

The National Capital Velo Club Exudes Class

by Neil Sandler

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From the very beginning there has always existed a sense of style and class about the National Capital Velo Club (NCVC). Early black and white photos of club members out for a ride in the 1960s, long before there were lycra and clipless pedals, show them wearing very hip leather bomber jackets, pleated trousers with the pant legs carefully rolled up to show imported leather cycling shoes from Italy. And the sleek thoroughbred European racing bikes they straddled glistened.

Today there is much about the area's largest bike racing club that continues to exude panache. During one of the photo shoots for this story, a club member murmured to his teammates, "oh boy, I know I'm going to hear about not wearing black bike shorts for this picture."

The club's fabled red and white "stars and bars" jersey is recognized nationwide, and even at venues overseas. The original

design, culled from the flag of the District of Columbia, was suggested nearly three decades ago by Hank Whitney, an Air Force captain and club member. There are various explanations as to why the same design has lasted so long, but the two most plausible are that the design is highly recognizable in the all important photo finish race photos, and secondly, the retro design is just downright "cool." Whatever the case, rest assured that anyone seen wearing the "stars and bars" on a bike ride in the mid-Atlantic is immediately identified as "a serious bike racer."

According to Mike Butler, 55, who served as club president for 16 of the past 30 years before turning in his cleats two years ago to become a soccer dad to his three daughters, "when the gun (starting a race) goes off, it's still all about the legs. Sure, some people have said they think the (jersey's) design is dated. But it's classic and anyone who wears it is making a statement about their passion for bike racing."

NCVC is recognized for its wide mix of personalities, from bike messengers, to high powered D.C. attorneys, television producers to world class bicyclists. Its membership has spawned at

least six of the area's leading bicycle shops.

NCVC is a storied name. The kind that will be here a century from now, when its current membership, recognized for its wide variety, becomes a part of the club's history. Unlike bike racing clubs that boast the name of its current sponsor, the National Capital Velo Club's name says it all.

The club's membership over the past 35 years has included national, Olympic and world champions. Marion Clignet, who began as a bike messenger in D.C., went on to win world championships and even a medal in the Olympics. A dual national, Clignet captured these top honors for the country of France, where she now lives and serves as a bike coach.

Thomas Prehn, a nationally ranked swimmer from the Norfolk, Va., area learned the ropes of bike racing while a member of NCVC after he moved to Annapolis. Prehn went on to capture America's top road racing crown - the U.S. Pro Championships in Philadelphia in 1986, while riding for the Schwinn pro team.

Most, like Prehn, who now lives in Colorado, reached

cycling's highest rungs after they "graduated" from NCVC.

However, virtually every one of these champions credits their membership on NCVC as a primary reason they got into cycling and stayed.

But others, like 17-time national champion Jim Montgomery, won most of his coveted stars and stripes jerseys while racing for NCVC. And Aubrey Gordon of Guyana raced on the Guyana Olympic team while racing for NCVC. He carried his nation's flag during the 1992 Olympic ceremony.

Even the nation's foremost bike racing historian, Peter Joffre Nye, author of many books on bike racing (including the reknown "Hearts of Lions: A History of Bike Racing in America" -- which features Prehn on its cover!) now suits up in his stars and bars wardrobe on weekends for club rides and races.

"Right off the back I liked the people in NCVC," Nye, who has been a club member since 1991, told SPOKES. "Lots of 'em are iconoclasts - lawyers, journalists, TV producers, accountants, you name it, who enjoy bike racing. But racing and training is just a part of their lives. They have social lives, families. They are people

whose lives have a good balance."

Jay Moglia, a bike messenger in D.C., and one of the area's top road racers, told SPOKES that he and a number of other messengers came to NCVC in 1997 from Burritto Brothers, which was primarily composed of messengers. "NCVC has supported us in new ways. It has brought us into contact with the larger local racing community beyond our strong messenger roots. It has turned out to be a great fit. The best part of NCVC is the range of people in the club and how interconnected it all is. It seems like it is the nature of the racing. Everyone is so consumed in their passion, it transcends occupation or even financial status."

Zach Browne, a former messenger, who now works construction, and has won a number of District 20 (mid-Atlantic area) road championships, serves as team director. "We come out here to work as a team. We all share a passion for the sport. And that's what we talk about, pretty much all of the time. Today's ride (an 80 mile training ride into Maryland's Catoctin Mountains) won't give us all that much time to talk. It is about the sport."

