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# Earn A Letter In Mountain Biking

*Can high-school mountain bike racing take the place of football?*

By John Ker

**B**ack in 2001, Matt Fritzinger, a math teacher at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, California, created an after-school cycling program for his students. When mountain bikers from other schools learned about the program, they got their schools to create similar programs based on Fritzinger's model. Now, some 10 years later, Matt's once-experimental high school mountain biking program is growing by leaps and bounds.

In 2009, Fritzinger's program was launched in a number of Southern California high schools. The program met with widespread acclaim from both the SoCal students who participated and from the school personnel and coaches who volunteered their efforts to get the program off the ground.

Thanks to the success of the program in both Northern and Southern California, other states are organizing efforts to bring the program to their schools as well.

The states of Washington, Colorado, Texas and Minnesota are all working with Fritzinger's organization, the National Interscholastic Cycling Association, to develop similar mountain bike programs for the schools in those states. Given the rapid growth of the program, it looks as though mountain biking could someday become as common in high school athletic programs as track, football, baseball and basketball.

We contacted some of the people involved in the growth of the program to find out how well the program is working and what we can look forward to in the future.



**Serious preparation:** Sofia Hamilton gets some pre-race coaching at the California State Championships. The list of NICA coaches and mechanics reads like a "who's who" of the sport.

Photo by Sean McCoy



# MTB High School

## THE FATHER OF HIGH SCHOOL RACING

### MATT FRITZINGER

Matt Fritzinger was the guy who started the first high school mountain bike program. He's the founder and main man at the National Interscholastic Cycling Association, the group that is now introducing his program to schools in other states.

**MBA:** Sport programs are coming under stringent budget review. How is your program funded?

**Matt Fritzinger:** Yes, funding is harder to come by, but we're fortunate that the funding of each league, and the teams, is fairly diversified. Grants and/or sponsorships help get a new league off the ground, but they quickly transition to a more sustainable model with entry fees, fundraising events and individual donors providing the bulk of the funding. Like any high school sport, we are very grateful to have our booster clubs.

**MBA:** In a football league, all the athletes use the same equipment, like helmets, shoes and pads. In your mountain bike program, there is no equipment guideline. You could have a freshman on a \$300 aluminum hardtail racing another freshman on an \$8000 carbon fiber wonder-bike. How is that fair?

**Matt:** We're just putting the finishing touches on a universal bike design that all high school racers will have to use. I own the company (laughter). Seriously, there is some inequity here, but I don't see enforcing a bike standard of any nature. The NICA is just as much about life skills, and so many of these kids are learning to work on their bikes, upgrade them, or have the incentive to earn and buy a better bike. There may be some "unfairness," but the less likely your parents are to buy a top-end bike, the more these kids benefit from learning to care for and provide their own; that is a skill that will last a lifetime.

**MBA:** Why no gravity events?

**Matt:** I believe an organization needs to be highly focused to succeed in our times, and we're focused on cross-country mountain biking. Gravity sports bring much higher risk factors, and very few students have access to trails where they can legally practice racing

down a hill. But a lot of our riders are going on to succeed in gravity sports; just this year, Kelsey Anderson raced downhill at the Worlds.

**MBA:** What's the biggest obstacle you've faced?

**Matt:** Finding good venues. The NorCal League has grown too big for keeping it all in one venue, and we're hard pressed to find new ones. We have strict guidelines for the trails, and confluences of other features are needed for a sound race course (like an uphill start/finish). Instead of looking for trails, we're looking for parking for 500 cars and asking, "Can we build a four- to six-mile loop here?"

**MBA:** How would you describe the growth of the program?

**Matt:** Exponential since 2001. That means the curve keeps getting steeper. It's daunting.

**MBA:** How big will high school mountain biking be in the next 10 to 20 years? How about 50 years?

**Matt:** We hit 1000 kids racing in 2010. We predict 5000 by 2015. Projecting beyond that is a little harder. It's just as interesting to wonder how that will impact our overall sports culture.

**MBA:** If people want to get a mountain biking program started in their school, what would you tell them to do?

**Matt:** They should contact Gary Boulanger at the NICA, who's in charge of new league development. His number is (650) 521-1624.



**Founding father:** Matt Fritzinger is the executive director of the NICA, the national governing body of high school mountain bike racing.

#### Colorado chasers:

Colorado's high school racing league just started, but it's growing steadily. Washington and Texas will have their first NICA races in 2011, while Minnesota expects to host its first race in 2012.

