

Newspaper Writing

Richard Williamson • Fort Myers, FL

For more than two years, I wrote a regular column in the Fort Myers News-Press on cycling, ending in the summer of 2001. Before that and since, I freelance on cycling, lacrosse, kayaking, canoeing, sailing, general sports, and fitness related articles (as well as other topics). These samples are typical of articles that appear in that column.

All the young guys are behind us... Older riders lead the pack.
Published in the Fort Myers News-Press

All the young guys are somewhere behind us,” grinned Tom Hauser, who finished first in the inaugural Royal Palm Classic 100-mile ride. Hauser, 56, rolled into Buckingham Park with Mike Bricker, 61, and Dale Sterz, 59. The trio completed the 100-mile ride in 4 hours and 49 minutes, almost 20 minutes ahead of the next group of riders.

Nearly 320 cyclists began the inaugural Royal Palm Classic, which benefited the Lee County Breast Screening Center. The event featured ride routes of 15, 30, 62, and 100 miles through rural eastern Lee County. The ride brought in nearly \$10,000 for the charity.

“The turnout really exceeded our expectations,” said ride organizer Jerry Tonti. “Most rides like this start out with as few as 50 riders.”

Charity rides like the Royal Palm Classic are not races, but finishing first in one of the distances takes a lot of effort. “It’s a lot like a race,” said Iain Cameron, 60, a resident of the Channel Islands in England who spends several months in Southwest Florida every year. He finished the 62-mile ride ahead of two much younger cyclists.

“I wanted to sprint at the end,” Cameron said. “But I think they were a wee bit tired out by then.”

Not all Royal Palm participants were interested in speed. “I was probably the only person there who had a basket on her bike,” said Mary Ellen Petersen. Petersen, 45, of Fort Myers did the 30-mile loop on an older road bike—complete with basketó

after a friend talked her into it. “I never expected to do a bike ride like this, but I am glad I came out.”

Most riders commended the Royal Palm Classic for the well-organized event, with well-stocked rest stops and good support staff. But it was the ride route that was the real hit with participants.

“Just a great course, beautiful countryside, fabulous roads. I really enjoyed it,” said Sterz. “One of the best group rides I have ever done.”

Several riders found course markers inadequate, especially early in the event. After going several miles off track, they found their mistake by referring to a course map.

Cynthia Coy, 33, of Fort Myers commented that more police escorts would have made some of the larger intersections safer. “But, for a first time event, it was pretty well done. I will come back again next year.”

“It was great going out,” said Bill Doughty, 40, referring to the strong tailwind that accompanied riders on the first leg of the ride. After a midpoint turnaround, riders in all distance categories met a strong headwind.

After 62 or 100 miles, riders in groups were able to draft off each other and finished at a good pace. Solo riders limped in to the finish at Buckingham Park.

“There’s always a headwind coming home,” Doughty said.

Fitting rides into schedule can be a difficult process.
Published in the Fort Myers News-Press

For cyclists, summer means Tour de France. For two weeks, we are reminded of the incredible distance between us—the recreational cyclists—and the pros. Each day, they race distances that often equal our entire weekly total.

So, how can a regular working stiff like me—or you—get into that kind of shape? Simple answer is, you can’t. At least not without changing careers. Those guys on television are working stiff, too, but their job is to bicycle. While we are pushing pencils at our desks they are pushing big gears in race after race through the European countryside.

According to former U.S. National Cycling Coach Eddie Borsiewicz, the man responsible for raising American cycling to world class, racing is the best training for racing. To get into race-shape, you must race. Unfortunately, in Southwest Florida, there just aren’t any opportunities for road racing.

But you do have some options that will put you in the racing spirit if not in an actual race. Try the Wednesday night ride from Fort Myers Schwinn on U.S.41. It’s a moderately fast out-and-back ride on Lee County Bike Paths to Bunch Beach, where there is a mid-point sprint.

Every weekend morning, the Caloosa Riders Bicycle Club offers organized rides of varying distances leaving from locations around Lee County. While each ride attracts cyclists of all abilities (you will always find someone going your speed), the Saturday rides are best characterized as brisk. On Sunday, the club rides are noticeably slower. That’s because of Bob’s Ride.

Leaving from the Bell Tower Shopping Center at 7:30am, Bob’s Ride is, to put it mildly, fast. Any cyclist who fancies himself a racer shows up for 50 grueling, pulse-pounding miles. Bob Wright, 54, a former bike racer from Illinois, has taken it on himself to make Southwest Florida cycling more like racing. The twenty or so riders who show up think it’s working.

