

Maniacs (of the cycling kind)

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One by one they come.

The waves lap on Lake Calhoun's North Beach, but the clouds are dark, it's cold and the sand is empty. The swings in a nearby park are deserted.

But as 10 a.m. nears, the Mill City Cyclomaniacs start to trickle in on their bikes.

Some of the young bikers come in pairs, some alone and some in groups followed by a parent. Despite the weather, despite the early time, they are ready for their first ride of the season and Cyclomaniac's third-annual trip to Izzy's Ice Cream in St. Paul, a distance of about 7 miles, one way.

"Most kids, you ask if they can bike 20 miles, they can't really grasp how far it is, and even older kids and parents are like, 'No way,'" said Angela Gustafson, founder and leader of the Mill City Cyclomaniacs. "These kids can. They are out there with their friends having fun and not even paying attention to how far they are biking."

The Cyclomaniacs bike 15–20 miles every Friday during the summer. The family cycling club welcomes riders of all ages, from grade-schoolers to their older siblings in middle and high school, as well as their parents and even little ones riding in bicycle trailers.

"People get intimidated thinking this is going to be a bunch of kids whose parents are super cyclists," Gustafson said. "We aren't that."

Gustafson, a stay-at-home mom and casual biker, was the leader of a pack of kids — her own — who questioned why there were no biking camps for their age group during the summer. She searched the Internet for cycling camps and asked around at local bike shops but found no group that regularly took youngsters out on long rides.

"Opportunities for kids under the age of 12 are either well hidden or don't exist at all," she said. So, she began e-mailing friends and other families about doing casual rides, and organized the first Cyclomaniacs session in 2009.

"There was a lot of interest and its just kept growing," Gustafson said. "It started out friends of ours who then told friends of theirs and it became very word-of-mouth."

Through weekly e-mails and the Cyclomaniacs website, mccyclomaniacs.us, members and nonmembers can check out the schedules, the routes and the day's activity for the Friday rides, which begin in June after school lets out and run through the end of August. Routes are determined by Gustafson or other members of the group.

"There are a lot of great maps out there," she said. "You just look at maps and pick out ride possibilities and go test them."

Every route is checked for construction issues, detours and whether it is safe for kids and can handle a large group of riders. Since most riders pedal in from South or Southwest neighborhoods, routes typically start and end at a central location, like Lake Calhoun or Lake Harriet.

Each ride sticks mainly to biking paths and trails, with stops scheduled at fun halfway points such as Sea Salt Eatery near Minnehaha Falls, Izzy's Ice Cream or the Stone Arch Bridge over the Mississippi River.

“A great thing about this group is we use the resources that this city has given us,” Gustafson said. “We have an incredible trail system, and I think there are a lot of people out there that aren’t aware of them or have (not) gone out and taken advantage of them.”

Food, fun and conversation are the key ingredients of each ride.

“It’s a confidence-booster,” Gustafson said. “We can’t all be good at everything, but to be able to say, ‘I biked 20 miles,’ as a kid is a big thing.

Twelve-year-old Cyclomaniac Julian Kinneavy is one of those who can.

“It’s not extremely hard,” Kinneavy said.

“I guess if you were a littler kid it’d be hard to keep up with the group if you are in the back,” he continued. “We are trying to get better at that. We usually have a group in the back that is taking care of the littler kids.”

All speeds are accepted and all types of bikes are welcome. Parents and adults are encouraged to come. They are spaced throughout the group as leaders, conversationalists, mechanics and, as usual, pack horses for the kids.

Many are stay-at-home parents with flexible schedules. But with interest from dual-working and single-parent families on the rise, Gustafson is initiating four Saturday rides this summer.

Also in negotiations for the Cyclomaniacs are possible collaborations with other clubs in the community. Ideas include partnering with an ultimate Frisbee club or scheduling a ride to Target Field for a private tour of the stadium.

“Things like that shake it up and keep it fresh,” Gustafson said. “Yet, the routes that we’ve done so far my kids want to do all again for the third year in a row.”

The ride to Izzy’s inaugurates each Cyclomaniacs season. Other traditions include taking a group photo once a week.

“It’s cool,” Kinneavy said. “We go to fun places and we get to go biking!”

Added Gustafson: “You can always count on taking a break and socializing with people on the ride, getting something fun to eat and biking back.”

Some members participate week after week and some ride just once or twice a season. Gustafson believes it only takes one try to feel the importance of the ride.

“There is nothing more gratifying than a sight like the one going over Martin Sabo Bridge (on the Midtown Greenway) and seeing this long, long line of bikers ahead of you — these little kids, tweens and adults all biking together,” she said. “It reunites a big group year after year.”