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Cyclist stuns medical doctors and inspires athletes of all ages and abilities

Ryan Levinson raced bikes in Florida in the late 1980's with Jonas Carney and George Hincapie. The cat 2 Tampa native was the Florida State Time Trial Champion and had aspirations of turning pro. In the years that could have been the turning point in his career, Levinson's performance began to drop. He didn't know it at the time, but muscular dystrophy was to blame. He quit cycling out of frustration, but was left wondering what might have been.

Although he gave up his cycling career, Ryan moved to California and maintained an active lifestyle. The San Diego State University student worked as a surf and SCUBA dive instructor and as a wilderness guide.

It wasn't until 1996 that Ryan was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. Afraid he would over do it, doctors told him to end his active lifestyle and "learn something useful like keypunch." Levinson had no intention of becoming inactive. "I figured if I am going to lose muscle anyway, I may as well lose it doing something I love," he explained. "I believe people should find their own limits, not have them assigned by others."

That was the persevering attitude that eventually prompted him to get back on the bike and become a human guinea pig. Although it was theorized that intense exercise may increase muscular loss in people with muscular dystrophy, it had never been tested. Since Levinson decided to risk losing his muscles faster so that he could enjoy his favorite activities, doctors and researchers monitored the results that the exercise had on his body. They were stunned by what they found. An increase was recorded in aerobic fitness and strength. Intense exercise didn't tear Ryan's diseased muscles apart like doctors thought it would. It made them stronger. (Cont. page 2)



Photo Courtesy of Nicole Lippert
Ryan racing the clock in a 200m time trial at the San Diego velodrome.

Proceeds from NORBA #2 support NOVA Youth Cycling Foundation

The second stop on this year's NORBA National circuit reaped benefits unique to the national series. All of the event's proceeds went to benefit the NOVA Youth Cycling Foundation, a youth mountain bike league that is dedicated to developing future cycling stars.

"The NOVA NORBA National was a result of years of hard work by the NOVA Youth Cycling Foundation," commented Jeff Frost. "We are proud to be a part of an event that takes all of it's proceeds to support mountain biking's future and we look forward to going back to Phoenix in 2006."

Held March 18-20, the event drew the largest NORBA pro field of the last two years. 92 men and 60 women lined up for the pro races, and all of the event's proceeds will be used to support the NOVA Youth Cycling Foundation.

Team NOVA Director Jerry Sieve said, "The whole purpose of this race in reality was to benefit the foundation. We're very happy to do this and it is something that is very beneficial to get young people into cycling."

The foundation's initiatives are paying off, as evidenced by the results of Team NOVA rider Rachel Throop. The 16-year-old has been a team member for five years and placed third in last year's junior expert class at the USA Cycling Mountain Bike National Championships. To learn more about the NOVA Youth Cycling Foundation and what you can do to support the cause, log onto www.teamnova.org.

Nine years after his diagnosis, Levinson won three medals at the 2004 Masters National Track Cycling Championships, won two gold medals at the Southern California district championships, and finished in the top five in over twenty road and track races. It was just his first year back on the bike since the 1980's.

Because Ryan has been successful in his athletic endeavors, even with muscular dystrophy, he has taken it upon himself to work with the U.S. Paralympics to ensure that the classification system is as inclusive as possible. He takes a stand for disabled people with MD and MS who are often excluded from elite events like the Paralympic Games and raises awareness to unify the athletes.

Ryan maintains a website www.ryanlevinson.com as a resource for active people with and without disabilities. He works with a variety of community groups to promote inclusive programming. He is a public speaker on behalf of the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and he also stays active in the athletic community and sets an example of what is possible for someone living with MD. Balance Bar has teamed up with Ryan and helps spread his message on www.balance.com.

Ryan has been honored for his achievements as well as his community involvement. The 33-year-old was awarded the 2004 Personal Achievement Award for the state of California and the San Diego chapter Volunteer of the Year award by the Muscular Dystrophy Association. After posting many impressive results last season, the San Diego Bicycle Club member was honored as the "Most Improved Rider." In San Diego, November 18 has been declared "Ryan Levinson Day."

Levinson is not only a certified instructor for kiteboarding, sailing, and SCUBA diving, but he is also a member of numerous athletic and community organizations who enjoys playing piano and reading.

"I am incredibly grateful that I can race bikes and set an example of what is possible for an athlete living with MD." Ryan is living proof that people with muscular dystrophy can reap the benefits of an active lifestyle, and he doesn't plan on learning keypunch anytime soon.



