



# NICA

## and the next generation of mountain bikers

Words by Gary J. Boulanger | Photos by Maurice Tierney



**This year, more than 2,000** student-athletes from 200 teams across the country will have participated in high school mountain bike races because a Berkeley, California, high school math teacher wanted to get out of class early.

Fourteen years ago, high school math teacher Matt Fritzinger noticed some fellow teachers leaving school early, because they were coaches. An avid road racer, Fritzinger formed a cycling club for students, expecting roadies like him to show up in the cycling-centric city east of San Francisco. Five students appeared with mountain bikes...

So, Fritz, as he's known, began riding with the students and preparing them for a handful of local races. In time, he realized there were several hurdles to clear, both at school and in the region, so he took matters—both administrative and financial—into his own hands and formed the Northern California High School Cycling League.

High school mountain bike racing had begun, but not even Fritz could envision its growth.

Today, every Marin County public and private school has a mountain bike team. Fritz left his teaching job in 2003 to become the NorCal League director, and hasn't slowed down until recently. Spurred on by regional and national demand, the high school mountain bike movement has grown, and a governing body was created nearly three years ago to manage and nourish that growth.

The National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) was formed in late



“By putting cycling in high school, where it can be accepted on the same level as football, baseball, and basketball, we hope it gives kids another option to pick the sport that’s right for them.”

2009, and incorporated in June 2010. I was the first board president, alongside six-time Leadville 100 winner Dave Wiens; Kozo Shimano, grandson of the founder; and mountain bike evangelist and pioneer Gary Fisher, among others. The electricity and momentum of the first year’s meetings was historic.

But this is not a story about one man’s vision to spread high school mountain biking coast to coast; it is a story of the student-athletes, coaches, friends, parents, advisors, volunteers, and sponsors who wholeheartedly bought into that vision, and fanned the flames with gusto, sweat, and grit.

### HIGH SCHOOL MOUNTAIN BIKING GOES COAST-TO-COAST

High school mountain biking has grown quickly since 2009. Now, with the recent addition of new leagues in Tennessee, New York, and Arizona, and the expansion of the original NorCal League into two conferences, due to its size (nearly 700 student-athletes), the league count is 11. SoCal was the first new league to launch in 2009, followed by Colorado (2010), Washington State (2011) and Texas (2012). Utah and Minnesota just began their first season this fall.

“We had to turn down some bids recently

because we needed to focus on maintaining a track record of manageable success, and so far we’re at 100 percent,” Fritzinger said. “Several things are making this possible: generous support from sponsors, tremendous volunteer groups across the board, and highly efficient systems to train others to put on races. We’re getting better each year in this regard. The kinds of services NICA provides are improving, and most importantly, getting less expensive. We’re to the point where we can provide grants to states to start new leagues where needed, which is a big step.”

### RIGHT-HAND MAN

Berkeley resident Austin McNerny has been a bedrock for high school mountain biking. Back in 2003, professional mountain bike racer Gina Hall told him about riding with the burgeoning Berkeley high school mountain bike team, and she suggested that he check it out. So, McNerny showed up and met Fritzinger, riding with the team for the remainder of the season. Fritz asked if he would be interested in taking over as head coach the following year because he was quitting teaching to make the NorCal League a reality. He accepted and was the head coach for the team for the following five seasons.

“Working with high school students who were interested in bikes was perfect, as I could both share my technical knowledge of the bike while also serving as a mentor for those that were trying to find their way in our very challenging and confusing world,” he explained. “Seeing first-hand the transformational power that being part of a supportive mountain bike team had on some youths made me realize the value that cycling and proper coaching/mentoring can have.”

McNerny, now serving as NICA’s part-time educational programs director, oversees the coaching curriculum and risk management program. Also, with his experience in natural resource management and extensive trail advocacy efforts, he assists NICA staff and leagues with developing stronger relationships with land managers and stewardship groups. He also contributed to the writing of the original and recently-updated coaching manual and on-the-bike skills instructions book. He travels and teaches at the coaching summits held by all NICA leagues and leads many of the online webinars offered as part of its continuing education program. By doing so, McNerny has met dedicated volunteers committed to helping grow cycling and to hears their concerns and questions.

“As one of the early crew from the NorCal



League, I serve as a sounding board and advisor to NICA staff and new league directors as they encounter challenging situations," he added.

