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CONFESSIONS OF A WHEELSUCKER // The view from the back of a pack of dedicated cyclists.

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Abstract:

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At the next left turn, a few riders at the front stand on their pedals and open a gap. The group surges to catch them and never really slows down, averaging between 25 and 30 mph, faster on the short downhills and only slightly slower going up. The speed stretches the riders out into a colorful, single-file snake. Sights that had drifted by on the way down - Hancock Lake, an orange grove, a stand of sunflowers - fly by like fence posts.

Two members of the U.S. national team, Derek Wilkerson and Josh Thornton, live in San Antonio and show up periodically on these rides. So do some pros and, more regularly, several cyclists who have won national age-group championships, including [Bill Shook] and one of the group's few female riders, Sherri Stedje.

Full Text:

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The first sight of the group startles me even though I have come to meet it - a squadron in bright uniforms appearing by an old stone wall on a quiet road in east Pasco County.

I turn my bike around, descend a hill and climb another, and then hear them, like buzzing wasps, behind me.

I look for a friendly rider as they pass, someone to let me in the formation, and find none. So I wait until I can ease my front wheel behind the rear wheel of the last rider.

The wind resistance, which is every rider's enemy, lets up a bit. I'm in the slipstream. I've caught the ride.

Lance Armstrong will almost certainly win his third consecutive Tour de France today, meaning news of the event will be briefly removed from its usual shelf in the inner pages of sports sections. In the home of the world's best rider, cycling remains a fringe sport, practiced most visibly by enthusiasts who meet on the outskirts of cities all over the country for hard training rides.

Probably the most serious local group departs on Sundays and Wednesdays from San Antonio, about 25 miles northeast of Tampa. In three years of riding with them, or trying to, I have learned some of the reasons why fewer people race bikes than, for example, play golf.

Cycling is much harder than most people realize, certainly harder than the riders' flamboyant outfits suggest. Getting good at it consumes lives.

Partly because of this, riders observe a code of behavior that seems intended to put people off.

Cyclists on 17-pound bikes will only grudgingly make way for 2-ton pickup trucks. Senior riders shout at lesser ones. Two weeks ago, a pair of veteran racers pulled their bikes to the grassy side of the road, squared off wearing cleated bike shoes and began flailing at one another in an endurance athletes' version of a fistfight.

"This has always been a hard-core training ride," says Glenn Weber, owner of the San Antonio Cyclery and a regular on the rides.

"The riders here are concerned with kicking butt. They're not too concerned with sitting and chatting. Of course, that's just making excuses for roadies, because we all know they can be an arrogant bunch."

"I love cycling, but sometimes it seems like they're a bunch of peacocks out there," says Jim Pavek, 52, a former shop owner and race organizer.

Cyclists have been meeting in San Antonio to ride at least since the early '70s. The current format evolved about 10 years ago, when increasing traffic forced riders from their old routes farther south; riders also were drawn to the hills that distinguish this ride from most others in the state.

"The St. Pete ride is fast and pretty flat," says Dave Stedje, of the Best of the Bay Cyclists team.

"This is obviously more challenging because of the hills. In my mind, it's the best place to ride in central Florida, by far."

On Sundays, as many as 80 cyclists may show up for the 62-mile loop through eastern Pasco and Hernando counties, out to Trilby, and back to San Antonio, by which time the lead group has usually been pared to about a dozen.

The Wednesday ride is a distilled version - faster, usually shorter and made up of especially committed riders.

"It always amazes me how many people don't work on Wednesday morning," says Bill Shook, owner of American Classic Designs Inc., a bicycle components company, and a regular on the Wednesday ride.

Most of the participants pile up debt to their bosses and spouses, not only for time

to do the ride, but to drive from their homes in Tampa, St. Petersburg and Sarasota. One rider is a vascular surgeon who cycles in the morning and operates in the afternoon. Others will spend their afternoons this time of the year surfing the Web for news of the Tour.

"The real, dedicated rider is unemployed," Shook says.

My wife, Laura, and I can catch the ride, as we do almost every Sunday, by pedalling from our home in Brooksville. Less frequently, I meet the Wednesday ride by cycling slowly south toward San Antonio like a surfer paddling out for a wave.

On this Wednesday morning in mid-July, the hard work begins as the group climbs toward the Interstate 75 overpass a few miles north of San Antonio.