Photo by Clark Hodge





## A RACER'S POINT OF VIEW

## ZACH VALDEZ

Zach Valdez of Hemet, California, has been involved in SoCal's high school racing program from its inception. A mountain biker since he was 12, Zach had tried both downhill and cross-country racing before getting into the high school program. Once in the program, Zach thrived. Besides being the SoCal High School Cycling League Varsity Champion for both 2009 and 2010, Zach also raced in the Juniors division to a second place at the Sea Otter, a first at the Fontana National, and an 11th at the final World Cup.

**MBA:** How did you become involved with high school mountain bike racing?

**Zach Valdez:** A racing buddy of mine had a pamphlet on the SoCal League at one of the local Rim Nordic mountain bike races. It looked awesome, so with the help of my mom and teacher, Pete Kirkham (now head coach), we started a mountain bike team for the League at Hemet High.

**MBA:** What happens when a kid goes out for the high school mountain bike program?

**Zach:** They sign a few papers and then you're in. If you need a bike, oftentimes the school has team bikes that can be lent or they can help a rider purchase a new bike. It all depends on the team. There are also skills clinics held by every team so that the newer riders aren't going in blind.

**MBA:** Do many kids not make the team?

**Zach:** Unlike in many other high school sports, no one gets rejected. The whole idea of the high school mountain bike leagues is to get students involved with cycling and racing, no matter what their ability. Also, teams are always looking for more kids to ride for them. Usually, it is a case of the more, the merrier.

**MBA:** What are the races like?

**Zach:** The races are awesome! The whole atmosphere is extremely positive. Unlike the racing scene outside the league, all the racers are younger, obviously. They are all looking to go out and race and to have as much fun as possible at the same time. The overall attitude of the racers and parents alike is much happier and more enjoyable than you see at most non-league races. Despite the fact that mountain biking is generally an individual sport, there seems to be camaraderie between the riders on every team, and even between teams. It's so rad that Matt Gunnell [Executive Director of the SoCal League] has such an awesome program going on and puts so much time and effort into it, making it that much better for everyone involved.

**MBA:** Does the high school program get kids ready for bigger events?

**Zach:** The league really helps younger riders get ready for the bigger races. At the league races, you see more competition on the starting line of your race than you would ever see outside of the league.

**SoCal champion:** Zach Valdez was Southern California's top varsity rider the past two years. Since graduating last spring, he now coaches other riders in the program while training for a pro career.

Photo by Sean McCoy



The fact is that unless it's a huge national event, such as Sea Otter or National Champs, not many kids show up to non-league races. It's unfortunate, but it's true. The SoCal League draws large numbers of students from all over the bottom half of California.

It's great to race against a huge field, because it pushes you. No matter where you are in the pack, you are almost always duking it out with several other racers throughout the race. The racers come out of that race wanting to improve and get faster—to place better next race. So then you have students going home and training like crazy and growing as cyclists, only to come to the next race and place better and better. It's a chain reaction that I witness happening constantly throughout the league. I went through that whole process as well. Basically, if it weren't for the SoCal League, I wouldn't be the cyclist I am today. I owe the league a lot!

**MBA:** How did you like being in the program?

**Zach:** I loved it. I was super stoked for every SoCal League race. Like I said before, the whole atmosphere of the races was incredible. I couldn't help but enjoy it. Riding with the team was great, too. Our team had an awesome camaraderie, as did every other team in the league. I'm pretty lucky to have been able to be involved in the whole SoCal League experience. I recently graduated, but I will be back for the 2011 season to help out and coach the Hemet team.



# THE LEAGUE'S BIGGEST CHEERLEADER

## BEN CAPRON

Ben Capron wears many hats. Besides being Chief Brand Officer for Specialized Bicycles, Ben is also a top cross-country racer, a father and the acting president of the board of directors of the National Interscholastic Cycling Association.

