

Go Coyotes!

Mountain Biking as a Team Sport Comes to Western Maryland



When Steve Green of High Mountain Sports and Garrett Trails learned about a meeting being held in Cumberland, Maryland, to explore starting team mountain biking for students, he mentioned it to some local mountain biking aficionados. Aaron Hordubay, Pat Hudnall and a small group of others went and, in the words of coach Gary Cooper, “fell in love” with the idea. Coaches, parents and students agree that this composite team, now embarked on its second year, has lived up to its promise. In the words of student athlete Tad Rodeheaver, everything about this sport is “awesome.”

The National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) was started in 2009 as a way of introducing students to the sport of mountain biking. The Maryland Interscholastic Cycling League (MICL) began operation just last year, in



Written by: **Mary Reisinger**
Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

2018. Already 13 teams have formed in Maryland, including a strong program in Garrett County. Leaders point out that one of the factors in the solid start has been the valuable assistance of Garrett Trails and High Mountain Sports. In addition, many individuals have enthusiastically joined in the effort, providing everything from donated gear to coaching hours.

Coaches universally praise the NICA and MICL organizations for their carefully constructed race courses, sensible regulations, and thorough training for coaches not only regarding safety and first aid, but also in how to effectively teach skills. Three levels of coaching are possible. Each

Garrett Composite Coyote's team (left to right): Coach Sharon Seling, Coach Gary Cooper, Coach Pat Hudnall, Jacob Murphy, Coach Aaron Hordubay, Ellie Hudnall, Josh Kight, Drew Hordubay, Ian Cooper, Jacob Helbig, Jackson Hordubay, Nathan Aldridge, Coach Carrie Hordubay, and Coach Gary Newcomb.



requires training. Garrett County's team currently has 11 coaches—Aaron Hordubay, Pat Hudnall, Eric Recker, Gary Cooper, Sharon Seling, Michelle Hudnall, Carrie Hordubay, Brian Haley, Josh Frick, Gary Newcomb, and Shane Myers—with more adults in training.

One coach, Sharon Seling, has been a mountain biker for years. She loves being out in nature, where she says we go to “recharge our souls.” Sharon rides in forested areas with a bear bell on her bike, but says it is difficult to find others to share the sport with her. When she began coaching, she expressed her concern to another adult about whether she should be there since she didn't have any children or grandchildren in the group. The other person said, “What do you mean you don't have any children here. Look around!” Sharon now feels that she has found a mountain bike family.

Another coach, Gary Newcomb, is the person who introduced his son-in-law Aaron Hordubay to mountain biking during a family vacation in Telemark, Wisconsin. His grandchildren are on the team, making it a three-generation sport. Many of the coaches are parents of team members, and in some cases, both parents in a family have become qualified coaches.

The coaches agree that the team wouldn't function without other adults, usually parents, who supply food, transportation, and assistance at practices, races, and extra-curricular activities. Many parents already were mountain bikers. Some decide to take up the sport in order to make it an activity for the whole family. Their efforts have helped to create the inclusive and supportive environment that is the hallmark of the Garrett County group.

The team draws athletes from several area schools; students who are home schooled or who attend schools other than Garrett County Public Schools are also eligible. Students can start in grade 6 and compete through high school. Last year 17 students signed up in Garrett County; this year 18 students had registered by the end of July with others considering joining. The organization sponsors a program called GRiT, Girls Riding Together, to increase the number of girls in the sport. At the moment, mountain biking is a club sport, affiliated with but not part of the school system. Eventually, leaders envision mountain biking becoming a regular part of physical education in the schools.

