



May 13, 2008

Get out and bike: Tips for starting to ride the trails, roads in WNC

Nanci Bompey

The miles of forest trails and mountain roads make Western North Carolina a great place to ride a bike. Local cyclists agree that the region is home to some of the best mountain biking and road cycling on the East Coast, if not the country.

The Blue Ridge Parkway consistently ranks as one of the best roads for cycling and Asheville recently approved the city's first bike plan that will eventually make it easier to get around town on two wheels. For mountain bikers, nearby Bent Creek has a trail for all skill levels and the Pisgah National Forest is top ranked for the sport, said Ben Wootten, a cyclist who works at Liberty Bikes.

"If you live in Asheville and you don't ride a mountain bike, why live in Asheville?" he said. "It's that good."

Both mountain biking and road cycling can be intimidating to someone who hasn't ridden a bike since grade school. A lack of bike lanes and shoulders mean dodging cars on the road and steep, technical trails mean spending more time off the bike than on it when in the woods.

But local cyclists say that if beginners get a good bike and take it slow, they can easily discover the benefits of the sport. Riding a bicycle is a great cardiovascular workout and is easier on the joints than running.

Connie Ruble Avery, a physical therapist who lives in Hendersonville, gave up road biking because of her fear of getting hit by a car but decided to take up the sport again after learning about the Blue Ridge Bicycle Club.

She is now a regular on the club's group rides, which she said helped alleviate her fear.

"I just love it," she said of the sport. "Not only is it good exercise, but it's just so beautiful to be outside in this part of the country."

TIPS ON STARTING

Get the right bike

If you plan to go road cycling, invest in a road bike; if trails are your thing, choose a mountain bike, Wootten said. Some people opt for hybrid bicycles, which are somewhere in between a road bike and a mountain bike, but Ben Wootten said he does not recommend these bikes, which are better suited for urban commuting.

"It's a great neighborhood bike, a great city bike but not much good for either of the two types of biking that Asheville is known for," he said.

Jason Posey, owner of Carolina Fatz, said many people go out and buy a bike at Wal-mart or Dick's Sporting Goods. While these bikes may be cheap, they won't hold up on the trail, and they may not be

the right fit, he said.

“A lot of people try to take a shortcut and the bike doesn’t fit them or it’s not properly assembled, and they get a bad taste in their mouth,” Posey said.

He said it is worth going to a bike shop and getting properly fitted for a bike. See Friday’s Citizen-Times for a how-to on getting fitted for a bike.

What to look for

At a minimum, Posey recommends a mountain bike with 24 gears and front suspension, often called a hard tail. Wootten said to look for mountain bikes that have a double-walled rim and disc breaks, which give the rider greater control.

Road bikes tend to be a bigger initial investment, but they last longer than a mountain bike. Riders can choose different saddles, clips, shoes and gears that are designed for the mountains.

Essential accessories

Everyone riding any type of bike should wear a helmet. A helmet should be worn on top of the head and the straps should be snug when your mouth is open, according to Lesli Meadows, owner of Velosports Performance Center.

Beyond that, Wootten recommends a way to carry water and the ability to fix a flat tire as absolute must-haves. Other helpful accessories are padded shorts and gloves. For road biking, Wootten recommends a computer that tells distance and speed, a headlight and a rear blinking light.

For road bikers, Meadows recommends a breathable jersey and glasses. A saddlebag can hold a spare tube, multi-use tool and a way to inflate the tube.

Before you go out

Meadows recommends learning how to fix a flat tire before hitting the road or the trail. Local bike shops offer maintenance clinics or can show you how.

For road cyclists, she said it is important to learn the rules of the road and the trail before venturing out among cars or into the woods. Meadows recommends the League of American Bicyclists Web site at www.bikeleague.org.

Starting out

New road and mountain bikers should start out riding somewhere flat like the track at Carrier Park, said Charlie Clogston, director of the Fletcher Flyer, a bike ride sponsored by the Blue Ridge Bicycle Club this Sunday, starting and ending at Fletcher Community Park.

Beyond that, Clogston recommends going on an organized ride. The bicycle club and most local bike shops offer group rides for all levels for both road and mountain bikers.

Meadows said beginner road bikers should spend time learning how to mount, dismount, clip in and out, and shift properly before heading out on the road. She suggests getting in the grass to learn how to turn, fall, maneuver in tight spaces and how to drink while riding.

Meadows recommends Joe Friel’s training bibles for learning the specifics.

Best rides for beginners

n Ledges whitewater park to Marshall along the French Broad River, north of Asheville.

n Bent Creek Experimental Forest.

n North Carolina Arboretum (parking fee, except for Tuesdays).

n Biltmore Estate (admission fee, visit www.biltmore.com).

n The Blue Ridge Bicycle Club also offers cue sheets for many road rides at www.blueridgebicycleclub.org. Also check here for more information on the Fletcher Flyer bike ride, which offers 50-, 62- and 100-mile ride options, or call Clogston at 254-8452.
