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Ells Angels: A Mountain Bike Saga

Teenage girls find motivation in mud of the trail

By Phil Lindeman

Mountaineer Staff Writer

On a dreary afternoon last Thursday, Sarina Kanter pedals her mountain bike steadily up a wide dirt road north of Edwards. The 13-year-old comes to a stop near the base of Berry Creek Trail, followed closely by two other teenage girls, Yoana Gonzalez and Estefania Loera, both age 16.

The trio breathes heavily for a moment before launching into a light-hearted rant about bike shorts.

"Man, they give you a wedgie," Sarina says, bracing herself with an unclipped foot. Pink socks with frills peek over the edge of her glistening bike shoes. Yoana, who wears large blue earrings, chimes in.

"We've worn them a few times already, but they never get better," she says.

Bike shorts aside, all three are donned in gear from various boutique sponsors: bikes by Ellsworth (fitted by Frank Mitchell at Moontime Cyclery, well over \$2,500 for the frame alone), Smith sunglasses (\$100), Kask Helmets (\$95), Jett gloves (made in Fort Collins, \$35).

Emblazoned across the back of their custom tops, in bright pink letters, is the name of their team: Ells Angels. On a normal day the squad is 10 girls strong,

but French projects and a track meet at Battle Mountain High School kept many from coming.

"You girls are going to be in much better shape because you came today," says Brett Donelson, their coach. He is dressed in a similar outfit and urges them to take one more loop -- about a mile total -- before calling an end to the day.

[See ELLS ANGELS, page 7]

THE UPDATE

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Dow 12,695.92	Nasdaq -34.57 2,863.04	S&P -10.88 1,348.65
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Spillway to open

In an agonizing trade-off, Army engineers said they will open a key spillway along the bulging Mississippi River as early as today and inundate thousands of homes and farms in Louisiana's Cajun country to avert a potentially bigger disaster in Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

About 25,000 people and 11,000 structures could be in harm's way when the gates on the Morganza spillway are unlocked for the first time in 38 years.

Suicide bombs kill 80 to avenge bin Laden

A pair of suicide bombers attacked recruits leaving a paramilitary training center in Pakistan yesterday, killing 80 people in the first retaliation for the killing of Osama bin Laden by American commandos last week.

The blasts in the northwest were a reminder of the savagery of al-Qaida-linked militants in Pakistan.

Gadhafi taunts NATO

Taunting NATO, Moammar Gadhafi said yesterday that he is alive despite a series of

[See UPDATES, page 14]



Three members of the Ells Angels mountain bike team (left to right), Yoana Gonzalez, Sarina Kanter, and Estefania Loera, pose with their coach, Brett Donelson, during a training break in Edwards yesterday. Most of the girls on the 10-person team never rode a trail until four weeks ago. Avery Cunliffe photo.

Arapahoe Basin to stay open longer

Arapahoe Basin will remain open seven days a week through June 5 and will reopen for summer skiing for at least two three-day weekends -- Friday, Saturday and Sunday June 10, 11, and 12 and June 17, 18 and 19.

The ski area has reported over 420 inches of snow this season; 15 inches in the last week. Because of the strong snow season and current 94 inch base, A-Basin will be able to push the ski season into the summer. This is the first time the area will experiment being open on weekends only.

"Having our greatest season in years, ideally we would like to stay open on the weekends until the Fourth of July, but it's too early to know what the conditions will be to make that call," said Alan Henceroth, COO of Arapahoe Basin.

[See A-BASIN, page 20]



Arapahoe Basin on closing day June 8, 2008. Due to over 420 inches of snow this year, A-Basin will stay open for two more weekends in June. Arapahoe Basin photo.

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ELLS ANGELS

[From page 1]

The girls groan and clip in again. As they head down a gentle hill, he reminds them to practice riding out of the saddle.

"For as much as they complain about the hills, they come back, time after time," Donelson says as the girls pull away. "They don't give up; they just get better."

Donelson doesn't fault the girls for complaining about the shorts: A little over a month ago, the majority of the Ells Angels had never ridden a trail or had access to thousands of dollars in gear. Some had never owned a bicycle.

