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PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT #40063752



MEMBERS OF THE BOULDER HIGH MOUNTAIN BIKE TEAM CELEBRATE A SUCCESSFUL SEASON OF THE COLORADO HIGH SCHOOL CYCLING LEAGUE.



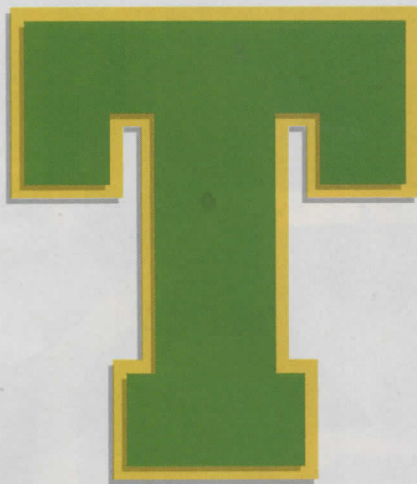
SCHOOL OF ROCK

[...and sand, and mud, and crashes, and
shot-out-of-a-cannon-fast singletrack.]

THE FASTEST KIDS COMPETING IN A NEW HIGH SCHOOL MOUNTAIN BIKING LEAGUE WILL
STAND ON A PODIUM. BUT THOUSANDS OF OTHERS ARE GAINING SOMETHING FAR MORE IMPORTANT.

by TRACY ROSS ■ photographed by SAM ADAMS

MEMBERS OF
BOULDER HIGH
MOUNTAIN BIKE
CELEBRATE
SUCCESSFUL
SEASON OF THE
COLORADO HIGH
SCHOOL CYCLING
LEAGUE.



The first time she crashed, 16-year-old Dominique Fenichell landed on a stone, bloodying her knees and bruising her elbow. The second time, dirt smeared across her almond-colored skin and clumps of earth stuck in her sun-streaked brown ponytail. Even when she stayed upright that afternoon, she labored. It was a hot, bright Colorado day at the Betasso Preserve west of Boulder. Lactic acid flooded her legs until they felt so heavy she almost stopped pedaling. The bike swayed unsteadily, and she breathed in raspy gulps. But she clung to the bar and used her last reserves of energy to keep riding.

Dominique had her reasons to keep going. She had promised herself that she'd at least finish the ride because coach Ben Boyer had personally invited her to try out the team. He hadn't said try out *for* the Boulder High School team—back then tryouts weren't necessary.

In Colorado in 2010, competitive high school mountain biking was a see-how-it-goes experiment. Some thought the sport was too specialized, too expensive to catch on. Others were wishfully calling it the most vibrant thing to happen to cycling since the advent of suspension forks. In that way, Dominique symbolized the freshly minted Colorado league: They were both wobbly and new, trying to find their legs, unsure where this was going. But if her state's high school experiment flourished, advocates of the program hoped, other states might soon create similar leagues. Dominique didn't know it at the time, but that hope fell on the shoulders of students like her. If this first-time mountain biker could stick it out, then maybe thousands of others would also get their chance.

Of course, on this day none of that mattered to Dominique, who simply hoped to survive the squad's first practice. This was Boulder, after all, and many of her would-be teammates were already seasoned riders. They had shot down the Betasso trails, bunny-hopping over rocks and roots. When Dominique tried to hop, her bike slid out from under her, pitching her onto the sun-baked earth again.

If you had asked her then, Dominique might have said that the ride, like her life, was a disaster. Her parents had uprooted her from her hometown of Quito, Ecuador, earlier that year, and she'd failed to make a single friend since they arrived. She rode with the constant fear of migraine headaches that came on during other high-impact sports, eventually forcing her to retreat to the solitude of her darkened bedroom.

Nearing the finish at last, Dominique half expected everyone on the Boulder High team to be shaking their heads and sneering. But when she wobbled back to the trailhead, they were grouped in a pack, cheering: "Yeah, Dominique! That was awesome. How'd you like it?"

