available to help and the amount of energy you have to run the club. If 20 students show up and you think you can only handle 10, how are you going to decide who stays and who goes? Think of these things ahead of time. Remember, it is best to start small and grow slowly over time. Most of the large high school mountain bike teams all started out small, and some teams remain small.

Here are some tips for recruiting students:

- ✓ Use the school P.A. system;
- ✓ Post the announcement around the school (try to get some students to do this for you);
- ✓ Get an article in the school paper;
- ✓ Use the school e-mail tree, which is used to make announcements to the student body, parents, and the community;
- ✓ Get students to recruit their peers;
- ✓ Get parents to talk to other parents;
- ✓ Once you are up and running, publicize photos and articles (get students to do this) to keep generating interest in the team.

Team Size

When first starting a club the goal should be to get the word out to everyone. Students need to feel like they are part of something that's important and validates their interest. Try to attract a large crowd, but realize that it's unlikely the club will ever get too big to handle in its first year. There is a natural attrition as students become involved in other activities. The number of students who become active participants is generally about half the number of students who attend the first meeting. You'll find that the students who disappear are involved with conflicting sports and activities. Over time, you may find that the size of your team begins to get unwieldy. You may not have enough coaching staff (assistant coaches and ride leaders) to handle the number of riders you have showing up at practice. Or you may start to feel that the size of your program is beginning to compromise

its quality. If this is the case, you may have to start making more strict guidelines about participation. Such guidelines may be: 3 unexcused absences from practice results in dismissal, no Seniors may join the team, riders with behavior issues may be dismissed from the team (after being given a chance to improve their behavior), etc.



What is the ideal student/coach ratio?

6 to 1 is the recommended maximum number of riders to coaches. However, having 6-8 riders to 2 coaches/ride leaders (with one coach at the front and one coach at the back of the group) is highly recommended. If you have a span of abilities, particularly with beginners, the best ratio may be even smaller, such as 3 to 1.

Dealing with a Wide Variety of Interests

While it may be your goal to have a cross-country mountain bike club (and indeed, that is what the NorCal High School Mountain Bike League is here to support), you may find that you have a wide variety of interests. BMX, dual-slalom, downhill, and road racing are all interests and talents you can expect to find. It is important to acknowledge these talents and interests. For example, if you don't show much regard or respect for downhill you may find that you have alienated yourself from half the bunch. Make it clear that your club will focus on cross-country mountain biking. Be sure to emphasize that the training programs used by the best down-hillers and dual-slalom riders include a large portion of cross-country riding. Juniors interested in road racing should know that professional mountain bikers use road bikes to train and often times make the transition to road racing. The advantages of mountain biking for junior road cyclists include increased handling skills, a larger number of peers,

and greater competition. A junior who is intent on road racing may consider doing both. If a junior chooses to do road only, s/he may be discouraged by the lack of organized competition and peers. While it is important to be open minded to the interests of all young cyclists, and to the disciplines they represent, it is also very important that you are clear about what your club is and is not about. While doing this may create some disappointment up front, it will certainly prevent conflicts down the trail.

Your First Meetings

Once you've gotten the go-ahead from your school and created some interest in your club, it is necessary to have a meeting for both the interested students and their parents. We recommend that you hold two separate meetings, one for students and one for parents, so you can adequately address the different concerns of each group.

Student Meeting

If possible, student meetings should take place at school during regular school hours. Most classrooms are available at lunchtime. Try to find one you can use regularly. Many clubs meet monthly in the fall and every week or every other week during the race season. Be prepared for the first meeting, and keep your goals simple. In addition to introducing yourself, present an idea of the club's structure and goals, including the requirements of participation. Be ready to acknowledge students' ideas and dreams; they serve as the impetus for achieving the single most important goal: getting them out on bikes. At this first meeting you want to convey that participating in the club will be lots of fun. You also should convey that you have high expectations from the students. It is important to set a tone of respect, safety, and good sportsmanship. You should collect a list of names, email addresses and phone numbers, and pass out a survey to help you understand the potential members of your club. Knowing their experiences and interests will help you move forward smoothly and cohesively. Having their names and email addresses will simplify making announcements and holding subsequent meetings. This meeting is also a good time to pass out the necessary forms that you need completed and signed before a student can participate in your club. After this meeting, create a roster of each student's contact,

medical, and emergency contact information. For more information on forms, see Chapter 3.