**MBA:** What are your goals for the growth of the program?

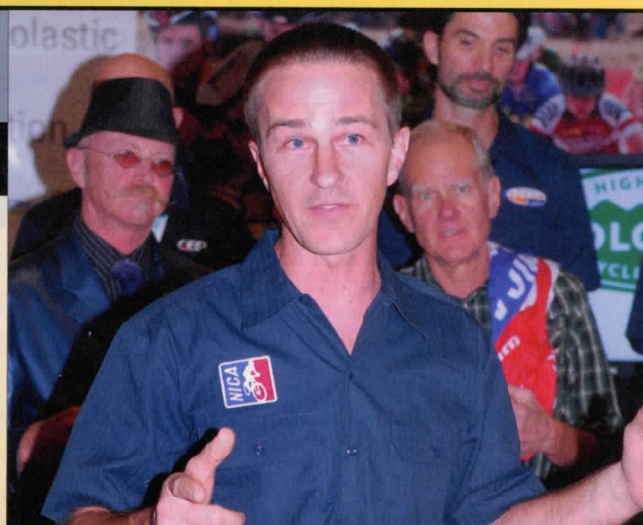
**Ben Capron:** The stated goal is to bring high school mountain biking to student-athletes coast to coast by 2020. And we're ahead of schedule. This year marks a decade of high school mountain biking. Matt Fritzinger started in NorCal; then, two years back, the SoCal league started, and this year there are leagues in Colorado and Texas, with Washington and Minnesota right behind. I'm super stoked at what NICA has been able to achieve and what it will do in the future.

**MBA:** Can you do it?

**Ben:** For sure! But it won't be easy. The NICA and league staff, coaches, volunteers, parents and especially the student-athletes are critical to achieving this goal. What is also really critical right now is increasing sponsorship.

**MBA:** What's the biggest obstacle you're facing?

**Ben:** The biggest challenge is funding. Anyone interested in supporting NICA should contact Nat Lopes (e-mail him at [nat@nationalmtb.org](mailto:nat@nationalmtb.org)). NICA's growth is fantastic, but keeping up with demand for new leagues is a very real challenge. We need to scale the organization rapidly, while maintaining the quality of the proven services. This is critical, and it will require funding, organizational excellence and dedication from the teams. So far, all of the support for NICA has come from individual "trailblazers" and industry sponsors like Specialized, (the Founding National Sponsor), Clif Bar, Trek, SRAM and the Easton Foundations. We need more support from these constituencies, but we really need support from outside of the industry to fuel the full potential. The NICA represents a great value to any potential corporate sponsor who believes in the physical, mental and emotional wellness that riding a bike brings to student athletes.



**Too busy?:** As Chief Brand Officer at Specialized Bicycles, Ben Capron could easily claim to be too busy to get involved in the high school league. Instead, he serves as acting president of the NICA. The group aims to expand from coast to coast by 2020.

The second-biggest challenge is operations. As the number of leagues increase, the complexities of running them also increases. This calls for swift development of the structure and processes within the NICA. The NICA staff is awesome, and the board has a lot to offer, but we've got a tiger by the tail and need to stay ahead of the curve. I am currently carrying the responsibilities of the board president as we look for the right person to fill this critical role on a permanent basis. The right candidate will have experience with nonprofit boards, good business acumen and enough time to take an active role in guiding NICA to success. Anyone who fits the bill and is interested should contact Matt Fritzinger, NICA Executive Director (e-mail him at [matt@nationalmtb.org](mailto:matt@nationalmtb.org)).

**MBA:** Any other thoughts on the program that you'd like to share?

**Ben:** Riding bikes is awesome. The joy, empowerment, and physical and emotional health that result from riding changes lives and the world for the better. Providing the opportunity for student-athletes to participate in mountain biking is a legacy that everyone involved should be proud of. Get involved and be a part of the movement! Check out [www.nationalmtb.org](http://www.nationalmtb.org) to find out how.



**Fast action:** Douglas Britt, a sophomore from Ralston Valley, Colorado, rails a turn at the Colorado State Championships.

Photo by Clark Hodge



**Team spirit:** Sir Francis Drake High School's "Drake Pirates" topped the Division One mountain bike teams in California for both 2009 and 2010. The Marin County school makes their founding fathers proud.

Photo by Sean McCoy



# MTB High School

## THE COLORADO CONNECTION

### KATE RAU

When Colorado's Kate Rau first learned of high school mountain bike racing in Northern California, she was intrigued. Three years later, after a chance meeting with Gary Fisher, Kate took up the cause to bring the program to Colorado.

**MBA:** How did you come to get involved in the program?

**Kate Rau:** As the Program Manager of Singletrack Mountain Bike Adventures, I've been involved with junior mountain bike racing for over a decade. From the late 1990s to 2007, there was one Colorado High School State Championship per year. I heard of NorCal around 2005. In 2008, I met Gary Fisher at the Boulder Trek Store grand opening, and he sent me the video "Children of the Dirt." Two years later, Colorado has a league.

**MBA:** How difficult was it to get the program off the ground?

**Kate:** It was relatively simple with the help of the existing cycling community in Colorado. IMBA sent out an initial announcement in September 2009. The NICA model and systems are relatively easy to replicate. I am fortunate to have the support of Max Bradley, acting Board President, and numerous others who are motivated. A grant from the Easton Foundation was integral to allowing us to start in 2010.