Too exhausted to speak, Dominique stood back and observed her well-wishers, none of whom had seemed to notice her in school but who now smiled at her. Her knees, arms, and elbows seeped bright red, pebble-laden blood, and her eyes stung from sweat. Though the kids' voices buoyed her, she had no idea how she could complete another one of Boyer's grueling rides. But when they asked if she'd be back to practice the following Thursday, she blurted out, "Sure." She thought, *Why not? I have a bike.*

In the fall of 2010, Boulder High was just one of a handful of schools in the United States testing competitive high school mountain bike programs. Schools in Washington, Utah, Texas, and Minnesota were also getting teams up and running. The programs had caught the attention of educators, cycling fans, and parents, whose sons and daughters were bucking traditional team sports like football and volleyball. But the idea of starting these teams was highly counterintuitive: In all but a few pockets of the country, cycling participation had been

WHEN DOMINIQUE TRIED TO HOP, HER BIKE SLID OUT FROM BENEATH HER, PITCHING HER ONTO THE SUN-BAKED EARTH AGAIN.

declining for a decade. Worse yet, kids were abandoning bikes en masse—that year only 20 percent of children between the ages of 7 and 17 rode a bike, down from 25 percent just 10 years earlier. The growing popularity of electronic games, coupled with increasingly fast-food-based diets, had led to an epidemic of childhood obesity that, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), affected 17 percent of American children by 2009.

But while so many bikes sat unused on back porches and in garages, a math teacher in Berkeley, California, named Matt Fritzinger was developing a cycling program for high schoolers that he dreamed would one day rival traditional scholastic sports. A former competitive racer, Fritzinger spent his adolescence in Libertyville, Illinois, where as a teenager he raced at the local velodrome while also steadily draining the booze from his parents' liquor cabinet. At 17, he realized alcohol was preventing him from becoming a better athlete, so he quit drinking and turned his focus to triathlons. By 1995 he had graduated from UC Berkeley—where he competed on the cycling team—and settled into a comfortable career teaching at Berkeley High. But something was missing.

"It bugged me that the other teachers were coaching

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their favorite sports and building positive relationships with kids that spanned three or four years," says Fritzinger, who is now 41.

He posted a flyer for a cycling club, and students were interested—but in mountain biking, not road riding. So he changed gears and four kids joined, including one who had broken his jaw earlier in the year. When Fritzinger discovered that the fracture happened during a drinking binge, he drew on his own experience with alcohol. "I knew the kids needed more than just a club," he says. "They needed goals and racing to keep them out of trouble."

The team rode for two years before its first race in the spring of 2001. Fritzinger gave the competitions he'd organized a name—the NorCal High School Mountain Bike Racing Series—and, with 60 kids, the nation's first scholastic mountain bike league was born. The students who entered those early races were a diverse bunch—fat, poor, rich, fit, shy, and extroverted. Many had never previously raced a bike.

The seeds of a new idea were planted. And for Fritzinger, introducing the sport to teenagers became his life's focus.

**MOUNTAIN
BIKING GAVE
DOMINIQUE
FENICHELL
A WAY TO
COPE WITH
DEBILITATING
MIGRAINES.**

Days after Dominique's first shaky ride with the Boulder High team, she returned for its next three-times-a-week practice at Betasso. Coach Boyer, a 44-year-old former road racer, broke the team into two groups. The fastest riders pedaled up the Link Trail, which climbs 650 feet over 1.2 miles to the top of Betasso—too much for a newbie. So Dominique, along with a few others, rode in the school van, meeting the rest of the team at the trailhead.

Sitting in the front passenger seat, watching the blocky granite walls of Boulder Canyon pass by, she reexamined what she'd gotten herself into. Only six months earlier, she'd been living 3,000 miles away, in Quito, with her friends and her beloved horse, Kosobo. She'd been a strong, emotionally secure athlete and a seasoned horse jumper. But Ecuador's government had become increasingly unstable, driving her parents to relocate in Boulder. Then came Dominique's headaches, which flared almost every time she went running.

It was too early to tell if mountain biking, with its jarring blows, would bring them back. The migraines made her brain feel as if it were being squeezed between the doors of an elevator. Often, after the headaches lifted, she'd feel depressed and disoriented. To cheer herself, she would sit in her bedroom and lose herself in painting, mixing colors, dreaming up scenes based on books she'd read by authors like Kierkegaard and Plato.

Ironically, her love of painting, and the escape it provided, was yet another source of discord in her life. She was so drawn to it that she hoped to one day attend art school, but Dominique's parents had made it clear that they would prefer if their daughter pursued a career in medicine or business. Their refusal to yield had seemed like an affront to Dominique—still adjusting to her new life in Boulder, she was desperately trying to form some notion of her identity. But she



didn't feel secure enough for a full-blown rebellion. Instead, she poured her anger and disappointment onto the canvas.