The expert coach double checks email addresses with the kids as they leave – hard to read handwriting could leave enthusiastic students “out of the loop.”

Parent/Guardian Meeting

Once you know you have some interested students, hold a meeting for parents and guardians. It is best to do this at the school in the early evening. Introduce yourself and describe what your cycling experience is, as well as your experience working with youth and qualifications (certified teacher, parent, CPR/First Aid Certified) to do so. Explain why you started a club and what you hope to achieve. If possible, arrange for any other adults (assistant coaches and ride leaders) who will be working with the team to attend this meeting so



parents/guardians can meet them as well. Describe the structure of the club, the schedule for rides, and when the season starts and ends. Have an informational packet to hand out. Prepare a short presentation on mountain biking; a short video can be worth a thousand words. Don't show an extreme

video, but rather a tape of a mountain biking event. The League has a great video, *Children of the Dirt* (3 or 30 minute version is available) that can be used to show parents what this high school mountain biking thing is all about. Be sure to explain the logistics of your riding plan as well as your safety plan (see section on Risk Management). Acknowledge that mountain biking has inherent risks for injury and explain the steps you will take to keep your riders as safe as possible. However, make sure you don't make any guarantees about their safety. It is important to allow time for parents' questions and to honor their concerns by taking adequate time to answer these questions. Also, let parents/guardians know that there are many ways for them

to get involved with the club. This meeting is also a good time to pass out the necessary forms that you need completed and signed before a student can participate in your club (see chapter 3 for more details on forms). Make sure you collect the names and contact information of the attendees so you can create an email list to keep parents/guardians informed.

The Expert Coach has a separate meeting for returning riders before including new members. During this meeting, select team leaders and/or officers and conduct a discussion about greeting new riders, being aware of conversation around new members, and how best to be encouraging and supporting. A second year rider is not generally aware of how intimidating their race stories are to a brand new member.

Section 4: Structuring your Mountain Bike Program

Constitution

Before you structure your club, make sure you know the school's guidelines for clubs. Most schools require a constitution which includes the meeting times and place, the officers, the mission statement, club goals, and rules. Involving the students in this process is their first opportunity to make the club something of their own. The objective of the second meeting could be to initiate this process. In addition, formulating a mission statement will help you clarify your own objectives for forming a club.

Sample Mission Statements

Our mission is to provide students who have the desire to mountain bike the coaching and camaraderie that will help them achieve both competitive and non-competitive cross-country goals in a safe and enjoyable manner.

-Berkeley High School Mountain Bike Club

To create and develop safe, skilled, courteous, and powerful mountain bikers and foster the best possible race experience.

-El Cerrito High School Mountain Bike Club

Officers

School clubs require student officers. Instead of electing officers, taking volunteers might be more appropriate. It is important to think about your own role and how much responsibility you want the students to carry. It is also important to realize that most sport teams are essentially run by the coach. A "Team Captain" role can be developed into a very important job and should be taken by someone who feels comfortable taking on a leadership position. The positions of president, vice-president, secretary, etc., may be honorary titles that come with taking on very specific tasks. On the other hand, if you want to develop a more student-driven club in which the students do the majority of the work, it may be important to carefully define the roles and responsibilities of the various offices. Don't underestimate the value of these roles and titles, it can mean a great deal to students and will often end up on college and job applications. (See section on Youth Leadership for more ideas about how to get students involved).

Meetings

Meetings are key to keeping students involved and taking care of the week-to-week business necessary to keeping the club up to speed (paperwork, knowing what's going on, etc.). Once riding commences, the meetings are an important part of the feedback loop that leads to good risk management practices. Make sure you establish a consistent time and place for meetings to occur. Keep in mind that meeting every other week might get confusing to people. It might be easier to meet weekly or send out an email announcement a day or two before each meeting. Arrive at the meeting prepared with an agenda. Being unprepared doesn't fly so well with high school students. At times you can delegate some of the meeting facilitation responsibilities to student officials or volunteers.