"When I'm available, I enjoy serving as a 'roaming marshal' and have worked at over 40 races in various capacities. This coming season, I'll be assisting Utah with their first race and will be working to complete a series of volunteer training videos as well as a League Director Manual, which will serve as a reference for how to run a high school cycling league."

#### FIRST MOVER STATUS

Matt Gunnell and Kate Rau were the first two new league directors after NorCal, and have relied heavily on NICA as they manage growth while providing a fun, safe, and professional experience for their student athletes.

Gunnell directs the SoCal League, and is involved for several reasons.

"I've always liked being involved in things that are real and have a direct impact on people," he said. "I have experience as a high school water polo coach, a teacher, and an advisor. At this stage of my life I see no better way to impact people than by helping them use cycling, a sport I love, as a tool to engage themselves with their lives.

It's awesome hearing stories of students, parents, and coaches who have 'found themselves' on the bike." SoCal had 14 teams and 106 riders in 2009, this past season, their fourth, Gunnell had 26 teams and 322 riders.

"By putting cycling in high school, where it can be accepted on the same level as football, baseball, and basketball, we hope it gives kids another option to pick the sport that's right for them," he added. "But being high school kids, they often pick up the sport quickly and within a year or two their identity is as a cyclist!"

Rau leads the Colorado League for similar reasons.

"I'm dedicated to positive youth development and the mountain bike has been my tool of choice for close to two decades," she explained. "The NICA model is perfect for creating outstanding opportunities for youth and family to connect in healthy ways. One of my favorite challenges is to find something, anything, which will engage a teenager to discover their brilliance and show it confidently to the world, in an outdoor setting. I feel teens have a voracious amount of energy, intellect and creativity ready to be unleashed."

"The Colorado High School Mountain Bike League is a tremendous environment where

**"The camaraderie and mutual support that develops, regardless of your skill, is very special."**

individual skills, positive self-identity, and healthy habits can be nurtured at one's own pace with a group of outstanding mentors and peers," Rau added. "The camaraderie and mutual support that develops, regardless of your skill, is very special. The huge bonus is that many parents are actively involved." In 2010, Rau's first season, 183 riders lined up to race. In 2011, it grew to 325, with more than 380 expected this fall.

#### TEXAS AND UTAH

Vance McMurry is a West Point graduate and former ultra runner. The Texan is a latecomer to mountain biking, but has taken his passion and experience to directing the Texas League's first season this past spring. An initial obstacle he faced was creating a Texas course challenging enough for experienced student athletes, but not too daunting for the first-time rider.

"One of the varsity boys told me after pre-

riding the Cameron Park Classic course that it was just like one of the courses he rode in Europe the previous summer," McMurry said with pride. "And, during our entire season, we only had to pull one student-athlete from the race for not being able to finish the course. This shows we're enticing both the experienced and beginners in a very exciting way."

Utah is the newest league to hold races, beginning this fall. Director Lori Harward echoes the sentiment of her peers when the topic of what riding has meant to her enters the conversation.

"My deep passion for cycling and kids is what drew me to NICA," she said. "I guess you could say I was born in the furnace of difficulty. I remember being in eighth grade and it was tough. I had just moved, had no friends and had serious family issues. I would get on my bike and ride. Riding made me feel better and after an hour of going hard, I felt like I could handle my life and everything would be okay. Thirty-one years later, I still get that same awesome feeling," she added.

## STUDENT BECOMES TEACHER

NICA Programs Manager Chris Spencer is a product of the NorCal League, racing in the early years before coaching a NorCal team while a student at U.C.-Santa Cruz.

"Racing bikes throughout high school really helped me develop confidence and focus," he explained. "It largely defines who I am today. My goal is to give every high schooler the opportunities I had. Everyone at NICA has a direct impact on its success everyday. The best days are when I get to work directly with high school riders."

"The constant challenge is: how do we make the most of everything?" Spencer added. "Everyone in NICA pulls really hard. We're constantly striving to sustain growth to new states while getting more and more support to existing riders and coaches."

## A LEAGUE OF OUR OWN: HOW TO START A NICA LEAGUE

Baby steps are important when starting a NICA League. Try connecting with other like-minded people in your area.

