



Easy Riders

THIS GROUP OF FRIENDS HAS LOGGED THOUSANDS OF MILES,
LAUGHS—AND CUPS OF COFFEE

It's a dark, drizzly dawn on Beverly Road, but the Coffee Tree is full of sunshine—spandex-clad bicyclists with blinding yellow jerseys, big smiles and bigger cups of coffee. Their shirts say it all: "Mostly old guys in tight pants."

The tongue-in-cheek slogan is a tip-off to the jubilant attitude the Mt. Lebanon Cycling and Caffeine Club (MTLCCC) brings to the pursuit of their passion: long-distance road cycling. Every year, the 20-odd regulars log 4,000 miles each by getting together to pedal cross-town or cross-country: weekend warriors who escape the 9-to-5 with hardbody workouts.

"A lot of us used to be runners who began to worry about knee replacements," says Dave Bodnar, who co-founded the group with former resident Dan Carroll in 1988. What began as a middle-age male exercise alternative for Bodnar, a Ralston Place resident who's technology coordinator for the Mt. Lebanon School District, has snowballed into a near-obsession, culminating in the purchase of the sharp MTLCCC jerseys that have just arrived.

Colorful? They're prismatic, with royal blue sleeves, zipped chrome-yellow tunics, and sponsor names emblazoned everywhere. The C&Cers complete the all-pro look with sleek black or striped tights, nylon bootie covers, clip-in pedaling shoes, Oakley shades, head rags and attitude.

How do they look?

"Like 20 pounds of potatoes in a ten-pound bag!" quips Steve Delach, the group's oldest member at 62. His fellow members roar.

On this cold Saturday morning, the plan is the usual: an easy run out to the zoo, followed by a stop in the Strip for yet more caffeine, followed by the grind up Banksville Road ("Greentree Road, when we're in training," says Dell Avenue's Bill Ehler.) It's a 26-mile trip

that gets the group home in time for the usual honey-do chores. On Sundays, they'll venture a bit further afield, often into rural Washington County, for rides of 50 miles or so; a favorite destination is Cherry Valley, near Hickory, Pa.

Over the years, they've completed dozens of "centuries," 100 miles at a stretch, and other grueling annual tours. Among their favorites: the 200-mile Tour of the Sciota River Valley in Ohio; the Seagull Century to and from Ocean City, Md.; the Mon Valley Century; the Tour de Sewickley, and this year, Bike Virginia, a five-day tour of the Blacksburg, Va. area. A perennial favorite is the June MS 150, between Pittsburgh and Erie.

This charity ride took on special meaning when group member Eric Obye, of Lebanon Hills Drive, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis three years ago. The bikers raised several hundred dollars each in pledges during their ride this year; in raising over \$4,000 the previous year, Obye was one of the top 15 fund-raisers. "When you have MS, it makes it easier," he says drily. He also praises his biking buddies, saying they've been "extremely supportive" of his determination to keep riding.

This group scoffs at leisurely amateur rides. ("We scoff at everything," says Arden Road's John Fehr. "We throw parties and scoff for money.") Four—Bill Ehler, Dan O'Hara, Kevin Kearns, and Allen Schultz—are licensed riders, meaning they can compete in professional races sanctioned by the U.S. Cycling Federation, like the International that tore through Pittsburgh in July. They prefer feats like the one that member Simon Tripp recently completed: the legendary End to End, a 13-day, 900-mile ride from John o' Groats, Scotland, to Lands End, Cornwall.

Top: A challenging weekend ride is not without its rewards. Pausing to refuel at LaPrima Coffee Shop in the Strip are, from left, Nick Rossi, Dave Bodnar, Alyssa Tripp, Simon Tripp, Steve Ayer, Dan O'Hara and Steve Delach. These riders know—and have probably visited—every coffee-and-pastry establishment within 50 miles.

Bottom: Saturday mornings mean cross-town hikes up—and teeth-clenching rides down—Mt. Washington, across to Highland Park, or down to the Strip District in search of high octane for the return trip.



The soft-spoken Brit, a JayCee Drive resident, comes in for his share of good-natured abuse.

"All right, you can lay off that phony English accent now," teases Delach, a Scrubgrass Road resident.

"I'm from Monessen, actually," returns Tripp, in perfect BBC tones. He has retaliated by nicknaming Bodnar, the group's resident organizer, "Sir," the honorific for a British schoolmaster. It logically follows that Nick Rossi, Bodnar's much younger and shorter co-worker from Longuevue Drive, has been dubbed "Mini-Sir." Obye is always called "Eddie," in honor of cycling great Eddie Merko.

Who's got the most expensive bike? It's a tough field; these gearheads prize their equipment. But all agree that Delach's snazzy recumbent model—more than the cost of your first car—tops the list. And they generally concur that Obye has taken the most spectacular crashes. "We've taken the Eric's Falls Ride—everywhere that he fell," reminisces John Fehr. They laugh about the New Year's ride, a tradition that took a detour into the Cathedral of Learning one year, when repairing a blown tire nearly froze a few fingers.

You might think climbing Mt. Washington is the hard part of a cross-town trip. On a rainy morning, the downhills—barrelling down West Liberty Avenue, and later dropping from Grandview Avenue down Sycamore Street—are far more harrowing. When Tripp and daughter Alyssa, a Lincoln fifth-grader who often rides tandem on Saturday mornings, reach Carson Street, their tire rims are smoking hot from the friction of the brakes.

Scrambling through downtown, the group talks about home improvements,



bike improvements, sports, or work, punctuated by calls of "Car back!" (behind) or "Green!" (light ahead). Behavioral consultant O'Hara, of Audubon Avenue, talks high school track with banker Steve Ayer, of Overlook Drive. As they speed along Butler Street, heading back into town, a car pulls alongside at a traffic light.

"Why don't you #S%#@ bikers get the @#% off the road!" thunders the passenger. It's Fehr, riding shotgun in Delach's Suburban.

In steamy La Prima, on 21st Street, the club carbo-loads on pastries and coffee, attracting curious looks from the early-morning crowd. Pretty soon Ehler is chatting with a young enthusiast, as they compare notes on best cycling sources—"there's a really cool bike shop in Ambridge with two whole buildings!" Bill offers. (Washington Road TRM is a group

favorite—and a club sponsor.)

As they remount for the last ascent homeward, the group flexes some powerful calf muscles and a few more smiles. They love racing uphill. Another way of keeping score: racing for town signs. "We give points—one for the first one to reach a township sign, two for a town sign," explains Ehler. "Sometimes we'll trick each other. Sometimes we'll help someone win."

The lure of an intense workout and a lot of laughs keeps the group rolling into its 15th year.

"It's the camaraderie," says Ehler. "It's a social group, but we're rolling around the city. I get cranky if I don't get my rides in. It's not that intellectual—I suspect the same as in golf. But it's a real community."

Learn about the club at its Web site: www.mtlcc.org