
Creating and nurturing a Youth Cycling Pipeline – Series 1

Starting a Program

As a cycling coach and a parent, I feel an obligation to grow cycling as a sport. As a consequence I started a junior cycling development program in 2003 with five juniors. This past year, 2008, our program has grown to more than 40 junior cyclist members. I believe that growing the sport is an obligation that all cycling coaches should share. For this reason, I am writing a series of articles for ***Creating and nurturing a Youth Cycling Pipeline*** based on my experience with the intent to encourage more cycling coaches to start and develop youth programs that will grow our sport.

Starting a junior cycling program is not as easy as taking a sign up sheet to your next club ride and collecting signatures. There are a few obstacles that you will need to overcome. You may believe that parents who are cyclists would have their preparing for their racing licenses as soon as they abandon the baby carriage. Although you will find that cycling parents are good sources for youth cyclists, retaining their offspring is not a certainty. The kids of parents who cycle are normal kids. They are interested in the same activities and athletic programs that their peers prefer. Kids are attracted to programs that offer popularity, tradition, identity, routine practice schedule, skill development, competition, and recognition. Parents mirror this attraction. “Mainstream” sports like football, baseball, soccer, softball, tennis, and swimming offer the type of programs that are familiar to the parents and kids. This is a challenge for cycling because there are so few cycling programs around the country that accommodate youth. Cycling is at a huge disadvantage in this department compared to the “mainstream” sports.

Because cycling is at a disadvantage, you need to think about how your program can compete against the “mainstream” sports. Prior to recruiting members for your junior cycling program, you should first define the mission of your program. Consider the answers to these questions as you develop the mission statement:

- Why cycling?
- What can your program offer kids over other sports?

You need to answer these questions to attract youngsters and most importantly, the decision makers – the parents.

Here is our mission statement: “Grow the sport by developing the next generation of serious cyclists. Groom junior cyclists with a focus on principles and values; good sportsmanship, attitude and teamwork. Promote a lifestyle of fitness and exercise to build a healthy environment for families.”

“Growing the sport” must be a part of your mission. Increasing the number of young cyclists will ultimately increase the popularity of the sport. “Developing the next generation” infers longevity in the sport, which lays the foundation for tradition. Character qualities like values, sportsmanship, attitude and teamwork are assets that draw parents to the program. Also, the lifestyle of fitness for families attracts parents, sponsors, and communities.

Note that our mission statement does not specify development of elite cyclists. You should strive to include as many cyclists as possible for improvement and success. This purpose may be different than other cycling development organizations, but it does not conflict with them. In fact, this statement supports a program that can be a pipeline not merely for elite cyclists, but for lifetime cyclists. When starting a junior cycling program, you should not be overly concerned about targeting the best athletes. We do not have the luxury of being too selective about athletic promise because the “mainstream” sports have traditionally attracted most of the mainstream youngsters. More important than finding gifted athletes, you should find candidates who have a good attitude and an interest in cycling. Your job as a coach is to develop these candidates into competent cyclists. Numbers is what our sport needs. If we grow the numbers, there will be plenty of elite athletes who will emerge.

Once you have your mission statement, you should define team rules and guidelines for your program including a code of conduct. These rules will clarify the behavioral expectations for your members and their parents.

The next action is to find places to practice and ride. Suitable practice locations and ride routes are the essential to a successful program. We have learned that you should limit the number of locations for the convenience of the parents. Finding places to practice and to ride can involve quite a bit of scouting. For many locations, even public ones, you may need to get permission. A good course will have all of the following features:

- It is SAFE, i.e. little traffic
- It has a variety of terrains
- It has some corners or turns
- It has parking available for the parents
- It has the ability to see most of the course from one point.

Next you should define your program. You should consider the following questions:

What is the identity of your program (name)? It is very important to kids and parents to have an “identity”.

What ages?

What type of rides should be included in the program?

Organize practices and rides that suit the ability of the kids. Start out with short rides: 10 km or so. Have cycling practices. Have the kids practice skills by doing drills like riding “no hands” in an empty parking lot or remote street. Play cycling games that include passing water-bottles. Pace-line drills. Fitness will increase with more practices and rides. Increase the distances.

What should the practices include?

