

THE



SPIN

FALCON CYCLING TAKES ON THE ROAD AHEAD

Sunlight glints across the row of shimmering carbon fiber frames as the pace line of cadet cyclists pedal their bikes against a headwind on the Academy's Stadium Drive. The blue USAFA jerseys are pristine as the group moves with the precision of a professional team approaching the foothills of the Alps on the Tour de France. The point man taps the back of his leg, indicating it's time for the rider behind him to move up and lead the pace line. The first cadet peels off, glides to the back of the line and falls in behind the last man. The progression of cadets overtakes another group of cyclists, easily gliding past to resume their dominion over the Academy's roads. The group moves north toward the B-52 and then west to begin attacking the climb up North Gate Boulevard. >



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VENTURE IN PALMER PARK

C1C Don Freeley charges full speed at the rock ledge, his full suspension mountain bike poised to leap over the obstacle ahead. He compresses the bike before using the suspension to launch his way over the rocks and into the landing zone beyond. Freeley lands in a cloud of dust, straight and clean, though shaking his head in disappointment. “Let me try that again,” he says. “I know I can do better.” He whips the bike around and pedals back to the top of the plateau for another try. In the next attempt, he clears the obstacle by a huge margin, his efforts captured in the camera. Humbly suppressing a smile, he nods in approval of the maneuver and we pack our gear to take on the rest of the park.

Quick Fact: a pelaton is a large group of road riders who streamline off of one another for mutual benefit.



Visit the Air Force Academy on any given afternoon and the cadet cycling club is a common sight. The lycra-clad Falcons can be seen breezing up Pine Drive on their road bikes, climbing the steep incline to the Community Center, or running time trials on the main stretch of Stadium Drive. Ever vigilant with their training, the sight of bicycles has become as synonymous with the Academy as the constant supply of parachutes gliding high above the airfield.

Don Feeley and Emily Brown are two of the cycling club's five seniors. They, along with C3C Wil Stover and C3C Zeb Hanley, sat down with *Checkpoints* to discuss their roles in the club, their love of the sport and the challenges they face on the bike. Hanley, a road racing and cross country mountain biker, begins with a brief overview of the club. “We are a competitive club at the Academy. We just got Limited on Season (LOS) status last semester, which enables us to opt out of intramural sports in order to train for cycling. Our practices normally last from about 4-6:30 p.m. every afternoon. Practicing as a team is very important, especially when we're learning pace line tactics.”

With no coach to oversee their practice sessions, the cadets rely on themselves for training. Typically, the more seasoned riders mentor the younger riders. “We have two seasons,” Hanley continues. “In the fall, we have cross country and downhill mountain biking events, and in the spring we race road—team time trials, criteriums and road races. USA Cycling is the parent organization we race through. We're in the Rocky Mountain Cycling conference.”

Riders in the club consist of a cross-section of road riders, cross country mountain bikers and down hillers. Zeb is the training cadet in charge. “I create everyone's workout logs and help coach the team.”

As one of the more experienced riders on the team, C1C Emily Brown takes new members under her wing and shows them the ropes from scratch. While many cadets who enter the Academy have strong athletic backgrounds, not everyone knows how to handle a ten-speed carbon fiber road bike in the middle of a pelaton. “I organize the team room and yell at people if the bikes are out of place,” Brown says sheepishly. She is the only member of the team who will be competing this year in the USA Cycling National Collegiate Road



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Championships in Madison, Wisconsin. What many people don’t know is that road racing is traditionally a team sport. Riders form a pace line in which they draft off one another to conserve energy, much like a flock of geese in formation. Historically speaking, if not for the efforts of the U.S. Postal Cycling Team, Lance Armstrong never would have achieved his untouchable seven consecutive Tour de France victories. Competing as a solo rider has proven challenging for Brown, who prides herself on forming mutually beneficial relationships with other solo racers at collegiate events.

Like many other members of the club, C3C Wil Stover is a long-time road cyclist who is steadily breaking into moun-

tain biking. “I’m the public affairs coordinator for the team,” Stover explains. “We just finished promoting the Front Range Cycling Classic here on the Academy. I’m hoping to get into mountain biking as soon as I can pull together the money for a good bike.”