Eventually, her athlete's body and her desire to make friends made her restless. Unable to run, she needed something else. Which is why, that summer, she had traveled with her mother to see a chiropractor—a specialist who they hoped could diagnose and fix her migraines.

After examining Dominique, the chiropractor traced the migraines to a slight abnormality in her spine—a lasting effect of scoliosis. He suggested that she get a mountain bike and ride it for exercise. Dominique bought a Trek Fuel—and, just like that, she says, something miraculous happened. Walking down a hallway at Boulder High, she had overheard

ents cooked burgers over grills, coaches performed last-minute wrench jobs. An awkward army of 144 kids from 17 schools mingled around fires, laughing and shoving, or bunny-hopping their bikes. They set up camp under a star-choked sky with their families.

Standing among them, Dominique took stock of her competition. Accomplished racers like Taylor and Kelsey Phinney—the son and daughter of Tour de France rider Davis Phinney—were there, but so were dozens of first-timers. The cockier riders paraded around on high-dollar carbon-fiber hardtails, but the majority straddled low-end rides: Rockhoppers and even Huffys. Battling butterflies that felt more like pterodactyls in her stomach, Dominique stayed at the campground until 10 p.m., then accompanied her parents—who thought camping would be too cold for her—to a hotel in Buena Vista.

The following day broke under a gauzy sky as competitors pre-rode an 11-mile course that wound through sagebrush, oak, and aspen groves. By 9:45 a.m., the first wave of girls—Division I varsity—had filled the starting corral. Pigtailed bouncers beneath multicolored helmets as a crowd of onlookers offered encour-



Boyer talking about a new mountain bike team that would include boys and girls of all abilities and compete in the newly formed Colorado High School Cycling League. She had nervously introduced herself and asked, "How do I join?"

Standing at Betasso now, Dominique's head swirled with doubt, but also hope. She rode that day, surviving her second practice. A third followed, then a fourth, and fifth, until she could ride the 3.2-mile loop with only a couple of crashes. And somewhere in there she began to feel something—a flicker of excitement she couldn't yet clearly articulate.

Whatever it was, she would need that rush to make it through the first race of the Colorado league's inaugural season, the Chalk Creek Challenge.

Three hours after leaving school, on the night before the race, the Boulder High team pulled into the Chalk Creek Campground, near Nathrop, Colorado. Departing the van, they could smell sulfur from nearby Mt. Princeton Hot Springs and see the triple 14,000-foot summits of Mounts Princeton, Shavano, and Antero. As par-

IN JUST ONE YEAR, FENICHELL, LEFT, IMPROVED FROM FIRST-TIMER TO PODIUM THREAT.

agement. "Ride fast, brake late, and slide the rear," one adult shouted as racers nervously gripped their handlebars, and male racers ran alongside, rattling cowbells.

Starting behind the varsity girls, Dominique steadied her nerves by studying the course. It climbed out of the meadow, wound through creosote, and plunged down rocky single-track into a grove of cottonwoods. She wondered if she had the strength to survive the first section, let alone race the other girls. When her start finally came, she burst out of the corral, hammered uphill, and crashed hard on the downhill. But under a blistering sun that made the inside of her mouth feel like sandpaper, she stood up, swung a leg across her saddle, swore—twice—and kept riding. To her surprise, she finished second out of the five junior varsity girls.

After the Chalk Creek Challenge, Dominique worked harder to keep pace with the faster racers. That one of her teammates also raced for the Garmin Development Team and another competed on the pro cyclocross circuit didn't matter to her. Failing felt like torture, so she kept pushing herself. Coach Boyer taught her how to corner—digging her tires into turns to keep her speed—and to descend the rockiest terrain in the attack position—arms bent, butt behind her seat, her body loose and relaxed. Most important, he taught her one of mountain biking's most fundamental skills: Look ahead and focus on where you want to go, not on the obstacles in your way.

As Dominique's speed began to increase, so did her confidence. She still crashed often, and struggled on the climbs, but sometimes everything clicked. During those brief moments, she loved the feeling of wind whipping in her face, tall grass against her shins, and particles of dirt kicking up from under her tires. During those fleeting moments, all her doubts and worries seemed to dissolve, like dust settling on the singletrack behind her: "There's a time when I'm out on the trails that my brain seems to catch fire," she once wrote with an adolescent flourish that, coming from an overachiever like Dominique, seems more endearing than pretentious. "My sensation of being alive and my awareness increases tenfold. I experience a happiness that is impossible in an ordinary state."