When their vests arrived two weeks back -- barely a day after a handful competed in the Vail Recreation District's short-track race in Eagle -- they wore them proudly to school, with no prodding from their coaches.

"We have 10 girls who have never clipped into a bike, never switched gears, never done anything like that," Donelson says. "It is refreshing to see them make the progress they have. These girls are just psyched to be here."

A 'dream'

Although many hands have helped mold the team, Ells Angels is the brainchild of Brett and his wife, Tam, both personal trainers with a long history in the Vail Valley. As avid cyclists, the couple had long dreamed of backing a sponsored bike team. To spark the idea, they needed girls and turned to The

Youth Foundation, a local organization for economically disadvantaged youth.

"We saw this as a unique opportunity for these girls," says Lauren DesCombs, an employee at The Youth Foundation who helped the Donelsons find participants. "They are resilient and fearless. I can't believe what they are willing to do. It provides them a glimmer of hope for the future, something for them to be passionate about."

The team began to take shape late last year when Amanda Precourt, a local philanthropist, caught wind of the project and offered a donation for equipment and training. Around the same time, The Youth Foundation secured a grant from The Women's Foundation of Colorado to start Girl PowHER, an after-school program to build self-esteem and remedy body-image issues in teenage girls.

Shortly after New Years, a group of 25 girls took yoga twice a week with Tam at the Riverfront Club in Avon. Before the sessions, the group wrote thank you letters to the various sponsors, which the Donelsons scrambled to assemble in two months.

"It showed they had a level of commitment to the team," DesCombs says of the letters and yoga. "If we have these girls starting at 13, by the time they reach high school, they are going to be rock stars."

Brett claims Ellsworth was a coveted sponsor from the beginning.



Estefania Loera leads a pack of Ells Angels down a trail in Edwards last Thursday. Avery Cunliffe photo.

Along with DesCombs, he worked with Moontime Cyclery to approach the California-based company. They were immediately responsive.

"This is the first youth, all-women's team we've sponsored and we're excited to see where they go," says Summer Henderson, the marketing director for Ellsworth. "I'd like to see these girls go to the top. Starting locally is a fantastic start."

The sponsorships, which number over a dozen, were a major boost for the Ells Angels in a number of ways.

[See ELLS ANGELS, page 8]

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ELLS ANGELS

[From page 7]

"They think it's really cool that someone cares enough about their future and what they are doing to pony up this gear," Brett said. "They don't take any of it for granted."

Riding on

After three months of twice-weekly yoga, the Donelson's and Pam Davis, another trainer, had whittled the team down to 10 girls. The bikes arrived on April 1 -- complete with the logo, designed by the Ellsworth graphics team -- and once the girls were fitted individually, they took them out into the field.

It was not easy.

"See, I have scars on my legs to prove it," Estefania says, pointing to her leg after cresting the Berry Creek hill once more. She claims clipping in was the hardest at first, only to be replaced by shifting, then actually riding. But is it worth it?

"It's a rush to bike," Sarina says. "It's fun and exciting. I barely know how to ride a regular bike, and I'm actually better on one of these."

For now, the program remains small. The 10 original Ells Angels will compete weekly in every VRD race, as well as at

Teva Games. Although the bikes belong to The Youth Foundation, they have free access to them once school ends to ride at will.

"They are giving them a level of independence with their training," DesCombs says. "These girls will continue well into high school. Some could even go on to bike in college."

DesCombs hopes the overarching Girl PowHER program will continue to grow from two sessions a week to four. Brett claims they could train 60 to 80 girls consistently in such a timeframe.

Before heading down the path a final time, the girls continue laughing and joking. They are doing roundabout impressions of Tam, who has a thick Australian accent. Brett smiles, recalling Tam's particular fondness for the girls. At the short-track race on May 4, she compared watching them to being a mother.

"She comes home raving every day, talking about a little thing one of the girls improved on," he says. "They fall in the mud, they laugh. They get back up. A lot of these girls need a big sister, someone to tell them they are doing well and on the right track."

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