Team veteran C1C Don Feeley balances his time between roads and trails. “I race road and mountain,” he says, “though I’m kind of in retirement from road racing. These days I’m turning wrenches and handling a lot of the club administration. I’m more into the trail riding. I’ve been riding mountain bikes with my family for over ten years, and I rode bicycle motocross (BMX) before that. Getting out on single track trails and whipping between the trees is a completely different experience from anything I’ve ever known.”

The cycling cadets come from all walks of life, and each has unique origins to their various riding histories. Emily Brown recalls, “I’ve been riding bikes with my mom for as long as I can remember. It’s always been a part of who I am. I joined the team my junior year. Riding is a wonderful stress reliever. There’s a sense of freedom, and it’s just a great way to get around.” ▷



Hanley chimes in, “I ran cross country and track all through high school, and after four years my knees and my ankles were about ready to give out. I needed a change so I picked up cycling. I love it because it’s an endurance sport and it requires a lot of strategy. Especially in road cycling, there’s the whole drafting component with your team. That always makes the races much more exciting.”

Wil Stover recounts, “I started riding road my junior year of high school with my dad in the hill country of Texas. What I love most about cycling here is just having the ability to get out and get away from the Academy and see new places. It’s a much different experience from riding in a car. You’re actually making a more personal connection to the places you ride. You can take in the world a little slower than if you were just driving by.”

The notion of freedom as it applies to riding is a common thread among each of the cadets. Whether it be a long road ride through the countryside or a cross country mountain ride on single-track, they all manage to find some component of satisfaction in the sport. “From a physical standpoint,” Hanley says, “cycling is a lot easier on your body compared to impact sports like running. It’s a great way to get exercise without damaging your body ... except for when you crash, of course.”

The cadets at the table echo a chorus of guilty laughter as each is forced to recall a memorable crash of his or her own. In fact, the art of crashing is only one of many challenges that cyclists face on a daily basis. Freeley remembers a difficult time early in his USAFA career. “My first year at the Academy was a tough experience. That following summer I went home to ride mountain bikes with my family and I ended up breaking my collar bone in four places. I had it rebuilt with metal plates and screws and missed my entire sophomore mountain bike season, which is what I had been working towards for a year and a half. For four months I wasn’t allowed outside. Not being able to get on the bike and have that stress relief was really hard for me.”

Left: C1C Emily Brown takes point on the Falcon pace line during practice. Brown was the only USAFA cyclist to compete at the 2011 National Collegiate Championships.

“Pushing ourselves beyond what we think we can do physically is a great accomplishment for me.”

Brown, a consummate road racer, discusses the issues she faces when climbing onto her mountain bike. “My biggest challenges are descending and cornering,” she laments. “I love climbing but I don’t like descending. I’ve read articles, watched tutorials and even sought advice from other experienced riders—I can recite all the technical skills from heart but it’s something I’m still working out on the bike.”

Hanley, who organizes the team’s training sessions, struggles with the same thing that every cadet faces while at the Academy. “I would say one of the harder challenges is just finding the time to train. Some of the guys we compete against are training upwards of 20 and 30 hours a week. We’re limited here at the Academy. To get a good workout you have to be on your bike for at least two or three hours a day. The risk of crashing is also difficult to overcome mentally. I crashed three times this season—twice during practice and once during a race. Crashing that much sometimes makes you second guess why you’re in the sport (it also costs a lot to fix your bike).” Yet another round of groans emanates from the other cadets at the mention of money.

“The biggest challenge for me,” Stover offers, “is pushing myself to my limit. As cadets, we don’t have much time to go out and train. Pushing ourselves beyond what we think we can do physically is a great accomplishment for me.”

Back on the road, the pace line of Falcon cyclists continues on, climbing west toward the mountains. They pedal in unison, falling back on one another’s support to persevere through the difficult times. As they round the top of the final hill, each cadet tucks into his drop bars to assume an aerodynamic descending stance. The pack breaks up as they sprint into the first 40 yards of the downhill, charging playfully for position. As gravity takes hold, they speed across the sprawling landscape of the Academy, that coveted sense of freedom nipping at their wheels. ▀