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Start-up mountain biking program offers students another fall sport

by Adam Carrington
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Riders compete in the Georgia High School Cycling League. The league was formed last year and currently has more than 200 participants.

Another fall sport is emerging, allowing high school and middle school athletes to pedal through the woods instead of running through them.

The Georgia High School Cycling League, a competitive mountain biking organization for high school athletes had its debut a season ago for participants in Grades 6-12, and now it has skyrocketed in numbers. A sport with similarities to cross country, the mountain biking program has now exceeded 200 athletes, thanks largely to new middle school programs.

There were just over 100 riders in the GHSC's debut season in 2014

"There's a demand for it," said race director Kenny Griffin. "High school students have younger siblings and they started gaining interest when we created it. We have over 79 middle school students so far."

This year, the 200-plus athletes will be racing on 12- to 15-mile dirt trails with a fair share of obstacles to overcome when the first of four races begin Sept. 13 at Georgia International Horse Park in Conyers. It is the same location where the 1996 Olympic mountain bike race took place.

The 2015 campaign will conclude Nov. 1 at the University of North Georgia College's campus in Gainesville.

North Cobb Christian was the lone Cobb County team to participate last year and finished fifth in the overall standings out of 11 teams. Now GHSC has added the Allatoona Creek Composite Team. A few of their neighboring rivals include Blanket's Creek in Woodstock and Cherokee High School.

"We were one of the first schools to get involved," said North Cobb Christian coach Ty Faulk. "Me and another coach (Ben Carr) were already starting a cycling club and we were like 'Wouldn't it be cool if we got some high school kids together?'"

Once he got word that the National Interscholastic Cycling Association, Faulk said he was "all over this."

Although the NICA added a middle school program, Faulk is still in the process of organizing one. They currently have 10 competitors on the roster led by seniors Tim Bourne and Mark Barton.

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Trails are sprinkled with roots and rocks. There are places where racers have to maneuver between trees that are close together as well as figuring out the tight corner. There are also the dips and the jumps.

"Kids have to walk their bikes over the obstacles when they first start," Faulk said. "The more they get into it, the more they learn to get over the obstacles on their own power."

Last year, races are divided into four different groups — freshmen, sophomores, JV and varsity. Varsity consisted of mostly seniors and juniors made up the majority of the JV group.

North Cobb Christian sophomore Hannah Hicks, is coming off an impressive freshman year where she wore the leading jersey for most of the season. And riders usually go out and waves and ride closely together, similar to how cross country races are run. Races typically last two hours.

"They feel the accomplishment of working and the accomplishment of finishing a race," Faulk said of his team. "There's also the enjoyment factor of it. They're always wanting to be out. If it rains, they're upset."

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