

MURPHY'S LAW

The Bike Team

An interscholastic mountain biking league in California gives high school kids a freewheeling winter sports option **By Austin Murphy**

WENT FOR a ride last week with a dozen guys who, among them, won't go through a can of shaving cream this year. They were members of the Sir Francis Drake High mountain biking club, a gang of baby-faced assassins who kicked my 43-year-old backside all over Mount Tamalpais. We met on a Sunday morning near Drake High in California's Marin County. I thought we would be out for 90 minutes, max—it was raining—but the Pirates, defending NorCal High School Mountain Bike Racing League and California state champs, were feeling more ambitious.

From boulder-strewn fire roads to dicey single track, from barren ridges to chaparral and redwood groves, our three-plus-hour tour took us through surroundings as varied as the excuses I tendered to the schoolboys upon catching up with them. (Every few miles they would dismount and wait for me.)

"Sorry, people—had a little chain suck back there."

"Sorry, got some mud in my eye."

"Give me a second to adjust my brake cable."

I love the concept of mountain biking for your high school. Traditionally, if you couldn't shoot a basketball, your winter sports options were limited to giving yourself shin splints running indoor

track or spending the season with your head in some guy's armpit on the wrestling mat.

USA Cycling doesn't keep track of the number of high school mountain biking teams in the country ("At least a hundred," guessed one official), but participation is growing. Now in its fifth season, the NorCal league encompasses 14 teams, plus independent riders—kids whose school doesn't have a team. The league was started by Matt Fritzing, a math teacher at Berkeley (Calif.) High. A former Cal road racer, he tried to start a club for roadies at the high school. But the only kids who

showed up for the first meeting were mountain bikers. After two years of taking students to preexisting regional races, "I started thinking about a league," recalls Fritzing. He mailed posters to high schools and bike shops all over the state. By 2001 NorCal was up and running; that year 60 riders took part in its events.

While some 100 kids raced the following year, it disappointed Fritzing that virtually none were from Marin County, where in the mid-1970s mountain biking was born. That changed when Dan Freeman got an e-mail from Matt Goebel. Freeman is a fat-tire freak and Drake High social studies teacher who in 2002 found himself neck and neck in a race called BillyCross with none other than Goebel, then a Drake sophomore. Trash talk flew. "You are the student, I am the master," Freeman shouted. "You will never defeat me!" After finishing ahead of Freeman (adults had to ride an extra lap of the course), Goebel sent him that e-mail

suggesting they start a team at Drake. Freeman did. Two years later—last season—Drake sophomore Kevin Bernotas, a quietly intense kid with a huge engine and a future in this sport, was winning every race on the schedule, and the Pirates were state champs. This year, some 40 Pirates, including five girls, are on the squad.

They are not the only Marin powerhouse. The Redwood High Giants, from Larkspur, took second behind Drake last year and beat the Pirates in this season's first race, at Folsom Lake. At Redwood, participation in practice rides and races is mandatory. At Drake, says junior Daniel Novak, "Dan tells us, 'You define your own commitment.'" Thus did Novak have few qualms about blowing off that rain-soaked Sunday ride. "I rode my trainer while I watched *The Italian Job*," he reports.

Also more relaxed is the Pirates' dress code, as evidenced by the red suspenders in which senior Oren Harris competes—"I'm thinking of going with my cow suspenders for our next race," he says. Where the Giants race in red Lycra shorts, Freeman would never make his riders "strap on the Lycra below the waist," he says. "We've got some kids who might quit if they had to do that."

"We're much more of a baggy shorts kind of team," says senior Michal Lebell.

"I don't want to burn anyone out," says Freeman of his laissez-faire style. "I want these kids to be lifelong riders. When the sun comes out on the weekend, I want them to think, The best thing I could do today is get on my bike."

So far, so good, Dan. In fact, they don't even need the sun.

ERIC LUSE

Drake High's team of **BABY-FACED ASSASSINS** kicked my 43-year-old backside.



ROCKIN' ROLLERS The Pirates are sailing after a banner year that included league and state titles.