At the next left turn, a few riders at the front stand on their pedals and open a gap. The group surges to catch them and never really slows down, averaging between 25 and 30 mph, faster on the short downhills and only slightly slower going up. The speed stretches the riders out into a colorful, single-file snake. Sights that had drifted by on the way down - Hancock Lake, an orange grove, a stand of sunflowers - fly by like fence posts.

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"You can have a guy who did the Tour of Spain riding with somebody who bought a bike last week," said longtime racer Brian Jones of Brooksville.

This is possible because of drafting. Riders can save about 30 percent of their energy by tucking in behind another rider, a fact that defines every aspect of cycling.

This is why cyclists ride in groups. Drafting dictates the tactics in high-level racing. It also explains why riders like me are left to drift to the back of the pack.

Cyclists in a group quickly decide whether other riders are experienced enough to safely navigate in the tight formation drafting requires and if are they strong enough to prevent gaps from forming.

If riders don't know you, they will grade you on your bike and how you look on it. You will receive especially low marks for having a triathlete's aero bars or hairy legs.

Pro riders shave because it makes it easier to receive massages and, if they crash, treatment for road rash. For local riders it is mainly a sign of commitment, with the added benefit that it highlights their best feature.

"It's arrogance, ego," Pavek says. "Your legs look better, your muscles look more defined."

South of Brooksville, the group comes to the first incline significant enough to have a name, Stop Sign Hill. It begins with a gradual rise toward an intersection, where the group turns right onto a much steeper section and invariably begins to sprint.

This hill is a struggle for all the riders in the last half of the pack. In my early attempts at making this ride, this was the point where I was always dropped, as being left behind - embarrassed, exhausted and without the help of the pack - is called.

Today, I make this hill, partly because I've learned to stay near the back of the group. This not only saves energy but keeps me out of the way of riders near the front, where you are expected to take a turn in the lead and may be shouted at if you don't.

The only consequence of the approach is, to me, acceptable: If I have any reputation on the ride, it is as a "wheelsucker."

Most riders have more at stake.

The devotion of some cyclists to their sport rivals a parent's devotion to a child.

Cycling may determine whether they decide to have an actual child, where they live or what they do for a living. Shook spends about 14 hours a week in the saddle, he says. A rider like Wilkerson can easily spend more than 30.

"It's not just time. You have to eat right, sleep right. You basically have to live your life for it," Shook says.

So the group rides become the basic tests of how well such lives are going.

"Those rides on Wednesdays and Sundays, those aren't just rides," Shook said. "Those are races. There are ego points on the line at the end."

This serious approach to the sport has had two basic results: producing some excellent cyclists and a tendency among more ordinary riders to identify with them.

The best by far is Armstrong, who is increasingly mentioned as one of the best of all time.

He took control of the tour two weeks ago, on a 130-mile stage with three climbs averaging more than 4,000 feet, and dominated the rest of the mountain stages. An ordinary day on the tour might cover 140 miles at 27 miles per hour, with several hills higher than any in Florida.

"People don't understand that this is the hardest and most grueling sport in the world," Shook says, "and the Tour is the hardest of the hardest of the hard."

There is only one Armstrong, but many replicas of his U.S. Postal Service jersey, which adult cyclists will wear as un-self-consciously as school kids wear Buccaneers' shirts.

"In a lot of sports, you have wanna-bes. But as far as egos go, there's something that happens in cycling," Pavek says. "You get the bike, you get the jersey, you put on the sunglasses and you look like any pro cyclist in the world."

It is hard to avoid being infected by this attitude.

My wife and I tell one another that we do the ride only for the workout. But about halfway up the second big hill, I find I'm keeping up with most of the riders and passing some others.

I begin to think that I rank somewhere in the middle of this group, that I am, as I recently heard a cyclist say about himself, "one of the local fast guys."

Another hundred yards of climbing and I know better. At the top of the hill, I start looking for the dirt road where I usually peel off.

The upcoming stretch of the ride is a sprint down a pothole-riddled one-lane road. I don't like the risk, I'm tired and, besides, it is nearly 9:30, time for me to think about getting to work - time for me, my aero bars and my hairy legs to go on home.

[Illustration]

Caption: The fast pack races along Bayhead Road in Pasco County after leaving San Antonio on a 62-mile loop one recent Sunday morning. ; The cyclists power up a stretch of Powell Road in Hernando County.; Photo: PHOTO, MAURICE RIVENBARK, (2)

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Start Page: 1F
Dateline: SAN ANTONIO
Personal Names: **Armstrong, Lance**
Pavek, Jim
Shook, Bill

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