- Skill development
- Fitness
- Cycling games – for fitness, fun, and competition
- After practice social time – It is very important to allow time at the end of practices and rides for the kids to socialize. If your practice is scheduled to be one hour long, add another 15 fifteen minutes for after practice social time. The kids will bond and cement their friendships during these times, which will strengthen the team and solidify loyalty to your program.

What type of races should be the target of the program?

Here is what I recommend for your race schedule. Too many races will burn-out the kids and parents.

- Several (10 – 20) local races – minimize travel time for parents
- Few (2 – 4) regional races – occasional overnight travel is enjoyable to kids and parents
- National Championships (1) – annual event – helps build your reputation and tradition

How often should your team meet?

I recommend offering three options to your youth program for parents and kids to consider.

- Primary Program Option – minimal practices and rides for competitive training – typically ages 10 – 12
- Intermediate Program Option – practices and rides for serious competitive training – typically ages 13 – 14, initial National Team members
- Advanced Program Option – practices and rides for ultimate competitive training – veteran National Team and ages 15 – 18

By offering these varied program levels, the kids and parents can decide which option best suits their interest. These options also produce a progression.

Here is an example of content for each program level.

Competitive Training		
Primary Program	Intermediate Program	Advanced Program
Helmet, road bike, cycling shoes, clip-less pedals, cycling kit	Helmet, road bike, cycling shoes, clip-less pedals, cycling kit	Helmet, road bike, cycling shoes, clip-less pedals, cycling kit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One skill/fitness practice per week • One additional group training ride per week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to three skill/fitness practices per week • Up to three additional group training rides per week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to four skill/fitness practices per week • Up to five additional group training rides per week

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve fitness and health • Learn basic bike handling, road cycling, safety, and etiquette • Instill teamwork, respect, and sportsman-like conduct • Promote work ethic and discipline • Encourage cycling as life-long sport • On-site USA Cycling race coaching and support • Award Eligibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a high level fitness • Develop the skills necessary for competition in USA Cycling Junior races • Instill teamwork, respect, and sportsman-like conduct • Promote work ethic and discipline • Encourage cycling as life-long sport • On-site USA Cycling race coaching and support • National Team eligibility • Award eligibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to Cycling over other Sports • Commitment to attend Junior practices and events • Commitment to compete races on team's race schedule • Team coaching • Advanced teamwork skills • Develop the tactics necessary for competition in USA Cycling Junior and Category races • National Team eligibility • On-site USA Cycling race coaching and support • Cycling Power and Fitness Test • Award Eligibility
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The program should accommodate the varying developmental stages of youths. In our case, we have been successful in retaining our members by creating a practice and ride schedule based on age groups, gender, and competency. Our cycling program is year round – indoor and outdoor – to assure that our youths are receiving adequate exercise to maintain health, improve strength, and to improve fitness. In order to keep the program fresh, the year is divided into four major periods of concentration: Preparation, Pre-competition, Competition, and Transition.

Preparation

- Cross-training, long rides, cycling speed drills, Plyometrics, strength building – diversity that includes activities other than cycling but related to endurance fitness and strength. These activities keep the team together while developing cycling related capabilities and helps reduce potential burn-out.
- Tentative event and race schedule to parents.
- Race licenses and renewals.

Pre-competition

- Build fitness and teamwork with special cycling events for competition readiness without the stress of racing.
- Establish the basic fitness abilities of endurance, muscular-endurance, strength, & speed.
- Sprints.
- Cycling team games.
- Increase muscular-endurance training and add hill workouts.
- Faster long rides.
- Fitness testing
- Team cycling events – not races – such as centuries, special event group rides, clinics, mini-camps.
- Our competitive season is very long. Some of our races will slide into the Pre-competition Period where team tactics are practiced. These early races should be underscored as racing practices. Emphasis on teamwork – criterium: work together to ensure everyone finishes on the same lap. Road races: Ensure that everyone finishes in a group.
- Reduce cross training. Update team progress, event schedule, and race schedule to parents.

Competition

Strive for teamwork in competition, graciousness and respect, humility for individual successes, team togetherness and pride.

