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With Cycling, Young Finds Himself in the Driver's Seat

Race Winner Thrives After Making Changes

By Matt McFarland
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For a long time, Woodbridge resident Ken Young, 32, said his most notable athletic achievement came when he was a reserve wide receiver on his high school football team.

It appeared that would be his only athletic claim to fame until two years ago.

Around then, Young acknowledged that he needed a change in his life.

"I was smoking and drinking and decided I needed to take control," he said. So he started running. He lost 30 pounds. He entered the EAS Body-for-Life Challenge and won, netting \$25,000. But the running wore on his knees, so he put his winnings toward cycling equipment.

In March of last year, he began competitive cycling as a category five rider, a beginner.

Last Sunday afternoon, Young left an international field in his wake to win the men's pro cycling race at the Silver Spring Grand Prix.

"Having a former national champion on your team shortens the learning curve," said Young after the race, referring to teammate Josh Frick, defending national champion in the men's over-30 time trial.

Since joining the cycling team Team Clean Currents, Young has established himself as a talented sprinter. "I told Josh if he gets me to the front into the last turn, nobody would catch me," Young said. So Frick led Young to the front on the crest of Fenton Street. From there, he held off Ashburn's David Fuentes, 34, who had led much of the race.

Young finished the 35-mile course in 1 hour 16 minutes. "There's no way you could do this without a team," Young said.

Young's team, which was the host for the race, took home much of the prize money. Frick won \$1,500 for primes, which are races within the race. After a bell rings, the first cyclist to cross the start-finish line wins the prime.

The kilometer-long course, a criterium set up with sharp turns around a single city block, rewards teamwork and technical biking skills.

Being able to handle a pothole on Bonifant Street or the cracked pavement on Georgia Avenue helps, too. Women's winner Heidi Woolever, 35, is a former bike messenger.

"It was pretty bumpy out there, which actually helps me. I don't mind the bumps," Woolever said.

Having raced in last year's Grand Prix, she knew the right line to take down straightaways and into corners. The Washington native dominated the race, winning all of the primes and finishing the 25-mile course in 1:05.

In the men's category 3 race, the field remained bunched and entered the narrow corners three and four abreast. In the middle of the pack was Peter Custer, 23, of Fairfax.

During the race, Custer had three near-crashes.

That included when he hooked elbows with another rider and when he was driven off the course on a turn; all this happened at 25-30 mph.

"It's a lot of guarding your wheels and trying to conserve energy," Custer said of criterium racing.

Cycling runs in his blood. His mother was an elite cyclist until a bad crash forced doctors to insert a six-inch bolt into her shoulder. When she crashed, she was racing in a men's race.

In the last lap, Custer followed the coattails of a rider making a push to the front. Then Custer made a push of his own, snagging the lead before the final turn to secure the win.

Chris Hayes of Warrenton won the men's 40-and-older race. He beat favorite Ramon Benitez.

"Ramon is probably the strongest guy, but that's how cycling is. In running, you always know your 10K time," Hayes said. In cycling, factors like drafting and teamwork can significantly alter a racer's finish, he said.

Roughly 200 children took part in kids' races. Last year, only 63 raced, and the year before that, 23. "There are three secrets," Team Clean Currents member Rick Barnett said. "We're offering a free helmet, T-shirt and water bottle."



Wade Jennings holds his friend's son, Nils Andersson, after he was forced from the race because of a problem with his bicycle. **Photo Credit:** Photos By Pouya Dianat -- The Washington Post Photo

Silver Spring's cyclical event

Grand Prix cycling race takes place in downtown area

by Chay Rao | Staff Writer

Anthony Perotti, of Great Falls, Va., knew exactly why he decided to enter the U-11 bicycle race at the Drink More Water Grand Prix of Silver Spring on Sunday. It wasn't the chance to win a race in front of a crowd in downtown Silver Spring, or even the chance to follow his father, Guy, into competitive cycling. It was the hardware.

"I just wanted the trophy," Perotti said. "I knew I could win."

The riders that took part in the professional races wanted more than trophies, however. At stake in the women's race was a \$2,000 purse that included sprint bonuses of \$350, while the men's race was a bit richer. Cyclists from the top teams in the area, including the host team of Clean Currents/Don Beyer Volvo, raced 60 kilometers through a one-kilometer course — called a criterium among cycling cognoscenti — that encompassed a straightaway and varied elevation on Georgia Avenue, and hard turns that required technical skill.