Record keeping

Be sure to keep organized records from the beginning. Paper will quickly accumulate. Start out with some binders before things become a mess. Get students to help with data entry to organize the roster and information from the survey gathered at the first meetings.

You should print out a copy of the roster for each assistant coach and ride leader to have and carry on every ride. Set up your email account so you can email the whole club at once (students, coaches, and parents). The rapid dissemination of information via email is one of the modern conveniences that makes running a mountain bike club possible.

Section 5: Team Administration and Management

As a coach and role model, you will affect the lives of your riders. Through your approach to coaching, you will show your riders how to deal with many of the challenges they will face in life. You must have a “philosophy” that you can apply and communicate to others. You must commit to it and be ready to define and defend it.

Most certainly, mistakes will be made along the way. But as long as people can recognize your genuineness to learn and to be fair to all team members, you will not fail. In general a coach's first priority should be in determining how they are going to interact with their team and how they wish for the team to interact with them, but most importantly, each other. Below is a summary of the elements of successful team management that will help you refine why and how you coach and administer a team.

Administrative Practices

Keeping organized team records and accounting helps keep the team running smoothly and allows for new staff and interested parents to understand the team's various activities. Thus, it is important to make sure simple tools are used to allow staff and volunteers to maintain the books without too much hassle. One of the easiest methods is to start with a 3-ring binder and create sections for the various topics/subject areas that require attention. For example, tabbed sections should include, but are not limited to: “roster”, “team correspondence”, “accounting”, “waiver forms”, “training program/notes”, “insurance”, “jersey”, “sponsor solicitations”, etc.

Like all paperwork, the key is to keep records up-to-date and relevant. Make sure you devote the necessary time at proper time intervals to keep the records in order. The organizational differences between a small and large team do not really differ much, and good administrative practices make managing a large team less daunting. To make life easier for the team's head coach, it is a good idea to solicit the help of a couple of parents to manage the team's accounting, roster development, and waiver/forms upkeep.

Team Dues

Unless the team is heavily subsidized by the school or has significant sponsorship capital, team dues will be necessary to raise funds to cover expenses. Dues should be established not only to raise funds, but also to build each participating family's “buy-in” to the program. By investing in the team, parents and riders are more committed to participating and contributing to the overall success of the program.



One successful NorCal High School League team required dues of \$250 per season payable in two installments of \$125 each. However, families that could not afford this amount were asked to contribute what they could afford or, if not possible, to inform the head coach of the challenge.

Scholarships

Competitive cycling is inherently more expensive than some other sports due to the necessary required equipment. Each participant will need suitable clothing, shoes, helmet, protective eyewear, and, of course, a bicycle. In addition, registering for races, and traveling to/from events all incur costs which can add up quickly. Thus, to help offset the costs and to encourage a full range of participation, scholarships should be offered. To be able to offer financial assistance, a team will have to collect dues (discussed above) and/or conduct fundraising through activities and sponsorship.

While many parents will want to know the exact costs of participation before allowing their child to join a team, the coach should do what he/she can to assure the interested family that cost will not prevent the interested rider from participating. To be fair and consistent with other assistance programs that may be available to the student, the coach should research existing criteria that is used by the school district to determine which families are eligible for aid programs (e.g., lunch assistance). Apply the same criteria to riders on the team and also be sure to stress to families and students that if cost is the deciding factor, then they should let the coach know so that everyone can work together to make sure funds are raised to allow full participation.



The ease with which a team is able to equip a new rider will grow as a team matures. Graduating riders and families will donate used gear that can be recycled and money can be generated through fundraising efforts. The rewards of participation can be so valuable that a coach should do as much as possible to help needy families.

Academics

Riding on the team is a privilege that should only be allowed if the student is performing in the classroom. Ask parents to monitor academic progress and provide you with updates if necessary. Determine what your school's minimum grade point average is for extracurricular participation and monitor academic status at appropriate intervals. Look into receiving reports from school counselors when grades are issued to allow you to determine if any child is not meeting expectations and do not be afraid to contact parents about poor academic performance. Your timely intervention in this regard can have positive life-long ramifications.