Photo by Claire Schneider Photography

Above: Ryan shows off his 2004 USAC and National Championship medals.



Photo Courtesy of Nicole Lippert

Above: Ryan sporting his California State championship kit

CLUB OF THE MONTH: Colorado State Rams Cycling Team



Photo courtesy of Grant Blakeman

L-R: team members Nathanael Ksiazkiewicz, Joe Saperstein, Levi Bowman and Garrett White.

The Rams Cycling Team of Colorado State University is a model collegiate cycling club, doing its part to promote cycling in the community. In the past two years, the club's membership has averaged a growth rate of 25%.

Club members do their part to get peers interested in cycling. On a monthly basis, the team performs free bicycle tune-ups on campus not only as a service to fellow students, but also as a recruiting tool. Club members spend 4 or 5 hours at a time in front of the student center performing the tune-ups, and "we continually get two or three people at every club meeting that heard about us through the tune-ups," says Club President Nathanael Ksiazkiewicz.

In addition to on-campus interaction, the CSU Rams became the first university in the Rocky Mountain region to award cycling scholarships. The team was also one of only a few major universities in the country to do so. Last fall, two members received scholarships. The financial assistance doesn't only support deserving individuals, but according to Ksiazkiewicz, it acts as a marketing tool as well. "The scholarships solidify the team and keep people involved," he said.

CLUB OF THE MONTH cont.

The team receives plenty of support and assistance through the alumni association—Friends of Rams Cycling. FRC members help the team put on events and also help raise money that supports both team activities and the scholarship fund.

Great promotional strategies and alumni relations help make the Rams a model collegiate club – but the members have something else going for them as well: The Oval Crit and the Beaver Meadows MTB Race. Last month, the 19th annual Oval Crit took place with at least 500 spectators and 400 racers throughout the day. September’s Beaver Meadows is the primary fundraiser for the team and will feature racing in every category from beginner to pro.



Photo courtesy of Nathaniel Ksiazkiewicz

Rams Team Treasurer Paul Cada works on a bike during one of the tune-ups on campus.

Another novel program is called Rams Wheels. It is an officially funded program by the Colorado State student government. 150 bikes can be found on campus for anyone to use. The club modeled this program after European communities that provide bicycles to the public in order to encourage physical fitness. It promotes an alternative to cars, and further the cause – the club teams up with alumni to put on the RAT ride. Standing for Rams Alternative Transportation, the ride shows students and citizens how to easily get around town on two wheels instead of four.

“We’re continually thinking about what we can do. Whatever doesn’t work – we change,” Ksiazkiewicz said. Perhaps this is the mindset that has helped the Rams Cycling Team become known as an innovative club. “It’s not just about Rams Cycling,” he went on to say. “It’s about raising the bar on collegiate cycling. We want to win too, but that’s not going to cloud our vision.”

RIDER SPOTLIGHT: Josh Gewirtz

Colorado College student and Team Fiordifrutta rider Josh Gewirtz recognizes how important it is for junior cyclists to have mentors. This is why he has taken it upon himself to help a younger rider – 14-year-old Russell Finsterwald. Gewirtz met the Front Range Cycling Club junior on a mountain bike ride last fall and was impressed with how much he loved to ride. Josh decided right then to help him out in any way possible.

Long-time coach, friend, and teammate Curt Davis has been one of Josh’s greatest mentors and influences in the sport. What he learned from Davis was that having fun is paramount in any racer’s career if it is going to last. This is the advice he has taken with him and this is what he tries to share with Russell.

“The most important thing I try to teach him is that bike riding and racing is all about fun,” the 21-year-old said.



Photo courtesy of Carol Finsterwald

“This is such a hard sport that it is the only way to keep a young rider like Russell in it for the long haul.”

Riding with him 1-2 times per week, Josh has been teaching Russell about training, racing, and bike handling skills. “I hope to show him that you can be competitive and still have fun.”

Like Russell, Josh started riding when he was 14. At first it was used as a means to get to baseball practice until he realized that he enjoyed his rides to practice better than actually playing ball. He is studying history and political science at Colorado College in Colorado Springs and hopes to race professionally on the NRC circuit after graduating.

Left: Russell and Josh at the Pikes Peak International Raceway during the Colorado College Tiger Classic.

Each month, a different rider will be put in the spotlight. The featured riders are cyclists who work hard to promote cycling or to improve their community. You can recommend a cyclist you know who strives to make a difference. If you know someone who should be in the spotlight, send an email to kfagan@usacycling.org.