Sometimes she wished she could pocket the feeling and call it up the next time she and her parents argued. That she couldn't, that tempers still flared whenever she brought up art school, made her angry. "The Fenichells don't shout," according to Dominique, but tension simmered beneath the surface.

Fortunately, riding helped the family cope. Through Dominique, her father had rekindled an old passion for cycling. And when they came to an impasse—an MBA versus a BA, or Brown University versus the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD)—he and Dominique began a practice of driving out to Betasso to ride until the tension lifted.

In school, Dominique's identity began to crystallize around mountain biking. Team practices included long rides on Sundays, which Boyer filmed for the school's internal TV channel. When students watched the team powering up hills, they saw Dominique, often bleeding but always smiling. Before long, other students were calling her "the mountain biker."

By the end of her junior year, she had come so far that she was invited to join Boulder's top development team, Tokyo Joe's. Suddenly she was riding with the best girls in the county, including Fairview High's 14-year-old Ksenia Lepikhina. Between June and August, the girls crisscrossed Colorado. Before races they'd study each turn, every transition. Though Dominique couldn't keep up with Ksenia, who'd been riding since first grade, she was improving almost daily. Boyer, too, could see that Dominique was becoming a more confident rider.

"When we first started, Dominique was ultracautious, hitting the brakes on the tiniest downhill," Boyer recalled. "I'd tell her to trust her suspension, to think of flying over stuff, to trust herself. Pretty soon we rode [much steeper] Buffalo Creek, and I could barely stay on her rear wheel. I started telling the other riders, 'If you want to nail something, follow Dominique's line.'"

In 2005, word had spread of the teacher who was offering an alternative to baseball, track, and other entrenched sports. It helped Fritzinger that Northern California was the birthplace of mountain biking, and that many of its early adopters were now parents with ninth or tenth graders. No doubt these influences had contributed to those initial 60 kids growing to 80 for the league's second season.

The larger the league grew, the more people called Fritzinger to ask how they could establish similar programs in their hometowns. He wanted to help, and would have loved to see bike racing at every high school in the country, but he was struggling just to keep his league afloat, maxing out his credit cards and working 70-hour weeks.

One of the most persistent suitors was a gregarious multisport athlete named Quintin Reich who had visions of creating a similar program in Southern California. As it turned out, Reich was also the son-in-law of Jim Easton, CEO of the multimillion-dollar sports-equipment company Easton Sports,

and its charitable arm, Easton Foundations. After attending the NorCal State Championships in 2008, Reich returned home and created a business plan for a SoCal League. He then showed it to his father-in-law, who offered to help. The next time Reich visited, he handed Fritzinger a check for \$100,000, seed money to start a high school mountain bike program around Los Angeles—the league's first franchise.

When the new league grew by 50 percent in its first year, Fritzinger knew it was time to expand. And when he heard competitors proudly exclaiming to their parents, "I took eleventh place," he allowed himself to imagine a world in which mountain bike racing might someday be as big as Little League. In late 2008, he began compiling his decades of race experience into a model he could use to develop leagues in all 50 states. Then he set up a board of directors, secured nonprofit status, and formed NICA, the National Interscholastic Cycling Association. At the core was the epiphany he had 10 years earlier: Mountain biking, perhaps because it's a little edgy, gives students, especially those who may be put off by traditional stick-and-ball sports, a way to distinguish themselves.

WHEN NICA UNVEILED ITS PLAN TO GROW HIGH SCHOOL MOUNTAIN BIKING COAST TO COAST, IT CAUSED AN IMMEDIATE FRENZY.

"Along the way they get in good shape, their self-esteem rises, and they become more focused in other areas of their lives," Fritzinger says. "I've had parents say that before the sport of mountain biking came along, their kid spent a lot of time on the couch and was on the verge of dropping out."

In 2009, Fritzinger unveiled NICA at Interbike—the industry trade show—along with his goal to "grow high school mountain biking coast to coast by 2020." It caused an immediate and sustained frenzy. Clif Bar, Trek, and Specialized increased their sponsorships, some by as much as 280 percent. SRAM and then Jeep joined as major sponsors. Everyone saw high school mountain biking as the future of the sport. According to a 2012 Outdoor Industry Association study, 6.8 million people currently mountain bike in the United States. Cycling luminary and NICA proponent Gary Fisher also likes to point out that there are 165,000 high schools in America. If the league can establish a toehold in just 10 percent of them, he says, participation in the sport will grow by 5 percent. That works out to 340,000 new mountain bikers every four years.

