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Life cycles

Biking club has drawn riders for almost 30 years

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BY TOM REED

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

On a recent afternoon, cyclist Kevin McFadden shifted gears before ever mounting his red Cinelli at a Groveport park.

Concerns and aggravations from the real world began to disappear as he eased his Ford Explorer into a parking lot and spotted members of the Major Taylor Bike Group.

They shook hands, exchanged hugs and flashed smiles as bright as reflectors.

"You want to know how long the Major Taylors have been around?" asked McFadden, 39, of Westerville, adjusting his helmet.

"I took a 13-year break from the group, moved to Michigan, started a family, came back, and they're still the same: same people, same foolishness, same energy, same brotherhood."

The Major Taylors, formed 28 years ago, still ride

with the joy of a child pedaling without training wheels for the first time.

During the third annual Long Street Tour, a day of cycling and fitness events on Saturday, members will host rides of 10, 30 and 62 miles.

Ties to fitness and the urban community make them a natural fit for the event, hosted by the Long Street Businessmen's Association with corporate sponsors.

The eclectic, 35-member group is named for pioneering black cyclist Marshall "Major" Taylor, an Indiana native. It includes men and women from throughout central Ohio.

"One of the reasons we have sustained ourselves over the years is we don't make race or gender an issue," said founder Robert Bradley, 63, of Columbus, the oldest member.

"We only care about one thing: 'Can you roll?' "



Club members Robert Bradley, left, and John Tolbert



JAMES D. DECAMPDISPATCH PHOTOS

Members of the Major Taylor Bike Group gather before their weekly ride from Three Creeks Metro Park in Groveport.



JAMES D. DECAMPDISPATCH

Eight months a year, the cyclists roll wherever the road takes them.

They meet Wednesdays at Three Creeks Metro Park in Groveport for a 20- to 25-mile ride and participate in regional and national tours.

Each spring, members traverse the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway from North Carolina. They conclude the season in October with the Sea Gull Century ride in Maryland, where they reunite with Major Taylor affiliates from throughout the country.

"Major Taylor is an inspirational figure," said Stanford Straughter, 61, of Columbus.

Taylor won world cycling titles in the late 1800s and early 1900s, becoming just the second black world champion in a sport, after boxer George Dixon.

Because of his Christian upbringing, Taylor refused to race on Sundays for many years. He died in 1932.

The Major Taylor Velodrome in Indianapolis is known in cycling circles as a world-class bike-racing facility.

"We hope to keep his legend alive by riding in his honor," Straughter said.

Before their recent outing, members gathered in a circle.

Chapter President George Harper, 58, led a prayer for safe passage. Then the Columbus resident gave thanks for a strong turnout of 22 riders on a muggy August afternoon.

"OK," he said, "let's roll."

The group rode through Groveport and along rolling, rural roadways in Fairfield County.

"Car back," a member shouted when a vehicle approached from the rear.

"Pothole," another yelled to alert riders behind him.

Ten miles into the journey, one cyclist on his first ride lost control on loose gravel. He hit the ground but suffered little more than a scraped knee.

"I wiped out a year ago on the (Three Creeks) trail," said Craig Fields, 36. "Hey, it happens to everybody."

Danger aside, riders rave about the health benefits of cycling.

They love the two-hour cardio workout, which varies with the course, and the lack of stress on their knees.

"I was getting to the point where I couldn't play tennis anymore," said Dan Cunningham, 56, of Columbus.

Major Taylor Bike Group members on a weekly afternoon ride



Major Taylor around the time of his marriage, circa 1902

IF YOU GO

The third annual Long Street Tour, a day of cycling and fitness activities, will take place Saturday in the King-Long Street District near the Lincoln Theater, 771 E. Long St. Events will include the Major Taylor Commemorative Bike Tour along with wellness walks, entertainment and health screenings; free health-related activities will be offered on the hour throughout the day. Tour registration, starting at 6:30 a.m., costs \$10. For more information, call 614-531-2700 or visit www.longstreettour.com.

"Cycling is a lot easier on my lower body."

Cunningham represents the old guard: He joined the Major Taylors at the start.

Friendship binds the cyclists, several members said -- even when other responsibilities occasionally scatter them.

His job took Cunningham to Philadelphia for several years, but he faithfully returned each spring to drive their equipment truck for the Tour of the Scioto River Valley -- a two-day, 200-mile trip from Columbus to Portsmouth and back.

"They will do anything for anybody," said Jed Rumora, 49, of Pataskala.

"I broke my collarbone in 2004, and some of the guys came out to my house and helped clean it for a party I was having."

Rumora named his son Pate -- the youngest rider, at 14 -- after fellow member Lloyd Pate, 61, of Columbus.

"It was really humbling," said Pate, a running back for the Buffalo Bills in 1970.

"We have been through so much over the years."

Harper smiled as he discussed the biggest change in their makeup.

"Now there are women out here kicking our butts," he said.

After their recent ride, the sweaty cyclists bid farewell for another week.

Karen Rumora, 20, of Pickerington -- among six women in the Major Taylor group -- marveled at the camaraderie.

"These are the greatest group of human beings I've ever been involved with," she said. "They treat you like family."

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