In addition, half a dozen of the area's top bike shops are owned and operated by current or former club members. Among them are Jim Strang, co-owner of the club's current sponsor Spokes, Etc. of northern Virginia, Larry Black, owner of College Park and Mt. Airy Bicycles, who is a former NCVC president, Matt McGoey, owner of All-American Bicycles in Damascus, Md., and a former District 20 champion, and Grahame Reffell, owner of Bicycle Outfitters in Leesburg, Va.

Another one of these shop owners, a French speaking Moroccan, who is credited by many with introducing Americans to the 10-speed bicycle in the early 1960s, is also credited with being one of the individuals behind the formation of NCVC.

Mel Pinto, 78, owner of The Bicycle Pro Shop in Georgetown, and of Mel Pinto Imports in Falls Church, Va., came to the U.S. with a tremendous enthusiasm for the sport of bike racing. His life revolved around those three weeks in summer when France stops for the Tour de France.

In what now must seem like a blur, the decade of the 1960s saw Pinto and several others breathe life into the smaller regional clubs that would eventually converge

into NCVC.

This blur of development goes back to 1960, when on one Sunday morning Pinto was shocked to come upon a bike race at Seven Corners Shopping Center in Falls Church. "I was only a spectator, but watching those 25 racers, got me thinking," Pinto recalled. Turns out the race organizer was Ray Matthews, who put on the event so his five sons could learn the sport. While each of Matthews' sons rode 10-speed racing bikes, most of the others raced on clunkers or an occasional three-speed English racer. Matthews had recently moved to the area from Argentina, where he'd been stationed, and he and his sons brought the then very unique 10-speed bikes with them to the U.S.

Pinto, who enjoyed riding a 10-speed he'd brought with him from Europe, and still went out of his way to find daily results from the Tour every July, introduced himself to Matthews. One thing led to another, and before long, Pinto imported 50 10-speed Gitanes from France.

"There was no place for the other kids to get their hands on 10-speed bikes, so the only way I knew to get them, was to become an importer," he recalls. At first,

no one other than the group that was racing in Matthews' local races, would buy them. But after Pinto put several bikes on consignment and on display in the shop windows of local bike shops, they began selling.

Among the early converts to 10-speed racing were Oliver "Boots" Ward of College Park, Md., Gerald Teewen of Virginia, and Bill Vetter. John Phillips of Baltimore, who'd been racing bikes since the 1930s, joined the group, as did his wife Zay, who won 13 Maryland state bike racing championships over her racing career. They brought along their son Bobby "the Bullet" Phillips, who'd already won several national championships, starting with a National Midget Championship in 1956.

Initially the group worked to bring others into the sport via club rides. In the early 1960's, the rules of the nation's bike federation, the ruling body of bike racing in America, made it more advantageous for the riders to form into small neighborhood racing clubs.

The clubs did ride together frequently in group rides of 60 or more from the Polo Grounds along the Potomac. They called themselves the Federation of

Washington Area Cycle Clubs, and they had a club newsletter call "The Spokesman."

But by the mid to late '60's the federation changed the rules making it more advantageous for racers to be members of one larger club, that was what eventually spurred the creation of NCVC, which became "the" club to join.

A few early references in mid-1960s publications are made of the "Washington Velo Club" and the "National Capital Bicycle Club," but by the late 1960s, the National Capital Velo Club was firmly established as the name of a growing racing group.

Ray Matthews was NCVC's first president with Pinto as treasurer.

Around the same time, in 1963, under Pinto's direction, the group who would later compose the NCVC met with Marcel Galopin, commercial attache to the French Embassy in Washington, who was looking for a club to become the official host of the National Capitol Open around the Ellipse. Pinto and Galopin, who frequently rode together, saw to it that the French Embassy would sponsor the races, with prizes included \$10,000 in merchandise supplied by Mel

Pinto Imports.

For 25 years, NCVC served as the club sponsor of the NCO, which was the mid-Atlantic's most important and widely attended race. Spectators numbering in the tens of thousands, and top racers from throughout the Eastern seaboard converged on the Ellipse in front of the White House. But around 1990, NCVC sold the rights to the race to the sports marketing company Proserv, which ran it for two seasons, but then dropped the event. Efforts by Pinto and some members of NCVC to revive the NCO have not succeeded.

NCVC, however, continues to host popular training races and this past year introduced a major criterium race on the streets of Washington, D.C. The inaugural Capital Children's Museum Criterium along Pennsylvania Avenue in northwest D.C., just blocks from the major tourist attractions drew racers from throughout the mid-Atlantic and was won by Olympic Gold Medalist Marty Nothstein - more proof of the respect NCVC's very name commands.

