

Adaptive Rider Days

Bike group opens mountain trails for adaptive cyclists

Text and photographs by Cindy Ross

TWO CYCLISTS ARE HELPING TREVOR COMEAU into his adaptive mountain bike. “Don’t touch the bottom of my feet,” he says as they help place his legs in the bike. “Grab under my ankles instead.”

His legs are sensitive and can easily go into spasms, the young quadriplegic explains to the members of the Berks Area Mountain Biking Association (BAMBA). The Reading-based organization is holding its annual adaptive cycling day to introduce the sport of mountain biking to those who cannot use a typical two-wheeled bicycle. Vermont Adaptive Ski & Sports, a nonprofit based in Killington, has provided a variety of adaptive bikes for the event.

For two-hour intervals, participants can sample the mountain biking trails that crisscross Reading’s Mount Penn in Berks County.

BAMBA cyclists accompany them on their rides. Talks and demonstrations throughout the day focus on how to make the sport accessible to those who cannot use their legs to pedal.

“Unlike most mountain biking communities, our group’s focus is not on building bigger, more technical trails that can make the sport intimidating,” BAMBA founder and past director Fred Moreadith says. “Our goal is to attract families, as well as people with adaptive cycle needs, like Trevor, to this fun sport.”

Embracing Inclusiveness

THE 200-MEMBER ASSOCIATION HAS fully embraced



(far right) Trevor Comeau has used an adaptive bicycle to cycle on roads, but until now hasn’t been able to do mountain biking, an activity he enjoyed prior to his accident in 2010. (right) Because he doesn’t have enough strength to brake when going downhill, a person follows him to assist.





Vermont Adaptive Ski & Sports, a nonprofit based in Killington, provides a variety of adaptive bikes for people to try during the event. BAMBA supplies the volunteers to help people enter and exit the vehicles and maneuver the local trails.

inclusiveness in mountain biking. The bike that Comeau is riding is powered by cranking a hand-wheel. Since his legs cannot steer the bike, his arms control all movements. Because he also has limited use of his hands, they are inserted into special gloves attached to the crank that assist him in making the revolutions.

Once Comeau is strapped in and provided instructions on how to operate the hand-cycle mountain bike, he and a few members of BAMBA head off on the trail into the woods. One person assists him from behind, holding straps attached to the cycle that act as a brake.

"I am not able to squeeze my fingers and apply the brakes," Comeau explains. "While I can power and drive it myself, I need some help braking."

Powering over the rocks and roots on the forested trail is a challenge but one that Comeau would like to do again in the future. Disabled from an accident in 2010, he has used an adaptive

road bicycle for many years, but he finds being in the woods on a more adventurous trail an appealing change.

John Pacharis, an active BAMBA member and a retired police officer, became disabled from a motorcycle accident. He has been the drive behind adaptive day.

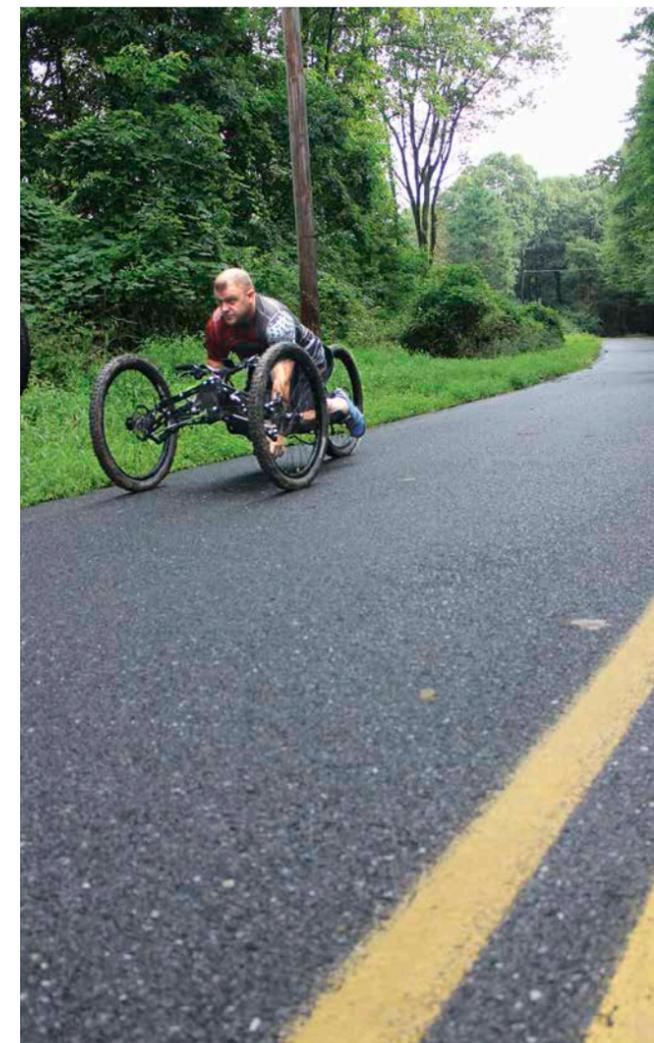
"After my accident, I was in a dark place," he says. "I needed to get out of the house and be around other cyclists. I needed to still feel like a cyclist."