- During the Competition Period, the emphasis is on getting team results – podium placements, top 10's, top 20's, etc.
- Longer Speed-endurance & muscular-endurance training with less recovery time.
- Speed-endurance training.
- Avoid overtraining.

- Emphasize tactics and teamwork during training and practices. Simulated races.
- Increase intensity in cycling games, but keep them short with plenty of recovery.
- Consolidation of cycling fitness.
- Fitness testing
- Advanced cycling camps.
- Races
- Keep the parents informed of team objectives and results.

Transition

Keep the team together during the off season. Change the training format for freshness.

- Rest and recovery following the Competition Period (end-of-season).
 - Little regimentation – mostly unstructured training at practices.
 - Have everyone stay in contact with the bike, but reduce mileage, time, and intensity
 - Time for tuning up.
 - After a season of training and/or racing, bodies and mind are tired. It is time for physical and mental relaxation; however, training and fitness should not be disregarded.
 - Fun rides – work on bike handling skills like cornering and riding with no hands.
 - Cycling skills assessment.
 - Group riding during the off-season at an easy pace for social benefits, no-pressure stress relief, and sharpen and improve group riding skills.
 - Cross-training: Team shuttle runs, standing broad jumps.
 - Report cards
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Other considerations for starting your program:

- Website – youth development pages for program descriptions, announcements, schedules, reports, etc.
- Apparel supplier and design - identity
- Obtaining Insurance
- Waiver and release forms

Recruiting young athletes

Recruiting young athletes for a sport that is not overly popular can be difficult. We started with five Juniors in 2002 and grew our membership to over 40 last year. It takes persistence and patience.

- Recruiting – keep the pipeline flowing in this priority
 - a. 10 – 12-year-olds
 - b. 13 – 14-year-olds
 - c. Under 10 – introduce kids to cycling – proper mount/dismount, clip-less pedals, shifting gears
 - d. 15 and older

The best candidates for cyclists are people who are friends – this works for all ages. Another source is to find parents who are cyclists or triathletes.

Parents

As a coach and director of a junior's cycling program, you have two audiences that you need to communicate. You have to remember that parents are the biggest influence that most kids have in their lives. It is critical that you engage the parents of your athletes and earn both their trust and buy in to the goals of the program. While engaging the parents is critical, it also important that the parents understand what your role is and what their role is at different events. You must establish early on that you have an open line of communication with the parents, but that during all cycling sessions you are in charge.

At the beginning of your relationship with an athlete and his or her parents, it is important to set the rules of engagement. You want both the athletes and the parents to understand that they can ask any questions, but that there is an appropriate time for those questions to be asked. During practices and races you must establish that you are in charge. Your athletes must come to you with questions and concerns during team events, not their parents. Likewise, parents must come to you and not their kids. You are in charge. This may seem like a difficult way to start a relationship with a parent, but it is important. Without establishing these rules on the front end it will be difficult to earn the trust of both your athletes and their parents.

As we have discussed previously, fear is an obstacle to success for every individual. I believe that most parents try to encourage and help their children. Their approach does not always achieve the intended affect. This is particularly true at races. The first race that we competed in with our juniors was very stressful for the kids. We had parents trying to help the kids get their numbers pinned while the coaches were trying to start the warm up. Everyone was running around in circles and it was total chaos. This chaos caused the kids to be more anxious about participating in the event. After this event we set the guidelines that once a child has been dropped off at an event, the coaches are in charge. Parents are required to step back from where the kids are preparing and may only help if asked by one of the coaches. Again this may seem like a difficult rule to enforce, but once the standard has been set it will prove to make races, practices and other events much less stressful for everyone. If you can set the standard with your current set of parents, the future parents will fall into line with little difficulty.

The key to a successful relationship with your parents and athletes is to set a standard of conduct for all members and stick to it under all circumstances. This is particularly true if a child is injured. As parents we have all experienced how a child will get more upset when they are hurt and Mom or Dad arrives. It is important for the coach to be the one who first assesses the injury. Most of the time the child will have minor scrapes and will hop back on the bike and continue to ride if the coach tells them to do so. This is important to keep a child's natural fear of crashing in check. Crashing your bike is a normal part of riding a bike, whether competitively or not. This should be kept in perspective, so that fear of crashing is not the factor that keeps your child from participating.

