

‘Like a second family’

Arlington Heights Bicycle Club members forge friendships on and off the road



Holiday cycling elves deliver Toys for Tots in a December Amling's Cycle Toy Ride. Pictured are, front row, Cary Cohen; back row, from left: Paula Matzek, Don Ami, Vince Kelley, Al Gibbs and Nancy Wagner. (Courtesy of Paula Matzek/Arlington Heights Bicycle Club)



The enormous selection of used bikes featured during a previous spring bike swap hosted by the Arlington Heights Bicycle Club. (Courtesy of Arlington Heights Bicycle Club)



Classic Cycling of Zurich North America biked 3,592 miles in June. Pictured, from left, are: Nate Solomon, Adrian Zalewski, Tim Adams and Sam Goodman. (Courtesy of the Village of Schaumburg)



The Arlington Heights Bicycle Club's 50th anniversary logo. (Courtesy of Bill Kragh/ Arlington Heights Bicycle Club)

“Zero Mile Ride.” Oxymoron maybe?

Actually, it's a social activity the Arlington Heights Bicycle Club enjoys. When it's too cold, club members indulge in two favorite pursuits — eating and socializing — while pedaling. That's right, zero miles.

This activity is just one way club members make time for each other. Besides a love for cycling, steadfast fellowship seems key to AHBC longevity.

Boasting more than 130 member households, and celebrating its 50th anniversary Aug. 28, the club may be on to something.

“We are a strong social club, not just a riding club,” said former president and ride chairman Tom Drabant.

Vice President Paula Matzek added, “We bill ourselves as a ‘no-drop club.’ If someone has a mechanical or other ride issue, we make sure to stay with the person until it's resolved.”

Lasting friendships

Current ride chair Mitch Polonsky echoes the club's social nature, observing that sharing meals is a given.

“For almost all our rides, we will stop someplace to eat.”

Don Ami, former Arlington 500 ride chair and 35-year club member, agrees.

“Lunch stops give members time to socialize and tell stories, leading to lasting friendships off the bike,” he said.

The club calendar is proof positive: Bakery rides every Tuesday and Thursday, picnic rides, progressive dinner ride, fall banquet, and don't forget December's toy ride breakfast.

Since 2006, club “elves” have donated and bike-trailed toys and gifts 14 miles from Amling's Cycle in Niles, supporting the U.S. Marines Toys for Tots drive. In 2019, 125 riders from several clubs hauled nearly 6,000 gifts on this ride, sponsored by Amling's since 2003.

Survey responses from seven longtime members emphasize bonds forged by friendship.

“For many of us, the club has become like a second family,” Matzek said.

Plenty of scheduled riding is important, too. In any given week, four to seven group rides are available at different speed levels, offering options regardless of one's biking ability. This wasn't always true.

“When I joined there was one ride at one pace and we all rode together,” Ami said. “Now there may be four groups riding different paces, a group for everyone.”

Mentors help newbies determine which ride level to join — leisure, advanced or in between.

Do ability levels lead to club factions?

“For picnics and banquets, everyone comes from every rider category,” Polonsky said. “Volunteers come from all levels, too. Ride leaders in faster groups willingly lead slower groups.”

A breakfast in 1971 helped establish the original Arlington Heights Park District Bicycle Association. According to 32-year member Bill Kragh's club history, Jim DeVos, park district recreation director, assembled interested riders via a newspaper ad.

“Saturday May 15, 1971, the park district sponsored a breakfast bike hike to Busse Woods that attracted approximately 65 people,” Kragh noted.

The district continues its support. Besides a free meeting room at Pioneer Park, the park district lets AHBC use the Centennial Park tennis courts for its annual Bike Swap.

Swap out your ride

A club founder, Jeanie Gain, now deceased, drove the organizing of the first swap in 1981. Community members can buy and sell used bikes in the spring. Past President

Christine Van Dornick is unaware of any other Midwest bike clubs hosting a swap.

Per Kragh's history, "Sales were as high as \$70,000 in some years," with AHBC earning a percentage.

Club treasurer David Martin said, "The swap is a community service event. People can pass on their bikes, children's and adults, and get better ones economically. Around 15%-20% of our income comes from the swap."

AHBC also hosts the Arlington 500, an annual May ride and its main fundraiser.

"Around 80%-85% of our income comes from the 500," Martin said.

Started in the late 1970s, the "Arlington Adventure" shifted from Recreation Park to Frontier Park in the 1980s and became the Arlington 500.

Its longest route was 500 furlongs, or 62.5 miles (metric century), with eight furlongs to a mile. Named with a

reference to Arlington International Racecourse, the ride currently rolls from Barrington High School.

Aug. 28 celebration

All are invited to join the club's 50th anniversary celebration from 1-4 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 28, at Recreation Park, 500 E. Miner St. Mayor Thomas Hayes will proclaim Aug. 28 "Arlington Heights Bicycle Club Day." Bikes and club history from the past 50 years will be on display.

Getting it in gear

Congratulations to Team Classic Cycling of Zurich North America for its three-peat win in the Business Bike Classic, a team challenge among Schaumburg businesses and organizations, part of Schaumburg's June "Bike Month" activities.

Logging 3,592 miles, Tim Adams, Sam Goodman, Nate Solomon and Adrian Zalewski bested the runner-up team by more than 1,300 miles. They even beat their own 2020 mileage by 174 miles.

"Normally, we ride as individuals on solo rides or community group rides," Zalewski said. "With different schedules and COVID, it was difficult to organize a team ride. We look forward to having those next year."

Twenty teams, four from Zurich North America, participated in the Business Bike Classic's third year. Team riders cycled solo, in groups or on stationary bikes, with all 22,000 total miles counting toward the challenge.

- Join the ride. Contact Ralph Banasiak at alongfortheridemail@gmail.com.