Uniform

While not essential to learning to ride a bicycle, cycling specific clothing can make the activity more enjoyable and safer for the rider. Moreover, a custom designed team uniform "kit" helps build a sense of camaraderie within the team and provides an opportunity to raise funds through the selling of advertisement space on the clothing. At a minimum, a cycling kit includes a jersey and shorts. Additional items that should be considered include gloves (short or long-fingered), wind vest, arm warmers, knee warmers, and socks.

Many custom cycling clothing companies exist and all reputable brands have staff that can assist with the design and layout process. The design and layout process is also a great opportunity for a parent and/or sponsor to get involved with the team. If a team is going to design and order custom clothing, the key is to do the order sufficiently in advance of when you will actually need the clothes as the manufacturing process can be quite time intensive, especially when many teams are all wanting their clothes at the same time. As an example, most cycling teams order their clothes in the early fall (September) in order to have the items by mid-December.

The clothing order can be the single largest expense a team might have during the season and, thus, it is critical to order appropriate numbers of each item in each size. This can be difficult to time and pay as some orders might have to be placed prior to knowing exactly how many kids – and what their sizes are – will be on the team. To address this, it is a good idea to see if you can pre-sell items to interested individuals, staff, local bike shops, sponsors, etc. As order volumes increase, most clothing companies provide greater price discounts.

Cycling clothes are not like your basic cotton t-shirt in that they need to be cared for properly in order to last. Thus, it is important to provide the riders - and their parent(s) - specific instructions on how to wash and care for the clothes. Also, always bring a few extra team items to the race in case someone forgets their jersey and/or shorts.

Website

A team website is a great resource for all involved and interested parties and also provides potential marketing space for sponsors. Ideally, a computer savvy team member will be able to help with the website construction and upkeep, but if no team member has such skills, a volunteer can help out. The website does not need to be fancy and can provide basic information regarding team news, roster of riders, overview of the training program, racing schedule, links, photos, list of sponsors, etc.

With many companies providing web site “hosting” services, the team website can be “sold” as an element of a sponsorship package. The key is to keep the site up-to-date and useful to team members. Consider having more senior team members write race reports and reflections on training to be posted on the site. Sponsors like to see the participants’ stories and it helps build solid writing skills to have students put their thoughts into writing.

Lastly, as the internet has become so pervasive, the team website can provide a very fast way to relay timely information to the entire team. When weather conditions are rough and rain/snow is likely, one coach would post announcements regarding whether or not a practice would occur so that riders could check the website one hour prior to practice to know whether or not to show up. This method saved the coach from having to answer phone calls from riders and saved parents from wondering what is going on.

Student Leadership

The coach should be focused on creating a team to develop a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and commitment amongst the riders. The



team can serve as a catalyst for developing personal characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and a hard work ethic that can be potentially transferred for use in non-sport settings. One way to achieve this is to involve students in the management and organization of the team.

Some teams elect a team president and vice-president while other teams may chose to elect captains for each racing level (freshman, sophomore, junior varsity, and varsity) or a boys and girls captain. Whichever model you select, it is important that each position has a clearly articulated job description and that the selected student(s) be involved in management decisions and be held accountable for tasks and responsibilities.