Student athletes and their families are finding this sport rewarding. Makayla Maule gave up some other sports to begin mountain biking. Her younger brother Nathaniel was initially unsure about joining the team, but now loves it. The two siblings are interested in following in the footsteps of their father Jeff, who competes in triathlons (biking, swimming, running). Makayla and Nathaniel's mother Angie is working hard to improve enough to keep up with the rest of her family. Last year, Jacob Murphy was too late signing up for soccer and turned to the mountain bike team as an alternative, riding in three races in the sixth and seventh grade events. He's looking forward to competing this year as an eighth grader. His mother Stephanie is very active as a parent volunteer and is thinking about training to be a coach. Gary Cooper's son reluctantly started on the team at his father's urging, but has acquired strong skills in just one season. Tad Rodeheaver, a rising senior who participates in robotics and many sports, particularly likes mountain biking. He has ambitious plans for his future, including being on



Coach Pat Hudnall instructing Jackson Hordubay on leaning into a turn. He will then practice this skill in real time on the trails at Deep Creek Lake.

mountain bike team in college, but first he is keen to go to as many races as he can in his final year of high school.

The season begins each summer in early July with three times a week practices, consisting largely of drills and trail riding to build stamina and skills. Students learn to maintain bikes, replace parts, change tires, and generally be as self-sufficient as possible. Team members carry backpacks with tools and spare parts so that they can respond to whatever happens while riding. Students pay league/race fees of \$275 and team dues of \$50. Students also need a bike, helmet, and basic equipment. The club appreciates donations of bikes, equipment, and funds to help defray these costs.

Each season includes four fall races in various parts of Maryland. In the first two years, all races have been held outside Western Maryland, but plans are afoot for a future race in Garrett County, possibly at Deep Creek Lake State Park. The weekend meets begin with “pre-riding” on Saturday, Saturday evening camping out and activities, and scored events on Sunday. Student athletes, who compete within grade level and gender groups, are awarded points for riding courses.



Ellie Hudnall learning the basics of cornering: low ready position, look through the turn and lean into the corner.

A powerful, positive spirit exists in the group. Coaches love the combination of being outside participating in a sport they love and mentoring young people. Parents embrace it as a healthy, wholesome activity for the whole family. Many observe that their children have grown tremendously in confidence and competence—and even in energy level. Students point to the opportunity to meet friends, to travel, to be outside, and to increase their skills as the benefits of being on the team.

The four pillars of NICA/MICL are strong minds, strong bodies, strong characters, and inclusivity. The organization focuses on personal skills development and the team dynamic rather than on defeating opponents, and this seems to suit the students perfectly. They cheer each other on and unselfishly help others. Carrie Hordubay was impressed with the boys who, after finishing their event, rode back to accompany the lone girl competing last year to the start line. Sharon Seling once was posted at a challenging part of a course and saw one cyclist nearly go over a drop off because of an encounter with a competitor. Both riders stopped and made sure the other person and both bikes were ok before they proceeded.



Coach Hordubay leads the Coyotes down to the practice field at Deep Creek State Park to practice various skills. The team will then practice those skills while riding the single track trails in the park.

The altruism of the young people on the team extends far beyond their races. They help with trail maintenance throughout the County. They volunteer at Taste of Garrett County, Gran Fondo, and other events.

The team designed and crafted ornaments out of bike parts for one of many trees at the Festival of Trees, a fundraiser for the Dove Center (an organization that offers safety, advocacy, and counseling around the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault) where decorated trees are displayed and sold. Team members are committed to the community in which they live.

The community also supports the team in numerous ways—such as helping with non-profit status and material donations. At the beginning of their first season, the team name Coyotes and a logo were chosen, with student Ellie Hudnall being instrumental in the logo design. Through the generosity of people like Shane Myers, the students are able to proudly wear gear displaying their logo.



Coyotes' Drew Hordubay and Aaron Hordubay aide a Grand Fondo rider with a bicycle problem during the Garrett County Gran Fondo ride in June, 2019.

The goals for this mountain bike team are to ride and race safely, include and value every rider, and have fun. Through participation in the team, students gain access to a life-long activity that promotes health, connection to the outdoors, and enjoyment of nature and exercise with family and friends. That really is awesome.

Learn more about mountain biking as a team sport on the national website (<https://www.nationalmtb.org/>) or the state website (<https://www.marylandmtb.org/>).

If you are interested in coaching, competing, or supporting the Coyotes, contact the team at garrettconica@gmail.com.