

by William Ernest Waites



PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL

Pedaling Power

Cyclists hit the road for fitness, competition, or simply socializing

Do you remember your first two-wheeler? For me, it was a used Schwinn—bright orange-red, with that stippled finish typical of a previous owner's spray-can paint job. But I loved it. Even though it was about four inches too high and I couldn't get on without putting a foot on one of the pedals, I loved it.

Although some of us might have outgrown our affection for the venerable velocipede, others have become hooked forever—like an errant pant-leg in an unguarded chain—and in Southwest Florida, many of those belong to the Caloosa Riders Bicycle Club. Members of the Ft. Myers-based club, about two hun-

dred strong, meet every week for group rides.

David Brunk, president of the club, describes a typical Saturday morning: "Between fifty and sixty cyclists break off into groups of similar ability. The speediest riders, pacing themselves at about twenty miles per hour, take off first, followed by the next fastest at about eighteen miles per hour, and so forth, until the slowest group is accommodated," he reports.

The club invites visitors in the area to join the rides. A list of scheduled rides and maps of the most popular routes can be found on its Web site (www.caloosariders.com).

“These are recreational rides only. There is no competition. We are just out there for the exercise, fresh air, and socializing with people who share our interests,” says Brunk.

At the same time, some Caloosa Riders are serious cyclists. The Web site includes a 66-page journal written by Brunk, covering a two-month ride from Washington, D.C., across the Lewis and Clark Bike Trail to Idaho—carrying all his gear with him.

Boosting Bicycling

Whether you have your own bike or rent, the island coast of Southwest Florida is cycle country. The Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization has published a countywide bicycle-facilities map that includes routes throughout the county. The map can be downloaded from the MPO’s Web site (www.swfrc.org) or is available at various bike dealers, rental facilities, the Calusa Nature Center, and the Lee County

Visitor and Convention Bureau. The map shows existing off-road bike trails and roads with bike lanes, paths, or paved shoulders wide enough for safe pedaling. Also included are a digest of safe cycling tips, Florida laws pertaining to cycling, and cycle-friendly parks and recreation facilities.

Dan Moser, Lee County Department of Health representative to the MPO’s Bicycle/Pedestrian Coordinating Committee, is a strong supporter of creating and maintaining an effective cycling infrastructure in Lee County. One of his most recent efforts has been lobbying for bicycle-safe lanes on the proposed Sanibel bridge and causeway. Moser makes the points that bicycling to and on the islands reduces traffic, reduces automotive pollution, and enhances the visitor’s experience.

“As it stands,” he says, “while riding a bike to Sanibel may be perceived as quite risky since cars and bikes share the same lanes, experienced riders can transit the causeway safely.” Moser adds, “The



Caloosa Riders (left) meet weekly for rides that are geared for cyclists of all levels. Some twenty-five miles of bike paths (above) make cycling one of the best ways of getting around Sanibel.



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Billy's Bikes owner Billy Kirkland figures bicycle riding is the third most popular family attraction on Sanibel, right behind beaches and nature.

greatest danger is on the causeway islands, where drivers tend to be preoccupied by the scenery. Once on Sanibel, there are excellent bike paths, but getting there on a bike will be easier when the new bridge with eight-foot-wide breakdown lanes is completed.”

Sanibel Cyclists

Sanibel, home of the Sanibel Bicycle Club, has twenty-five miles of bike trails bordering the main roads and wending through J. N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge. The club (www.sanibelbicycleclub.org) is a persistent voice for maintaining and improving Sanibel’s bike paths, referred to as “shared-use” paths to acknowledge the ways they are used and to broaden funding support.

Patti Sousa, wife of club president George Sousa, says the club has two hundred and twelve members, with the typical seasonal bulge. Members meet from November through April with monthly potluck dinners and business meetings. The group also gathers for weekly twenty-mile rides, departing from Sanibel’s

Holiday Inn at 7 a.m. each Saturday. Monthly off-island rides and occasional excursions range from an upcoming trip to Gainesville to a group trip to Austria.

Island rides, which have been a regular occurrence during the club’s ten-year history, include a safety monitor and a “sweep.” The sweep brings up the rear and makes sure no one is left behind. “The majority of our members are over fifty, with many who are in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. A few don’t make the whole trip, preferring instead to join us along the way or show up at our destination, the Sunset Grill, on their own,” says Sousa.

Visitors are welcome to join the rides, according to Sousa, adding that the group is largely social. She and her husband weren’t big riders before moving to Sanibel two years ago. “We just got caught up in the group and made many friends from it,” she says enthusiastically.

Especially for Visitors

Sanibel also has several businesses that rent and sell bikes, including Billy’s Bikes, The Bike Route, and Finnimore’s Cycle Shop. On Captiva, Jim’s Rentals

provides bicycles.

Billy's Bikes owner Billy Kirkland claims that bike riding is the third most popular family attraction on the islands. "First are the beaches, second is the nature, then there's cycling. A family of four can rent bikes for two hours and see almost all of Sanibel for just \$20," Kirkland says.

When Kirkland moved to Sanibel in 1985 after almost ten years on Ft. Myers Beach, he noticed the opportunity in bicycle rentals and started to rent them at local hotels and resorts. In 1999, he purchased Island Mopeds and converted it to Billy's Bikes, shifting the balance of business from mopeds to pedal bikes. Today, two-thirds of his rentals are single-speed and multi-speed bicycles. Tandems also are available, as are bikes especially fitted for disabled riders.

Tour de Cape

The "big wheel" of local cycling events is the annual Tour de Cape, staged in January by the City of Cape Coral. The event draws an estimated 800 to 1,000 riders to pedal the streets of the Cape in one of four circuits—a hundred-mile "century," a metric "century" of 62 miles, a 31-mile ride, or a 15-mile ride, with staggered start times.

Unlike its better known French cousin, the Tour de Cape is not a race; it is purely recreational. According to Keith Lockhart, recreation/events coordinator for the City of Cape Coral Parks and Recreation Department, rest stops are set up at fifteen-mile intervals with fruit, water, and other energy boosters for riders. Major intersections have police monitors to assist cyclists through traffic. "But," Lockhart says, "riders are required to follow the rules of the road, wear helmets, ride single file, and stop at traffic signals."

Most participants are local riders but fifteen percent to twenty percent come from points as distant as Tampa, Orlando, and Miami. This widely promoted event has put Cape Coral and all of Southwest Florida on the bicycling map. 🏍️

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