But like any sport that grows exponentially, the organization has problems that still need to be solved. For example, Fritzinger and others have wrestled with what to do about the discrepancy in equipment after watching some racers straddle \$5,000 full-carbon race machines while others ride squeaky department-store models.

Coaches like Jon Bernhard from Buena Vista, Colorado, say that economic disparity—more than fitness or training—creates an unbalanced playing field at NICA races. “Teams like Boulder and Fairview, where parents have a lot of money, get the most wins at these races,” he says. “But my kids ride bikes donated from a rental fleet.”

The issue of financial equality isn’t likely to disappear soon, but fans of the program say NICA’s positive influence on kids outweighs these ongoing

issues. Instead of chalky and terrifying, like it had the last time around. But to Dominique, winning just felt like a bonus, rather than the whole prize. She’d already extracted so much from mountain biking. Coming to a compromise with her parents, she’d applied to (and would be accepted into) some of the country’s best schools, and would choose RISD, which also happened to have a cycling team. For her painting, she’d been awarded a prestigious Scholastic Gold Key award. For her growth on the Boulder High team, coach Boyer nominated her for NICA’s All-Star Athlete Award.

At her next race, the Snow Mountain Ranch Stampede near the town of Winter Park, Colorado, the sun crisped, then wilted the red and yellow aspens. The mood in the pit zone was charged, electric. That morning, league officials had made the controversial decision to bump Fairview’s freshman Ksenia Lepikhina (Dominique’s Tokyo Joe’s teammate) from the girls junior varsity division to varsity, based on her first place, seven-minute-lead victory at the previous race. Several coaches cried foul, but Dominique didn’t care. She welcomed another chance to compete against Ksenia.

For three-quarters of the race they were neck and neck, so far ahead of the



ing issues. In fact, the league seems certain to meet its lofty expansion plans. Six states have programs operating this year, while another three will start leagues next year. Specialized founder Mike Sinyard believes this momentum will continue, and in some places NICA could even replicate what happened in Marin County, California, not far from his company’s headquarters. “One hundred percent of high schools have mountain bike teams there,” he says, “and at some schools there are more kids mountain biking than in football, soccer, or any other team.”

By Dominique’s senior year, the Colorado league had doubled in size and the Boulder High team had grown from 17 to 39 riders. At the team’s first meeting, in August, it voted Dominique its cocaptain. After mountain biking for just over a year, she was already riding in the fastest group, often crushing most of her teammates.

She then won the season’s first race, the 2011 Chalk Creek Challenge, bettering her previous time by a whopping 13 minutes. The trail felt fast and flowing

THE FLEDGLING COLORADO LEAGUE HAS BEEN PRAISED BY STUDENTS, ORGANIZERS, AND COACHES.

group it felt like the two of them were on their own personal joyride. They talked as they rode over the dry, matte single-track, promising to pull each other to the finish. It might have happened, but they came to a hill that jutted from the earth at a 30-degree angle. Ksenia cleared it; Dominique didn’t.

Dominique knew that she would probably never stand on an Olympic podium—she might not even make the podium on this day—but she now had a sense of what it was going to take to navigate through life. She might have headaches and a crooked back and fights with people she loved, but she’d also have the bike. She believed she’d found a way to cope with all of it, to smooth out all the harsh bumps. And wasn’t that what Matt Fritzinger had been aiming for from the start?

On the singletrack at Snow Mountain Ranch, the blazing Rocky Mountain sun reminded Dominique of Quito, but the speed beneath her wheels put her squarely in the moment. The spectators could see her cranking the pedals, pushing herself forward, flying through the bright yellow aspens. In a clearing before the finish, she splashed through a small creek, bunny-hopped a wooden plank, and sprinted through a glittering sand trap.

Lining both sides of the final climb, the crowd cheered, clapped, stomped their feet, clanged cowbells. Dominique could hear their voices building, gathering, flowing over the sagebrush. She could see Ksenia in the distance, too far ahead now to catch. But she also heard the crowd yelling, “Keep pedaling, Dominique! Ride faster!” And so she did. **[E]**