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Cyclists gather for a spin in Punta Gorda

By GREG MARTIN

STAFF WRITER

PUNTA GORDA — Some 260 of Southwest Florida's most avid bicycle riders tore themselves away from watching the Tour de France race Saturday to do something even more special — to help turn a local group's annual bike ride into this area's own "Tour de Punta Gorda."

The third annual Wheels & Wings ride, organized by the Peace River Riders club, drew triple the turnout it attracted in its first year. This year's 260 riders included teams from as far as St. Petersburg.

"It's a lot more fun to ride with people, and it's really good exercise," explained Renee Ward of Cape Coral, who rides 50 miles five days per week.

The event featured group rides for several different levels. Their distances: 15 miles, 32 miles or 50 miles. For the more sporting, a 10-mile fullspeed race was thrown in.

The horde whirred off from sponsor Beef 'O' Brady's restaurant. They trekked east on Punta Gorda's back roads, and kept going east on U.S. 17, well past the Cleveland area of town.

The bikers returned on Riverside Drive, crossed the Peace River and looped through Charlotte Harbor on Melbourne Street and Bayshore Road.

Court Nederveld, events director for Peace River and a Sun columnist, said he couldn't be more pleased with the turnout. Several participants were real hotshots, he said.

He attributed the growing number of riders to the event's timing.

"In July, there's only two places to be," he said. "One is in Europe watching the Tour de France. The other is Punta Gorda, for Wheels & Wings."

Nederveld, who is also a member of the Charlotte County Metropolitan Planning Organization's bicycling advisory committee, also was excited because he has been promoting bicycling initiatives to local governments. They include one to get bike routes marked.

"Punta Gorda and, by default, Charlotte County are becoming much more bicycle-friendly," he reported.

One glance at the beaming smiles and bristling physiques of the riders, and one could tell they're passionate about their sport.

"I'm an airline pilot, so I kind of like to get outside," said Robert Fenderson of Sarasota.

The event put Punta Gorda on the map for a dozen members of the Bachetta racing team. Its members, who hail from St. Petersburg to Fort Myers, travel throughout the Southeast to compete.

Asked for his impression of Punta Gorda, Bachetta member Jay Corp of St. Pete replied, "It's very nice." He mentioned a comfortable night in this city's Four Points by Sheraton hotel.

"We're seeing more cities become bike-friendly because they're seeing the benefits — that we spend," he said.

Charlotte County offers several nearly idyllic routes, local riders say.

Frank Bobkowski, 71, of Venice, said he rides four days per week through Cape Haze, Gulf Cove or North Port. Their only detraction: excessive litter, he said.

"It gets me out of the house," he said.

Some riders were participating to challenge themselves. Englewood mountain-biker Rocky Reed said he wanted to build up muscles by riding a home-built, onespeed bike. Normally, he races off-road with son Jake in events from Caloosahatchee Regional Park to Gainesville, Fla.

"This is a great area for mountain biking," he said. "You're about an hour (driving distance) away from several great places."

Saturday's riders included one man who couldn't walk, due to a neurological disease. But Kirk Asp could ride a "tadpole recumbent trike," which is a lowslung three-wheeler with a bucket seat.

"Well, I mean, you want to get out and do something," he said.

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Rocky Reed of Englewood, left, chats with Frank Bobkowski, right, prior to the Wheels & Wings ride Saturday. Both are members of the Real Bikes bike shop team.



Court Nederveld, event organizer for Peace River Riders, right, welcomes John Schlitter and Jacquie Hafner of Palmetto to the Wheels & Wings event Saturday morning in Punta Gorda.



A trio of bikers rides on Riverside Drive.



A group of riders whirs west on Riverside Drive on a leg of a 50-mile ride organized by Peace River Riders on Saturday.



SUN PHOTOS BY GREG MARTIN

Riders get ready to embark Saturday morning from a Punta Gorda parking lot during a Wheels & Wings event.



For these participants, a bicycle built for two was just the right speed, during the Peace River Riders event Saturday.



SUN PHOTO BY GREG MARTIN

Riders get their game faces on prior to the start of the Wheels & Wings event, organized by the Peace River Riders club, early Saturday morning in Punta Gorda.