Advocates such as Dave Wiens, Susan DeMattei, Ned Overend and Travis Brown lent a lot of credibility to the effort. Early sponsors such as Primal Wear, Wheat Ridge Cyclery and Yeti brought more attention to the cause.

**MBA:** How much time did you devote to the program to get it going?

**Kate:** I stopped keeping track. Definitely more hours are required during the race season. Plus, volunteers and coaches devote many hours to the effort.

**MBA:** How do you feel the program is going now?

**Kate:** I am thrilled with the consistent participation at races. The positive feedback I hear indicates that it is going quite well. The landowners at the race venues have been very supportive and accommodating, and are open to having us return.

**MBA:** How are things looking for next year? Are other schools interested in getting involved?

**Kate:** I continue to get inquiries from people across the state who want to build teams for next year. Recently, I met with representatives of Denver Public Schools, which currently has no teams in the league. There is a good

chance that 200 racers will be on the start line at the 2011 opener.

**MBA:** What has been the most satisfying part of your involvement in the program?

**Kate:** Witnessing kids engaged in a healthy outdoor activity while being supported by a large community of positive, healthy role models and peers is extremely rewarding. The fact that a group of teenagers spent a Saturday doing trail work was definitely a highlight. Watching riders reach personal goals and cheering their teammates at the finish line is very gratifying.

**MBA:** How much enthusiasm is there for the program among the kids, the schools, the parents and the workers?

**Kate:** The smiles and camaraderie are ever present. Many teams and parents celebrate all weekend with potluck dinners, campfires and pre-race rituals. The pit zone, where teams congregate, is decorated with homemade banners, bike stands and trainers. The race operations staff works extremely hard for 30 hours, and they keep coming back.

**MBA:** Any closing thoughts?

**Kate:** The fact that this is spreading to Texas, Washington and Minnesota is very exciting. I invite anyone interested in youth and outdoor sports to attend a NICA event. Matt Fritzinger deserves to be inducted into the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame. Mountain biking at the high school level is bound to influence kids in many ways, from being physically active, making healthy choices, instilling independence and confidence, creating a positive peer culture, to having a blast! This type of programming resonates with the positive youth development research, where prevention is much cheaper than intervention.



**Rocky Mountain motivator:** After meeting with Gary Fisher, Kate Rau volunteered to start the Colorado branch of the NICA. She and a team of supporters had Colorado's high school program up and running in 2010.

Photo by Ben Boyer



#### Future Olympian?:

Argentina-born Sofia Gomez Villafane of Los Gatos High School was California's Freshmen Girls Series Champ in 2009, and second overall among JV Girls in NorCal in 2010.

Photo by Sean McCoy



**Team spirit:** Thanks to corporate sponsors, teams like this one from Woodcreek High School in Roseville, California, commonly enjoy racing with matching race kits, good bikes and expert coaching.

Photo by Sean McCoy



# THAT'S MY BOY

## JOSE GONZALEZ

A former racer, then a mechanic and now one of the key people in Trek's suspension department, Jose Gonzalez has been in the mountain bike business for 17 years. When his son Christian started riding for his local high school, Jose wondered how he'd do.

**MBA:** Were you surprised your son enrolled in high school racing?

**Jose Gonzalez:** I wasn't sure what to expect when Christian first started to ride with the high school club. He was very into mountain bikes, but it was 98 percent gravity based. He loves going to Mammoth and Whistler. He was totally into gravity riding, and I never remember him being much for climbing or pedaling. He would grumble about having to climb a small grade when I would take him on some cross-country rides!

Although he was very excited about mountain biking being part of his high school curriculum, I honestly thought that he would not enjoy the cross-country side of the sport and it would be short-lived. Boy, was I wrong! He has completely embraced it. Due to the shared experience with the other kids, he now loves riding in general. This program is solely responsible for turning a gravity junkie into an all-around rider and opening up the world of riding that exists when you are able, and willing, to ride up and down.

I want to take this moment to applaud everyone behind the NorCal league, SoCal league and NICA for what they have done for the sport of mountain biking and cycling in general. They have accomplished what NORBA and no one else has been able to do, which is to get 15- to 18-year-old kids excited about riding and racing mountain bikes, specifically cross-country. This will have a very profound and positive long-term impact on the sport.