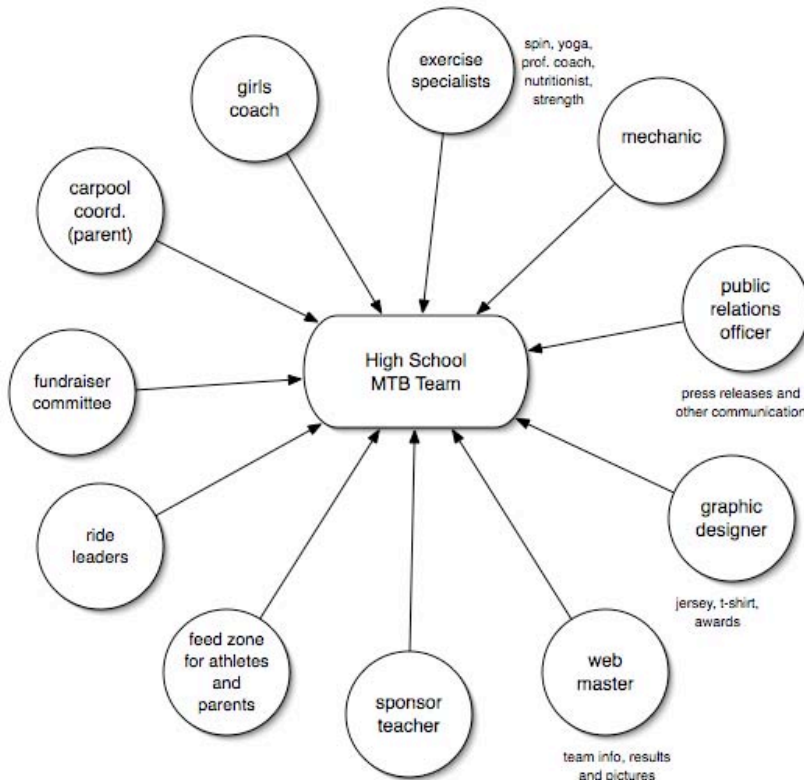
The student leaders should encourage group activities, such as team dinners, volunteering for community projects (e.g., trail repairs), and facilitating team meetings. While coaches will teach young riders about responsibility and coming to practice and races on time and ready to ride hard, these messages should be reinforced by the students’ peers.

It is important to remind the student leaders that they have assumed positions of leadership and, thus, they must not be afraid to take authority with other riders, parents, and ride leaders. While the coach sets the standard, the student leaders are there to reinforce positive behavior. The coach and student leaders must follow through on these expectations and, as a result, the other students will learn to do the same.

Team Support Network

In order to build the best support network possible, a good coach will strive to involve as many volunteers and supporters as possible. To this end, make your needs known and don’t be afraid to ask for help. It takes a team to run a successful high school mountain bike program. The following diagram will help you bring together an effective support team to help your program run smoothly. Not all programs have all of these “positions,” and many can be filled by students or parents.

Ideal Team Support Network



Coaching Staff Recruitment

Most high school mountain bike programs have a three-tiered coaching staff consisting of one head coach, several assistant coaches, and a good number of ride leaders (the number of ride leaders needed will depend on the size of the team.)

While the needs of each team will differ, the basic steps involved in

recruiting and retaining assistant coaches remain essentially the same. The head coach must be sure to:

- Identify volunteer needs;
- Create clear assistant coach / volunteer job descriptions;
- Define target volunteer groups;
- Brainstorm and implement recruitment ideas;
- Develop a timeline;
- Provide proper tools and training;
- Practice on-going marketing and volunteer recruitment; and
- Provide feedback and rewards.

Good help (and lots of it) allows a coach to:

- Have time to observe, consider, plan, and react to individual and team circumstances;
- Spend more one-on-one time with the kids who need it;
- Develop specialized and nuanced training routines for veteran riders;
- Allow teams to be split into smaller units to eliminate long "waiting" interruptions on the training rides;
- Provides more eyes and ears on each ride to insure safety and observe the progress of individual training;
- Consult and share thoughts and opinions with volunteers for collective and better decision-making;
- Provide continuity: have the same coaches and helpers each year.

Possible assistant coach candidates might come from the following sources:

- Collegiate racers and team alumni;
- Pro/semi-pro racers;
- Masters racers;

- Bike-shop employee types;
- Non-racing adult riders (not fitting the above categories);
- Parents of your kids.

It is important to consider the positives/negatives associated with each candidate. For example, while a local semi-pro racer might appear to be a perfect candidate to ride with the faster team members, a coach should discuss “why” the racer wants to ride with the team and make the case very clear that the team rides may not provide necessary training for the more advanced and aspiring racer. A coach should make sure assistants are helping for the “right” reasons so that they do not leave mid-season frustrated that they are not achieving better race results instead of helping the juniors develop.