Bob’s Rides are part training ride, part seminar on proper cycling technique. There are two rules:

first, Bob is in charge; second, the group’s performance is more important than yours alone. Bob is called “coach,” and he is a good one. From him, local cyclists have learned the basics of bike racing such as sprinting, rotating pace-lines, and race strategy. Like Tour de France racers, riders each take the lead of the paceline for a few seconds before pulling off to let the next rider through. Speeds often exceed 30 miles per hour.

Each week, the ride goes the same out-and-back route to Lehigh Acres, with a pre-determined warm-up, cool-down, and several sprints. Throughout the ride, Bob shouts encouragement and instructs riders on how to work together as a group and how to be more efficient individually. If you fall off the pace on the way out, you can rejoin the group when it returns. The return trip is usually blazingly fast. If you drop then you are on your own until the cooldown area after the sprint.

“It’s a great training ride. It takes some work to get used to the pace and the formation,” Bob said, “but the ride is getting consistently faster each week.”

To find out more about the Caloosa Riders, call ride coordinator Jackie Kampfert at 995-6665. Bob Wright can be reached at 482-8899. Helmets are required.

Terms of Engearment.
Published in the Fort Myers News-Press

Terms of Engearment (well, that’s what I’d call it if I were writing ad copy for it...)

Cycling is a sport of jargon. Sounding like you know your stuff is just as important as looking like you can ride. You don’t want to be a “Fred,” or an uncoordinated new rider, do you?

Every ride or race starts with a bunch of riders, usally called the “group” or, in races, the “peleton.” Typically, the group maintains the average speed of the ride or race attendants. Behind it, or “off the back” are riders who have been “dropped.” You don’t want to be dropped. Instead, you’d rather be “off the front” in a “break away” group.

To “get away” off the front, you have to “attack.” An attack is a fast, prolonged effort away from the peleton. If you attack alone, it is called “taking a flyer.” The best situation is to be away with a small group so you can form a “paceline,” where riders draft behind a leader. A “rotating paceline” features a circular motion of riders “pulling,” or taking the lead, for just a few seconds before rotating off to the back of the line. Speeds can reach well above 30 miles per hour.

In big road races, your coach, or “director sportif,” dictates the tactics for your team. He’ll tell you when to attack, when to “sit in” or rest behind the leaders, and when to “chase.” Breakaway riders’ teammates try to “block” for them. Blocking is systematic obstruction of the chase effort. Blockers will jump to chase groups and sit in or refuse to pull, messing up the rhythm of the chase. With enough team members, blockers can spread out across the road and physically slow the group..

In a fast race, you might “blow up,” your legs unable to keep pace anymore. Worse is “bonking,” when you’ve used up all your reserves of energy and are running on empty.

As you get close to the finish, attacks become more frequent. Riders get “curbed” to the roadside or have their front wheel

The mountain biker she is.
Published in the Fort Myers News-Press

A great rooster tail of mud sprays from the rear wheel as the knobby tire bites into the wet soil. The mountain bike surges foward, jumps a log. Grinds over a rocky hilltop. Careens down a twisting trail to a dry creekbed below.

Many people picture mountain bikers as muscular brutes, massive thighs churning, powering their bikes over rugged terrain. Then you meet Jeannine Strandin.

The 34 year-old California-native looks more like the equestrian she was than the mountain biker she is. Thin and graceful on the bike, Strandin represents the other end of the spectrum from the kind of riders one sees in magazines and on television. She’s like the rest of us. But she can really ride a mountain bike.

Strandin came to mountain biking from horseback riding. “I got to a point where I was going to spend money on either a horse or a mountain bike. I chose the bike,” she explained. “It came down to a bike being lower maintenance.”

That was just two years ago. Since that time, Strandin has risen in the ranks of licensed racers to the level of Expert, one of only two in Southwest Florida. She regularly competes in events all over the state, consistently finishing well against fierce competition. She attributes her success to a lot of hard work and perseverance.

“At first it was a personal challenge: I want to jump that log, make it down that hill, over that rock.” Early in her riding career, Strandin made a point of riding with men who were stronger and faster than her. It was either keep up or be left behind in the woods. She kept up.

Unlike her male counterparts, who regularly “bomb” down hills and take risks, Strandin exercises caution while training and racing. “Women might be more careful by nature,” she said. “But then, as an orthopaedic and rehab nurse, I see a lot of the results of being too aggressive in sports.”

Her passion for mountain biking fascinates her co-workers at Southwest Regional Hospital, many of whom come to her for advice on buying a bike for themselves or their families. As a result, several have taken up recreational bike riding.

For Strandin, who is president and co-founder of the Florida Mudcutters mountain bike club, sharing her love of the sport is one of the best parts of riding. “Racing is exciting, but it is more fun to see a family get out and ride together. In the end, that’s what it’s all about.”