**MBA:** What have you learned as a dad?

**Jose:** The main thing has been that the sharing of the experience with other kids "masks" the steep fitness curve associated with cycling, especially competitive cycling. It is not an easy sport to compete in, and this environment takes the edge off it and keeps it fun. The biggest revelation has been to see a kid that grumbled about doing five minutes of climbing, and only if there was a substantial gravity pay-off afterwards, now wanting to go out and do 45-minute climbs and two-hour loops. Christian has developed a true competitive hunger and now wants to be very competitive, both ascending and descending. There is a downside to this, however,

and that is that I have to work my buns off and I can't slack on a ride now, since he's right there (Jose smiles).

**MBA:** You've been around racing for years. What's different about the high school league?

**Jose:** I think the main thing is that it's all about the kids and that the events have a very grassroots/homegrown feel to them. Kids need to be able to develop and grow at their own pace outside an adult-focused environment. Unfortunately, almost all mountain bike competition was focused on adults prior to the high school program. Domestically, youth-oriented mountain bike programs were almost non-existent prior to the high school league. The only exception I'm aware of is Durango's DEVO program, which has been running for over 10 years.

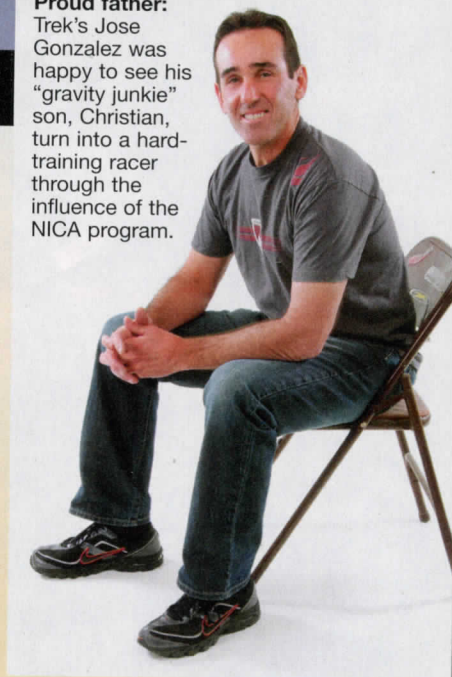
Even at the California State Championship last year, where there were about 500 kids racing, the kids could be kids and not feel overly pressured or overwhelmed by the event itself. The ambience and atmosphere at the events have a great vibe with a strong emphasis on participation, and the results are icing on the cake. It's definitely a competitive sport, but it's not only about the racing. NICA stays focused on the experience and works on building that culture in from the ground up. By doing that, the kids develop a true interest and passion for the sport of mountain biking, which makes it more likely that they will make it a lifelong sport—competitive or otherwise.

As far as the events, the guys are doing a great job in all aspects of the events. But I believe that the crux has been the course designs and remaining at normal altitude for the specific region. The courses are designed to be challenging and interesting for the kids, but not too physically grueling or technically difficult, so kids have a very positive experience and don't get discouraged. And the more advanced kids still feel challenged due to their increased pace, speed and competition.

**MBA:** What's it like to be involved as the parent of a high school mountain bike racer?

**Jose:** It's been an incredible experience to watch my son develop both as an individual and as an athlete through this program. This sport is not an easy one at any level, and it requires so much mental toughness, discipline, physical ability, self-accountability and responsibility. All

**Proud father:** Trek's Jose Gonzalez was happy to see his "gravity junkie" son, Christian, turn into a hard-training racer through the influence of the NICA program.



of these are life skills. It has instilled a lot of self-esteem and self-confidence in my son, and I've witnessed how it's also helped him socially at school.

But the thing that's truly priceless is being able to share the passion for and enjoyment of the sport with my son. We have now begun to travel around the country to ride epic locations and share the adventure. Prior to the high school program, we were limited to lift-assisted, resort riding. This program transformed him into an all-around mountain bike rider instead of just a gravity-focused rider, and he's now even more motivated to become a better all-around rider. Christian has also really noticed the benefits and gains from participating in the high school cross-country league crossing over to his downhill riding. He's become a better overall rider and now fully appreciates how much better of a downhill he is due to the fitness and bike time he's developed through cross-country racing. He just recently got his first downhill podium finish, and he attributed a good part of it to being fit and pedaling.

**MBA:** What advice would you give to other parents?

**Jose:** The main thing is to have fun with it and to join the kids in the riding if you can. Even if you are not currently a rider, this is a great opportunity to get into the sport and progress along with your child. Not only are you sharing the experience and spending quality time together, but it will also help you stay youthful, healthy and fit. Who knows? It may completely change your life. Mountain biking truly is an incredible lifelong sport that can be shared and enjoyed well into our golden years. □