"This type of course is very difficult," Peter Custer, who won the Men's Category 3 race, said. "The turns are tight, the surface is kind of rough. It took me a little while to get my confidence."

Custer's win highlighted the progression that cyclists move through to enter the major professional races. When Custer started as a Category 5, or beginner cyclist, a year ago, he trained to put himself in a position like the one presented to him on Sunday. By winning races in lower categories, Custer, who is from Fairfax, Va., qualified for Category 3 races this season. Coming into the Silver Spring Grand Prix, he had won the last two races he had entered, but it took him a while to extend the streak to three.

"Early in the race, I went out to get the sprint bonuses, but I wasn't feeling great," Custer said. "My legs felt kind of heavy. I waited it out and tried to conserve energy, and in the last four laps, I started to wake up. I made a move on the outside and I hammered it."

The win gave Custer 21 more points to move up another category, and highlighted the strategy that all riders need to undertake in criterium racing. Though the overall distance may vary, the short distance of the course — they usually measure one kilometer in length and are laid out through downtown venues — means that positioning, and

teamwork are crucial. Top riders will jockey for an advantage, use blocking and draft off their teammates in order to conserve energy, so that in the final two laps they are in among the top three, ready for a full sprint to the finish. Fall outside those top three spots into the final turn, and a cyclist's chances of winning a race are almost nil.

“Blocking makes a huge difference,” Heidi Woolever, who raced with Team ABRT/Latitude, said. “My teammates protected me through the last corner. They made sure that I wasn't getting countered by other riders.”

In fact, her teammates were so effective, that Woolever not only won the Women's Category 1/2/3 race, but she also was able to use their blocking to capture sprint bonuses totaling \$900 in the process. For the Takoma Park native who now lives in Washington, D.C., it was a chance to perform in front of a “home” crowd.

“I wanted to do well here,” Woolever said. “I had a bunch of relatives and friends come out, and I love this course. The fact that it's on Georgia Avenue and all these familiar streets gave me a little bit of extra energy. Until the final lap, no one was trying to get to the fourth turn ahead of me, and I took advantage.”

The best story of the day, however, might have been the last. In the men's Category 1/2/3 race, a relative novice took the field by storm. Three years ago, Ken Young was 30 pounds heavier and unhappy with his lifestyle. He entered the Body Transformation Challenge, a nationwide contest sponsored by the nutritional supplement EAS as a way to lose weight, and ended up winning \$25,000. He took that money and invested it his newfound passion, cycling.

“I didn't want to run so I took up cycling,” Young said. “I took up cycling because it was a little easier on the body, and suddenly I realized that I was getting better at it. I never really considered myself a competitive athlete until I took up cycling, but I started winning races and moving up the rankings, and I started to feel differently.”

At the start of last season, Young, who lives in Woodbridge, Va., was a Category 5 rider, but after rapid improvement over the course of the year he was invited to compete for the Clean Currents/Don Beyer Volvo team that is based in Washington, D.C. That training environment, which includes Josh Frick, the current national champion in the time trial category, who captured two sprint bonuses totaling \$1,500 on Sunday, helped Young along.

“When you have the riders we have on this team, the learning curve is pretty fast,” Young said.

It also helps to have teammates like that on a technical course. Frick's pushes for sprint bonuses caused several other riders in the field to expend energy chasing him, and Young, who is also a sprint specialist, stayed back and conserved his energy. In the final laps, his teammates fought for position, got him into the top three, and let him use his legs to cruise to his first professional victory. That the win came on his 32nd birthday of

all days was extra special. As he accepted the winner's trophy, the appreciative crowd serenaded him with a rendition of "Happy Birthday to You".

"This is a great feeling," Young said. "With about 10 laps to go, I started feeling pretty good, and I told the guys that if they could get me those last 300 meters, nobody was going to beat me. They delivered me there and something good happened."

Notes: Bethesda's Nick Bax, who won the Men's Category 3 race last year, moved up in classification and finished in 20th place in the Category 1/2/3 race. ... Patrick Berry won the U-5 race, Gavin May won the U-7 race and Amy Krotine won the U-9 race to round out the youth results.



J. Adam Fenster/The Gazette

Competitors in the women's pro race navigate Georgia Avenue Sunday during the Drink More Water Grand Prix of Silver Spring.



J. Adam Fenster/The Gazette

Anthony Perotti, 10, of Great Falls, Va., won the 10&11 race Sunday at the Drink More Water Grand Prix of Silver Spring.



J. Adam Fenster/The Gazette

Ken Young of team DCVelo celebrates after crossing the finish line first in the men's pro race.