To make the volunteer program work, the coach must remain flexible, communicate often, and consider the following:

- Scheduling rides to fit the volunteer’s available hours;
- Making "your" training rides one of theirs (but don’t promise this);
- Enable the volunteer to do their job safely and effectively (provide tools);
- Provide rewards (bike parts, jersey, food, etc.);
- Matching volunteers to groups of kids;
- Making it social time for them too;
- Consistency...same time, same place, each week;
- “Expert” volunteers and “generalists” are all beneficial.

Section 6: Fundraising

Having funds available for the team is the head coach’s responsibility but must be achieved with the team’s support. To help manage the funds, it is a good idea to identify a parent who can act as “treasurer.” Have the treasurer open either a checking account for the team or create a separate account that will only be used for team business. Develop a simple spreadsheet to track all income and expenses. With

the accounting system in place, the coach can work with the team members and families to raise funds through grants, donations, sponsorship, fundraising, sales, and team dues. These activities are well suited for parent volunteers to assist with.

Some teams/clubs are able (or required) to open an account with their school.

Grants

Some school districts work closely with their local non-profits to help provide funds to various school based programs. Be sure to investigate if there are programs that help fund after school programs and, if so, develop requests for funding to help offset the costs of scholarships, equipment, travel, etc.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship is always great and many local businesses have long histories of supporting cycling. Many local businesses are owned by people who attended local schools and, thus, they may have an affinity for their alma mater. More information about sponsorship is provided in the next chapter.



Donations

Most schools have a parent run development group that accepts donations on behalf of the many different programs in the schools. Ask school administrators about such programs and, if they exist, make sure to get information on how people can make donations. In some cases, these development groups are non-profits and, thus, donations made to them are tax deductible. Some local businesses will provide a small percentage of each sale/service to a local charity of the client’s choice so it is great if you can find these businesses and then encourage parents to patronize said businesses and

request that their donation go to the local high school mountain bike team.

Sales

Teams can have garage sales to sell old bikes, parts, and donated items and can also advertise on the team website the sale of team clothing. Many alumni who have become cyclists will be very happy to purchase a team jersey if they know that the proceeds will help the team. Look to the local bike shop to sell jerseys on your behalf as well.

Dues

As discussed previously, team dues can help raise funds. Team dues are more about covering the cost of operating a team. By charging dues you are asking parents to commit and chances are your team will be more cohesive as parents will take it more seriously. When you charge dues, be sure to make them a stand-alone charge that is separate from the cost of jersey and race fees (do not de-value the tremendous service you provide!). The money should be used primarily for scholarships, coaches stipends, and coaches travel. Consider having a parent manage this process so that the coach is not left in a position of having to repeatedly ask for help.

Fundraising

Each team should look at their own school to determine if there are fundraising opportunities and not be afraid to get creative. For example, one urban school is able to sell parking spaces in the teacher lot in the evenings as the lot is adjacent to a large performing arts center. This simple job, which only requires a couple of student volunteers and a chaperone, has raised hundreds of dollars in an evening. Be creative and come up with unique ideas that people are willing to help out with.

Section 7: Sponsorship

It goes without saying that every high school kid would like to be a “sponsored” rider. However, the reality is that getting sponsorship for a cycling team is not an easy task. While we like to believe that the

top cyclists in the country are living large and have huge assortments of bikes and equipment to choose from, the reality is that only a very small number of cyclists are sponsored at a level that allows them to buy a house and have a luxurious life off of their bike. The fact is that most mountain bikers are barely making a living being a “pro” and only a small number of all cyclists are making a salary; most of these riders are road cyclists as well.



However, do NOT let this stop you from seeking sponsorship for your high school team. Experience has shown that companies are very interested in youth sports and your team can do quite well in securing sponsors. In particular, local businesses and cycling companies may be more interested in supporting a youth cycling program that has a positive impact on kids. Below are some tips as well as suggestions from a few companies and athletes.

Step 1: Identify Potential Sponsors

First, start with your team members. Ask everyone on the team if their families own a business or if the parents work for a local company that may be interested in sponsoring the team. Second, open the phone book and your rolodex, and think of everyone you know that may be a good contact. Build a list of individuals and firms that you want to pursue. Think broadly as you do not want to limit yourself at this point. Have kids search the Internet and look for cycling-related companies that have online sponsorship applications. Ask your team what types of businesses do they want to be associated with? Of course, everyone will want a bike shop and some cool bike industry companies, but what about a couple local restaurants, doctors or lawyers, office supply stores, etc?

