

Cycling in Marin: Bronze medal Paralympic cyclist rides for MS

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Though Anthony Zahn, 38, has ridden a bike since he was a kid, the Paralympic bronze medal cyclist didn't always ride as a para-athlete. For years, Zahn, a Mill Valley resident, rode and raced against able-bodied athletes even though he was diagnosed in his teens with Charcot-Marie-Tooth (CMT) disease, a genetic degenerative disorder that attacks the peripheral muscles and nerves in the body.

"I had basically ignored or tried to ignore my condition," Zahn said. "I thought I'd be the first person with CMT at the Tour de France."

This weekend Zahn will be on his bike again riding in the Waves to Wine, a two-day fundraising ride for the MS Society.

CMT makes it so that Zahn, in para-athlete classification terminology, has zero-discernible strength in his feet, ankles, calves and hands. In fact, it was because running was so difficult when he was 14-years old — though he didn't yet know why — that Zahn turned to competitive cycling.

"Anthony has been motivated to cycle what seems like his entire life," said Liz Bernstein, Zahn's girlfriend and event director of Waves to Wine.

Zahn threw himself completely into the sport, attending training camps in Colorado and reading every copy of *Bicycling* when he should have been doing homework. But, CMT is also a progressive disease, meaning as Zahn raced and moved up the ranks, each year it got harder to do the same things.

One race, another rider made a joke about his skinny legs and mentioned the Paralympics.

"I had never even heard of the Paralympics until 2005," Zahn said. But, he got some information from that other rider and it turned out to be just right for him.

"I didn't have any idea what it would really be like," Zahn said.

He had no idea if he'd come in last at para-cyclist nationals or ride away from everyone.

Para-cycling — and most sports in the Paralympics — are divided into categories based on ability. In cycling, there are five categories of athletes who ride standard upright bikes, often with modifications, then additional categories for tandem bikes with blind riders, hand-cycles and tricycles. Zahn rides a regular bike, but in the category that's "the most disabled that still rides upright," he said.

Because classifications are by ability, not by injury or illness, people with very different disabilities ride together. Zahn's category includes paraplegics, double-single amputees (meaning those with one leg amputated above the knee and one arm below the shoulder), people with cerebral palsy and a number of veterans with severe injuries. It can make for an interesting race.

There are also rules about how long and how intense para-cyclist races can be. When Zahn complained to a team director about rules limiting climbs to shorter than 1-kilometer, the director joked, "They seem to think you guys are disabled."

Zahn made the U.S. development team, based on a time standard, in the first two years he tried out.

But, in 2007, he finally made the national team and then the Beijing Paralympic team in 2008.

"The Olympics is just such an amazing show," Zahn said. Even simply eating in the athlete dining hall in Beijing and London, which has seating for 8,000 people and is open around-the-clock, is a crazy experience.

After the London Games, where he took two eighth places while struggling with cracked ribs from a crash just six weeks earlier and recovering from a bout of tonsillitis, Zahn decided to take a break. But, not for too long.

Zahn moved to Mill Valley with Bernstein earlier this year. And, when the weather got good, they started riding together. For them, the Waves to Wine ride will be a whole family affair.

His mother, brother and sister are all volunteering for the event, while he, his dad and Bernstein's sister, who was diagnosed with MS seven years ago, will be riding the 100-mile route.

Last year, Zahn flew in from where he was living at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado to ride Waves to Wine with Bernstein's sister. It gave him a chance to see how MS affects people and to get to make friends who are living with the disease.

"I think their diseases are similar, so when they first met, it was great to hear them talk about things they could do to help improve each of their lives," Bernstein said.

This year, he's happy to be raising money for a "great, great cause," he said, and support his family and friends doing it. But, mostly, he's just excited because he loves riding. "It'll be a fun bike ride."

In the press

The Drake High mountain bike team — and a number of Marin high school mountain bikers — made an appearance in Outside Magazine this month in a story titled "Fast Times at Singletrack High."

The article, which features the Drake team in its (ultimately unsuccessful) quest for a fifth state title, follows a number of local high school riders through their training and at the NorCal championship race this past spring. With high school mountain biking experiencing a massive growth spurt nationwide, Outside points to Marin as the leaders of the pack.

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Waves to wine ride

What: The National MS Society's ride with 40-, 50-, 75- and 100-mile ride options

Where: Cow Palace to Sonoma Mountain Village in Rohnert Park; Sonoma Mountain Village also hosts the beer and wine garden, fashion show, expo and dinner for Saturday evening and at the finish

When: Saturday and Sunday

On the Web: www.wavestowine.org