

EL TOUR'S REAL HEROES

Volunteers Keep the Event Running Smoothly

By Susan Dawson-Cook

From the sidelines,

the start of El Tour de Tucson appears to be all glamour and glitz. As elite athletes from around the world prepare to lead a parade of thousands through the 109-mile course, their fine-tuned muscles ripple and their bright jerseys appear almost too blinding, even in the pre-dawn light.

With the pop of the starting gun, the cyclists dash off in a whirl of color and spinning spokes. And then, just hours later, victorious riders whiz through the chute and cross the finish line, their bodies glistening with sweat, arms raised in victory.

Few spectators see who and what is beyond these glossy images, what makes El Tour de Tucson the talk of the town in restaurants and coffee shops, what incites people to return year after year. It is the behind-the-scenes efforts of volunteers and staff that make El Tour de Tucson not only possible, but one of the most revered bicycling events in the country. They believe in El Tour de Tucson and all that it represents to the cycling and local community.

Rich Corbett, volunteer bike patrol director, who has been involved with the ride since the early years, says he loves doing it "because I love to help people. I'm an Eagle Scout and I want to help people achieve what they want to achieve." And he continues to do just that year after year.

Chuck Gannon, president of the Tucson Chapter of the American Diabetes Association in 1984 and of the Association state affiliate in subsequent years, knew about El Tour de Tucson's mission to help others from the beginning. Richard DeBernardis walked into the Diabetes Association office before the first race in 1983 and "asked if they would like to be the recipient of funds gleaned from the ride." The American Diabetes Association continued to receive funds from El Tour de Tucson until new donor requirements made it prohibitive for El Tour to continue supporting the organization.

In the years that followed, El Tour de Tucson continued to lend a helping hand to the community and beyond, raising funds for the Arthritis Foundation, Tu Nidito Children and Family Services, the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, the American Parkinson Disease Association and this year, Water For People.

As the ride grew more popular, Richard DeBernardis built up a following of devoted employees and literally thousands of volunteers. Gannon, who has participated in many of the El Tour de Tucson rides and is on the PBAA board of directors, has seen first-hand just how much work goes on in the background.

The planning committee spends months each year reviewing the course and making changes to benefit riders



The hundreds of volunteers who staff aid stations make sure that El Tour riders get plenty of fuel and encouragement. Kadie Pangburn Photo

and the motoring public, according to Nippy Feldhake, the 2007 Assistant Route Director and 1987 volunteer of the year, who has participated in all 25 El Tour events.

Planning involves designing the course, finding solutions to construction snags and discussing procedures and expenses. In the days before the ride, planning volunteers pass out packets and give lectures on ride safety and ride etiquette.

Beyond event planning, many volunteers work in the PBAA office for months before the race or on the day of the race, serve on bike patrol, as ham radio operators, on the sag wagon (to pick up exhausted riders) at aid stations or removing chips in the finish line chute.

It is no trivial task, preparing more than 10,000 packets for pre-race pickup and hundreds of hours of conscientious work occur during the months and weeks leading up to the race. Office volunteers Leila and Totten Warfield, volunteers of the year in 2000, spend four days a week helping in the PBAA office. While Totten prepares prize certificates for people who raise significant funds for El Tour, Leila makes a rider number for each packet. Many more are involved in these preparatory endeavors, such as Dennis Richards, the 2006 volunteer of the year, who processes the confirmation letters issued to each rider, and other groups who stuff packets.

According to Barbara Franklin, teens performing community service volunteer in the PBAA office. The teens can do anything from emptying the trash or cleaning banners to placing the labels on the ride medallions each finisher will receive.

Once all the pre-race work has ended, the race day work begins. The bike patrol, started by Corbett in 1985, is a group of yellow-clad volunteer riders who monitor the course, administer basic first aid to injured riders, help with a flat tire or other repairs and provide pre-race riding safety workshops. Corbett, 61, who taught bike mechanics at Pima Community College for 20 years, says he knows how to handle nearly any repair challenge that presents itself.

For many years Corbett, who won gold in his age group in 1996, rode first for time, then went back out on the course to help riders. But this became exhausting, he says, and the "Windy El Tour" in 2003, when winds

gusted up to 35 mph, was the last year he raced.

A certified cycling coach and the 1999 Team in Training coach, Corbett regularly leads training rides for GABA. Anyone who wants to participate should "show up and hopefully have read the rating on the ride," he says. The rides accommodate a broad range of capabilities, from people who will attain platinum status all the way to people who will make it in sometime before sunset, he says. Information on these rides can be found at bikegaba.org.

Corbett has had numerous opportunities to help riders during his years on bike patrol. Fifteen years ago, he encountered a stranded female cyclist on Irvington. Her brother had changed her tire the day before, placing the spacer on wrong side of the dropout, which caused the derailleur to go into the wheel when she changed gears. Corbett repaired the tire and remembers seeing her later at finish line, delighted to have finished. "It gave me a really good feeling," he says.

Ten years ago, on Soldiers Trail, he encountered a male rider with a problem — twelve chain links had become twisted and inoperable. In less than 25 minutes, Corbett repaired the chain and said he read disappointment in the rider's face as he wearily hopped back onto his bike.

Corbett says he greets riders with something positive, not only helping with mechanical things, but also offering encouragement. The most common repairs, he says, usually

involve getting a chain back on track or fixing a flat tire, but medical aid is sometimes needed. Corbett, a "Woofers," or Wilderness First Responder, says many of his patrol riders have medical training; some are nurses and doctors.

Usually, first aid kits never get opened, he says, but when they do, they usually get used in their entirety. Corbett was the first on the scene at the worst accident of last year's event. A rider going 35 mph went down on Hughes Access Road, ending up with two fractures, lacerations on his chin and a mild concussion. Corbett kept the rider stable and offered encouragement until the EMS arrived on the scene.

At the finish line, people often ask who is winning, if someone can reassure them that their spouse or friend is OK. Ham radio operators can quickly and efficiently obtain such details. Throughout the event, dozens of radio operators patrol the course, communicating with a central station at the finish line, tracking leading and trailing riders and calling the EMS in the event of a medical emergency.

Cyclists in all the events need to stay properly hydrated and keep their bodies fueled. Aid stations at regular intervals along the course make it easier for riders to consume what they need. Aid station volunteers, Gannon says, are typically energetic and enthusiastic individuals. Beyond offering water, fruit and other snacks at various places along the course, these volunteers are the morale boosters, the ones who cheer up weary riders.

Gannon loves El Tour de Tucson because it encourages people, especially young people, to go out there and do something healthy. He says El Tour de Tucson has been good for his health, and even better for Tucson. Because of El Tour, there is more interest in improving bicycling conditions in Tucson. The city and county are more aware of what is needed for safe riding which has ultimately led to more bicycle lanes and routes.

The economic impact of the actual event itself is significant as well, Gannon says. People come from all over the world to compete or participate in El Tour de Tucson. Hotels, restaurants, grocery stores and bicycle shops all reap the benefits of the ride.

The 25th anniversary of El Tour de Tucson gives us all the opportunity to look beyond the flashes of color, to show our appreciation for the selfless volunteers. They are the ones who plan the event, process applications, prepare race packets, work at aid stations, communicate via radio during the event, or patrol the course on their bicycles. They are the ones, along with the PBAA staff, who make El Tour de Tucson such a remarkable event.

Susan Dawson-Cook will participate in the 80 mile ride this year, representing Team Miraval.