Step 2: Develop Proposal

Think of your relationship with a sponsor like an exchange. What is it that you are offering the sponsor? Develop a concise list of what you are going to provide in exchange for their sponsorship. Options include, but are not limited to: logo placement on the jersey/shorts, logo and product description on the team website, distribution of samples or literature from the sponsor at events and/or to team families and friends, photographs of kids using sponsor's items for marketing purposes, etc.

Also, what is it you are asking for from sponsors? Are you seeking product donation, services to be rendered or financial support? Depending on where you are located, your asking price will vary. Be flexible and ask sponsors what they would like from your team. Your proposal should be a document that is short and to the point. Include photos of the kids and their families and highlight what makes the team special and the benefits the program is providing to the kids. Entice the sponsor to want to be part of what is happening!

Step 3: Soliciting Sponsorships

If you're cold calling, make sure you know something more about the company than what they sell. Make sure to customize the sponsorship application as much as possible. Take the time to find out if there is a sponsorship coordinator and what his or her name is. Be patient when waiting for a reply. Following up is fine, especially if you're on a deadline, but companies get so many requests that it honestly takes a good bit of time to go through them. Some cycling companies ask for around 60 days before they answer. Having connections helps too. If you have a shop guy who already has a relationship with you and can vouch for the team, that's a plus.



According to Todd Wells (highly sponsored Olympian), "the best way to get a sponsor is to develop a relationship with the people you are asking for stuff. It's easier to say "No" to someone you don't know. Networking is key."

Be sure to give yourself plenty of time to seek the sponsors and to negotiate with them. The expert coach says "I am seeking sponsors year-around and really start hard during the summer. Ask team families to begin working with you over the summer, and be sure to determine when your deadline is for the jersey order as this will drive when you need to have sponsor's logos in hand. If you have a website, be sure to include the sponsor's logo and information on the site."

Step 4: Managing the Sponsor

Once you receive a commitment from a sponsor, put it in writing! Send them a thank you letter and spell out exactly what you are providing them and vice-versa. If the sponsor is providing discounted purchases of their product, place your order with sufficient lead time and be organized. Do not send multiple orders for a number of small items. Consolidate orders and pay with one credit card. Whenever communicating with a sponsor, be pleasant and thankful.

Step 5: Provide Timely Updates and Feedback

Companies and businesses generally want to hear from their riders! As one marketing manager said, "We'd like to see your results. I really like to get pictures of the team using my product. Not only can I use them for promo, it shows that my investment is actually being put to good use." To this end, write a summary after each race and send both an email and a few choice photos to each sponsor.

Again, Todd Wells provides solid advice:

As far as keeping the sponsor happy, being a good role model for their brand and products are obvious. I write a race report after each event and send it out to all my sponsors. It's short, less than 1 page, and gives my view of the race. I talk more about the feel of the event than the blow by blow of the race. It gives a different perspective from the race report you can read online. You could have a different kid write a race report after each race and send it to your sponsors. You could even include a picture of the kid writing the report.

Be sure to let sponsors know how their products are working. Kids are tough testers of products, and companies like to know if you are experiencing problems or difficulties with their products. Be courteous and respectful when doing this as you are not complaining but rather helping them refine their product to make it better. Be sure kids never talk trash about a sponsor. Bike parts break occasionally, but a kid should never say a component or item that was provided to the team "sucks."

Step 6: Appreciate the Sponsor

At the end of each season, send a color photo of the team as well as a thank you letter to the sponsor. The letter should be signed by all the riders on the team and, if you can, send a pair of socks, t-shirt, or something as a symbol of your appreciation. For sponsors who have provided a significant contribution, find out the size of your contact and get them a jersey (if they are a cyclist). Ask them if they are interested in renewing their sponsorship for the next season and what, if anything, your team could do differently to make the relationship a more positive and fruitful one.

Many thanks to Austin McInerney and Mark Kintz for their contributions to this chapter.