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Cherokee launches mountain bike team in growing club organization

by Alex Resnak
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Cherokee High School and its feeder schools have added mountain biking for the new school year.

The team will be part of the Georgia High School Cycling League, which operates under the rules of the National Interscholastic Cycling Association.

Coached by Carrie Willbur, the team is open to boys and girls in grades 6-12 and will compete in four races beginning in September. Willbur, though, is keeping her focus more on the long-term success of the team.

"What I would like to see is the group stay together for the whole season and just be a team," she said. "The focus this year is to learn new skills, to ride and to go to the races. With our group being small in numbers, we may not be competitive as far as points go, but we still want to go and experience the whole thing. We want to keep the group together, so next year they can promote the team."

Currently the Cherokee team consists of seven riders, but Willbur said she expects to see that number grow before the season starts. An experienced triathlete, she has plans to expand her coaching staff, which consists of herself, assistant Derek Boyd and various parent volunteers.

"I'll be a head coach, but what I foresee in the future is to have multiple people who have different experiences," she said. "We can have anybody, from an experienced mountain biker to someone who does yoga or weight-lifting — a well-rounded group. Teaching mountain biking is great, but they need to be strong, they need to stretch and they need to be fit. We'll all be pieces and parts of a puzzle to make it a whole."

Willbur's plan of expanding her staff goes right along with the GHSC's mission to make cycling a lifelong sport and a way for participants to live a healthier lifestyle.

"Football, baseball and basketball are traditionally high school sports," GHSC race director and programs director Kenny Griffin said. "A very small percentage of those athletes go on to play in college, and an even smaller percentage of those athletes play professionally. Cycling is a lot more user-friendly, meaning that myself and my buddies, in our mid-30s, are not going to get together and play tackle football in our yards and relive our old high school days. We're going to get on our bikes, go for a ride and stay healthy."

GHSC races, which are co-ed, are scored in a similar format to high school cross country races, with a team's success based on the success of its top individual finishers.

The GHSC, which is on pace to double in size this year, is currently considered a club sport, but Griffin said it could one day fall under the Georgia High School Association's umbrella, as long as the transition occurs naturally.

"I think, long-term, if the GHSA is welcoming with open arms to the format and structure, that's great, but it's certainly not something where we're wanting to fit a square peg in a round hole," Griffin said. "We don't want to force it. We want it to grow organically and have a good reputation

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before me make a step like that. We have our hands full, just with the growth in the next couple years, before we even think about a move like that."

The club charges \$175 in mandatory fees, in addition to a \$45 race fee, but financial assistance programs do exist through the league.

The season begins Sept. 13 with a race at the Georgia International Horse Park in Conyers, where mountain biking events were held during the 1996 Olympics.

"We do have a fee to join the team, but what's really great about this league is that they have scholarships and loaner bikes," Willbur said. "Even if a kid doesn't have a bike, we have some they can use from the league. That's really cool."

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