To begin, start a high school mountain bike club in your region. NICA provides the same insurance and benefits through its Indie Club Program. NICA Indie Clubs are scholastic competitive cross-country mountain bike clubs, either school-based, composite (regional based teams), composed of NICA member student-

## THE NICA TEMPLATE

NICA's first priority is the athlete. The course template—a challenging cross-country combination of twisting singletrack and wide double-track six miles in length with approximately 500 feet of elevation change per lap—emphasizes speed, safety, and an opportunity for both experienced and beginning racers to feel like they've accomplished something big on race day. A professional timing and recording system is used, and the courses are setup and marked off a day early to allow athletes and coaches a chance to pre-ride the course.

Several bike industry folks have commented on the impressive layout, comparing NICA venues to World Cup events. Races vary in distance, from 24 miles (Varsity Boys), 18 miles (Varsity Girls, Sophomore and JV Boys), and 12 miles (JV, Sophomore and Freshman Girls and Freshman Boys). All team members compete, and it's rare to see a student pulled from a race. This does wonders to encourage the self-esteem of students and parents alike, because NICA, while a racing organization, strives to develop life-long cyclists, and many parents have returned to or started riding again because of their son or daughter's participation.

NICA recently launched [spiritofhowdy.org](http://spiritofhowdy.org) with the International Mountain Bicycling Association to teach everyone involved (directors, coaches, riders and parents) its basic ethos for trail etiquette, the same way other outdoor organizations used their Leave No Trace campaign to educate hikers and backpackers on how to treat the environment.

## DEVELOPING THE FUTURE OF OUR SPORT

There's a twofold challenge for all league directors and coaches: how to nurture the gifted and talented racers while providing a healthy, encouraging environment for the beginners. Like other sports, there will be a talent disparity among the ranks, but high school mountain biking approaches things differently.

athletes and licensed NICA coaches. Teams hold activities within the basic parameters of NICA. Indie Clubs must choose a spring or fall season and conform to the appropriate NICA Team Training Limits.

Next, the head coach needs to obtain a NICA Coaches License. First-year Indie Clubs are required to have a team director with a NICA Assistant Coach License. The directors of second year clubs and beyond must have a NICA Head Coach License. All teams are also required to have a NICA Ride Leader License, which covers wilderness trail first-aid. All NICA coaches and

Race leader jerseys are awarded on the podium after each race in all categories, based on an accumulated points system. It's not uncommon for the fast kids to cheer on their much slower teammates, because of the bond they've developed during practice sessions, camps, and race travel.

There are some NICA alumni who've progressed to the elite ranks of bike racing. Lucas Euser and Steven Cozza raced for the Garmin-Chipotle road team, and John Bennett, a Cal-Poly student and former NorCal League champion, won a stage of the Redlands Classic road race in 2011.

"The NorCal League got me on a bike," Bennett said. "Without my team, coaches, and Matt Fritzinger I wouldn't be racing. NorCal provided the positive atmosphere I needed to keep engaged in a sport. The NorCal League and NICA are great breeding grounds for kids to develop the skills and fitness to move on to the next level, whatever that level may be."

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Fritzinger's initial vision of seeing high school mountain biking grow coast-to-coast by 2020 is coming to fruition quicker than he thought. NICA Executive Director Doug Selee knows that expanding the program will be a challenge. "We want to keep expanding and adding more leagues to give more student athletes this opportunity. To do this, we need to form a sustainable business model that best supports our existing leagues, enables NICA to grow at a manageable rate, and delivers solid value to our sponsors and supporters," said Selee.

"The interest in high school mountain biking is rising. We need to be there to help grow the sport and build a lifelong love of healthy lifestyles and cycling," Selee added.

The longview is getting more people on bikes and enjoying the trails. High school mountain bike racing is one means to that end. All it took was one math teacher to ignite another cycling revolution. ■

volunteers are also required to pass a background check.

Indie Clubs can "graduate" to Emerging League status, which is the foothold to becoming a Project League (like Colorado, Texas, Washington, Minnesota, and Utah), then Chapter League (like NorCal and SoCal).

NICA has a Team Starter Kit on their website with some important steps and helpful tips that will give you guidance as you start your team.

For more information, visit: [www.nationalmtb.org/indie-club-program](http://www.nationalmtb.org/indie-club-program).