

Bikes are Earning Seal of Approval

Competitive Navy cyclists turn to Ramona manufacturer

By [Don Norcross](#) Union-Tribune Staff Writer

RAMONA – Paul Verdile wandered about the expo at a 12-hour mountain bike race 18 months ago in Temecula. Amid the bike manufacturers and food vendors, Verdile stopped at a booth representing Navy SEALs.

As a recruiting tool, the SEALs fielded a relay team, and one thing struck Verdile about the cyclists.

In his opinion, most of them were riding junk, much of it foreign made.

“Some (bikes) were kind of shabby,” admits Eric Skalski, one of the SEAL riders. “Some were top of the line. Some were 10 years old. It was kind of hodgepodge.” Verdile works in sales and marketing for Ramona-based Ellsworth mountain bikes, so he pitched the SEALs about riding the American-made product.

As owner Tony Ellsworth put it: “A Navy guy never likes to hear he’s on inferior equipment. Those guys bet their lives on their equipment all the time.” Of the six or seven core riders making up the SEAL team – creatively named the Flying Frogs – almost all now pedal Ellsworth rides. The SEALs pay for the bikes, so Ellsworth is not sponsoring the team. Ellsworth, though, makes it clear that the men of the military have his support.



Navy SEAL Mike Everett and his Ellsworth Evolve

“These guys are out there protecting America, allowing me to earn a living and feed my children by making bicycles,” says Ellsworth, 47. “Who wouldn’t want to be involved with our best and our brightest? These guys are winners.”

The SEAL team has improved since hopping aboard Ellsworth bikes, finishing in the top three in amateur classes at eight races last year.

“It used to be, ‘Gosh, we need to scrape together five guys to (make) a team,’ ” recalls Skalski. “Then it was like, ‘OK, we have seven good guys. We’re going to cut two of you.’”

“It’s not recreational anymore. We go out to get on the podium. We want to put the bike on the podium and we want to put the SEAL name out there so we can attract more recruits.”

The bike is only part of the reason for the team’s success. Riders such as Skalski, who is paying a

significant amount of money for a coach this season, take the sport seriously.

Explaining why he’s drawn to endurance mountain biking, SEAL Duncan Smith says: “The fitness is important. It calls for a lot of quick reactions. And understanding the technical part of the bike is challenging. All of that resonates with us as SEALs.” But to twist the title of Lance Armstrong’s best-selling book, the SEALs will tell you, **It Is About the Bike**. The Ellsworth Evolve model features 29-inch wheels instead of standard 26-inch wheels. Skalski says having bigger wheels “allows three things to happen.

“It rolls through sand much more easily. It turns large obstacles into small obstacles. And once you’re rolling, the rotational force keeps perpetuating, which carries speed farther. You’re able to hold speed, particularly downhill.” Another SEAL, Mike Everett, says the bike simply handles well. “When you’re riding a full-suspension bike, what you don’t want is a bunch of bobbing up and down when you’re trying to pedal, when you’re trying to ‘get on it,’ ” he says. “You lose a lot of power when the bike’s bobbing up and down.” Ellsworth, who attended Torrey Pines High, is a graduate of BYU, where he majored in international relations and political science. Before

founding his bike company in 1991, Ellsworth owned a business that specialized in 401(k) retirement plans. Bikes, though, have been his passion since he was a kid. "I've ridden cross-country. I've been lost in the desert. I've been lost in the mountains," he says. "I've spent a lot of good, intimate time with a bicycle." He remembers riding with friends in Escondido around 1990 and complaining about the quality of mountain bikes. A friend told him, "If you know exactly what should be done, why don't you make your own?" "It was almost like a dare," recalls Ellsworth. By 1999, selling bikes was going so well that Ellsworth sold his investment company. In comparison to Trek or Specialized, Ellsworth is a boutique shop, producing fewer than 3,000 bikes a year. The company consists of 11-20 employees, depending on business. The frames are hand-crafted in Vancouver, Wash., and shipped to Ramona for assembly. They retail for \$4,000 to \$5,000. Ellsworth calls his work "half art, half performance." Everett may have handed out the best compliment, saying, "We're not pro racers. They don't give away frames. If there was something better out there, I'd buy it." The SEALs have shown their appreciation. After serving a tour in Iraq, Kurt Muhlbach presented Ellsworth with a U.S. flag that flew at a U.S. base outside Baghdad. "You brought us into your family," Muhlbach told Ellsworth. "Now we're bringing you into ours." The flag hangs on a wall inside the Ramona shop.

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