Coaches and parents can form a relationship that is supportive and healthy for the athletes. It requires trust, communication, and commitment to a common goal. All of these can be achieved if you set expectations early and commit to open lines of communication with all parties. This is critical for any successful program.

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE:

Cycling is not a sport that most of us grew up with. We haven't participated in the sport or even been a spectator of cycling events. Because of this while we all know what people say about assumptions you can safely assume the following about parents of kids entering the cycling world for the first time:

1. Assume I know nothing about cycling; you will be right 90% of the time.
2. Assume I want the best for my child.
3. Assume I want to help my child and you as the coach – but remember I don't know anything about cycling – therefore I don't really know how to help.

Before I get started I need to know the basics, things like:

- When and where is practice
- Does practice occur rain or shine

(This is where a group email distribution or a web site can become your best friend – otherwise your phone will constantly ring)

- What equipment does my child need (in English please)
- o What is a road bike?
- o Clipless pedals?
- o Biking shorts?
- What's my job at practice, i.e. do I just drop them off or do I stay to help
- And please make sure I understand that yes my child will fall/crash but they will survive

After a few practices I am ready (an anxious) for more information. Now I want to know things like:

- When is the first race?
- What is a criterium (road race, time trial) anyway?
- How to prepare my child for the race?
- o How to obtain a license?

- o How to register for the race?
- o What to eat and when?
- o Where to be and when?
- o What does my child need to bring to the race, i.e. what goes in the race bag, do they need a trainer, water bottle, etc.
- What do I do to help before, during and after the race?
 - o Registration
 - o Pinning numbers on
 - o Bike preparation
 - o Warm ups
 - o Roll out
 - o What if there is a crash or a mechanical

Now the race is over and boy I am confused. How do you even know who won? Depending on what type of race it is, this can be very confusing for both the kids and the parents. What seems intuitive to you may not be to the parents (remember we know nothing about cycling).

As you review the race with the kids, include the parents so we can gain an understanding of how it all works. It will be good to let the parents know they are there to listen (not question). If parents have questions about tactics, strategy, etc. they should ask the coach later. You don't want parents confusing the kids. As the team is together longer and has more race experience parents will begin to understand how the different events work and even understand some of the strategies you utilize. IF you utilize a strategy where you have a designated winner, or a person that everyone in the race is working for, be sure you explain this to the parents. Otherwise they are cheering on their child (i.e. coaching them from the sidelines) to charge ahead and win. Parents also may have a difficult time understanding how a team functions in a race, the concept of a domestique, for example, is a good one to explain early on.

While this may seem like a lot of information to cover it will make your job easier and make race days less hectic. As your team grows you won't have to cover all the details with new parents, experienced parents will give them the scoop. That makes it critical you get your initial parents trained right.

The race day strategy that has worked best for our team is to ensure the parents understand how to do the basic tasks (pump tires, pin on numbers, put bikes on trainers, etc), the coach will ask them for help as needed, and that the coach is in charge. This means ensure your child arrives on time with all their gear, and then be available to help as needed. Once the race begins cheer for everyone to do their best, stay strong, etc. and leave the sideline coaching to the coach.

The last tip is to keep in mind that parents are planners and often juggling more than 1 child's activities. Please give us as much advance notice about events as possible and let us know upfront what is reasonable and what's not, i.e. the race calendar won't be available a year in advance – that is not how cycling works.

Creating a continuing structure – Building tradition

The problem I have seen with Junior Program is that they are short term. Once a group of juniors graduates from high school, there are not any replacements to replenish the team. Your program needs a pipeline to replace the original members. To continue, your program must keep have elements that ensure that at am minimum your membership is replenished and optimally, its membership grows.

We have determined that these items are crucial for the continuation of your Junior Cycling Program

Reputation is everything

Encourage unity at events (team members, parents, coaches)

Start kids early as possible – USA Cycling Race Age 10

Recruit both genders

Consistency with rides and practices – keep to your schedule, avoid cancellations

Freshness and diversity with the content of practices – burn-out avoidance

Web site – recruiting, announcements, search, record keeping, reporting

Maintain and Publish Age Group/Gender Records

Rewards and recognition