Today, as back then, one of the true beauties of the club is the breadth of its cycling activities. On this February 2002 weekend,

NCVC members participated in a bike racing clinic, hosted by long-time member Bruce Oliver; a tortuous 80 mile mountain ride in the hills of western Maryland primarily for the club's top racers; and a social (not so social, according to some participants!) 50 miler that heads out every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. from the Dean & Deluca coffee shop in Georgetown into Maryland's rural suburbs.

Myron Lehtman, formerly a top mid-Atlantic triathlete, and a lawyer with the U.S. Department of Justice, is known as "The Mayor" of the Sunday coffee rides. "This Sunday ride is an institution," Lehtman told SPOKES. "It's not really just a coffee clutch ride. It's what you make of it. No one comes back unchallenged. And we always welcome new NCVC members and non-club members to join in."

Oliver's Saturday morning three hour clinics have really added significant depth to the squad. "Back in 1996, I'd just come off a very successful (racing) season largely because I feel that I'd figured out a bunch of things about the sport of bike racing. But about the same time I saw a lot of our Cat. 4's were struggling. I decided to try out teaching some of what I'd learned." So during the

winter of '96-'97 Oliver began running clinics that began at 9 a.m. at the Caboose along the W&OD bike path in northern Virginia and concluded around noon.

During these clinics, the 50-year-old Freddie Mac attorney, who last season won the District 20 criterium championships for racers 50+, teaches such cycling skills as pedaling technique, paceline basics, tactical use of the paceline, blocking, being invisible in the paceline, cornering, sprinting techniques, how to lead out, attacking, counterattacking and race simulation.

"I pretty much try and cover everything that the only other way you could learn is by actually racing," Oliver told SPOKES. The three hour clinic is generally broken down into three one hour activities. After an initial lecture, say on pedaling stroke, Oliver will work with each rider one-on-one. On this particular day, for instance, Oliver had each rider ride out of their saddle for 10 miles. "The idea," he explained, "is to teach each rider to connect pedal strokes. Because if you didn't connect pedal strokes, your legs would never last the entire 10 miles." After each rider receives some one-on-one coaching, the group moves onto lessons two and three. Lessons are about bike racing

skills, and not so much about endurance, because as Oliver notes: "getting fit is easy, but becoming a bike racer is hard."

While most of the 20 to 50 riders who show up are Cat. 4's or 5's, some more experienced Cat. 3's will come out to brush up on their skills or to help out. Oliver notes that a major success of this program is that even when he cannot attend because of his six year old daughter's basketball games, others who have been participating can take over and teach for him. The clinics begin the first Saturday in December and run through April. Only NCVC members or prospective members can participate.

NCVC has always prided itself on bringing new athletes into the sport. In the 1970s, for instance, Mary Pelz, now 48, came to the club as a non-cyclist.

"I was an athlete looking for a sport. I decided I was going to get serious about a sport and it was either going to be tennis or bike racing," she recalled. "I'd seen the National Capitol Open in front of the White House and was impressed by the conditioning and skills of the racers. I met Linda Dockendorf (who later married another NCVC resident of the 1970s, Larry Black, owner of

College Park and Mt. Airy Bicycles), who was racing for NCVC, and I began training with her. I'd do the training races at IBM (in Montgomery County, Md)." Pelz recalled how challenging all the races were because inevitably a nationally ranked women would show up and put pressure on the field.

Many time national champion Betsy Davis of New Jersey, for example, would frequently compete in local races. "Betsy was a great rider and champion," Pelz exclaimed. "She was blue collar (working in a New Jersey bike shop) and showed she was not afraid of hard work. It showed in her results. I worshiped the ground she walked on because she was that good on a bike!"

Pelz and long-time club president Mike Butler, who subsequently married and had three daughters, noted that another reason the club has thrived is the international nature of Washington, D.C.

"Bicycling is perceived as very much an international sport. As a member of NCVC, you'd frequently find yourself training with people from all over the world, France, Britain, South America, New Zealand... you name it," said Butler, who himself

came to the U.S. from Guyana. Butler believes that Australians contributed more to NCVC than any other nation, particularly in the person of racer Ian Jackson (a national champion in Australia).

Current NCVC President Stew Harris, executive director of Public Webworks, took over the reins when Butler retired in 2000. Why has NCVC survived, we asked Harris. "I'm not sure I know the reason, but...I suspect it is because from its inception our club was based on a strong volunteer ethic and a tradition of egalitarianism. It says right in our ridership documents that all members are expected to contribute and the success of the club is directly dependant on the contributions of its members. Our Cat. 1 riders road guard at our races like everyone else. Everyone is eligible for partial reimbursement of race entry fees, and special event funding for travel outside the area.

"NCVC has managed to imbue our riders with a strong team ethic. Members who are out for themselves alone, and don't learn the NCVC way, tend not to stay with our club very long."