He began to attend BAMBA meetings and made steps to get an adaptive bike. Now, he rides an adaptive recumbent mountain bike and leads the club's Tuesday evening rides.

"There are different levels of disabilities," he explains. "Some people are nervous about being out in the woods. Some feel unsteady when they first



begin to ride an adaptive bike and are more cautious over the terrain. We try to make that experience as easy and fun as possible."



Craving Speed

BROTHERS CHRIS AND ERIC Kaag also ride adaptive cycles and participate in the club. A degenerative nerve condition has limited both men's ability to ambulate their lower extremities. They ride their bikes from a kneeling position and use a hand crank to power forward. The bikes feature a push button that shifts into a super low gear so they can climb over obstacles.

Eric works at the Lebanon veterans' hospital, while Chris operates Corps Fitness Crossfit Berks in Wyomissing. This facility works with his nonprofit IMABLE Foundation to give fitness classes to people with multiple sclerosis, spina bifida, autism and Down syndrome, as well as raise money to buy adaptive recreational equipment.

The brothers and Pacharis are Marine veterans, and the three bring a never-give-up attitude to the sport that helps others who may be nervous and feel less secure about trying adaptive mountain biking.

Last year, Pacharis logged 1,500 miles of trail riding. "I am a mountain biker," he says. "I identify as a mountain biker. The trails are my outlet to vent."

Jared Fenstemcher was 18 days into a 30-day cross-country cycling trip when a car struck him from behind. Chris Kaag reached out to Fenstemcher right after his accident and provided an adaptive bike from IMABLE. Thanks to this connection and the instant network of mountain bikers, Fenstemcher says, "I did not spend much time feeling depressed."

Mostly a road racer before his accident, he did some mountain biking in college, and he likes going downhill fast, even on an adaptive bike.

"I have a lot less fear than most," the 34-year-old admits. "I crave speed, perhaps even more than I did before my accident, probably because I cannot go fast in my normal life."

Adaptive mountain biking helps to fulfill that need. "In a recovery facility, everything is customized to be handicapped accessible," Fenstemcher explains.

(above left) Some bikes feature electronics, including power assist, which makes a tremendous difference in being able to move the cycle over tree roots and other obstacles. Eric Kaag uses an adaptive cycle that he mounts in a kneeling position. He works at the Lebanon veterans' hospital.



Adaptive mountain bikes allow those used to road riding to use trails in the forest, too.

“Life is very different moving forward, and you need to find new hobbies or do old hobbies in a different way.”

Electrical assist mechanisms that help to power adaptive bikes have been “a game changer,” Pacharis says. Before this technology, a person riding an adaptive bike with a hand crank was limited on where they could go. Steep climbing and rough terrain were not possible. It also doesn’t help that those with certain spinal cord injuries are further limited because they may not be able to sweat and cool their body temperature.

TWO WOMEN IN WHEELCHAIRS have been watching patiently while waiting their turns on the bikes. Sue Stroz and Hope Hand are cyclists who regularly ride the paved Schuylkill River Trail in the Philadelphia area, but they are unsure of the adaptive mountain bikes at first. Soon, they get the hang of it, and they enjoy the experience so much that they plan to return for the next BAMBA adaptive day.

“Today was an eye opener for all participants, both those with mobility issues and those without,” Pacharis says. “We want to show people that they can get out on the trails again, regardless of what challenges life has thrown at them.”

—Cindy Ross writes from New Ringgold, Schuylkill County.

WHEN YOU GO

The next **Berks Area Mountain Biking Association adaptive day** will be held August 10-11 at the BAMBA Lot, 2 List Rd., Reading. Contact the association at BAMBA, PO Box 6121, Wyomissing 19610; BerksAreaMBA@gmail.com. berksmountainbiking.org.

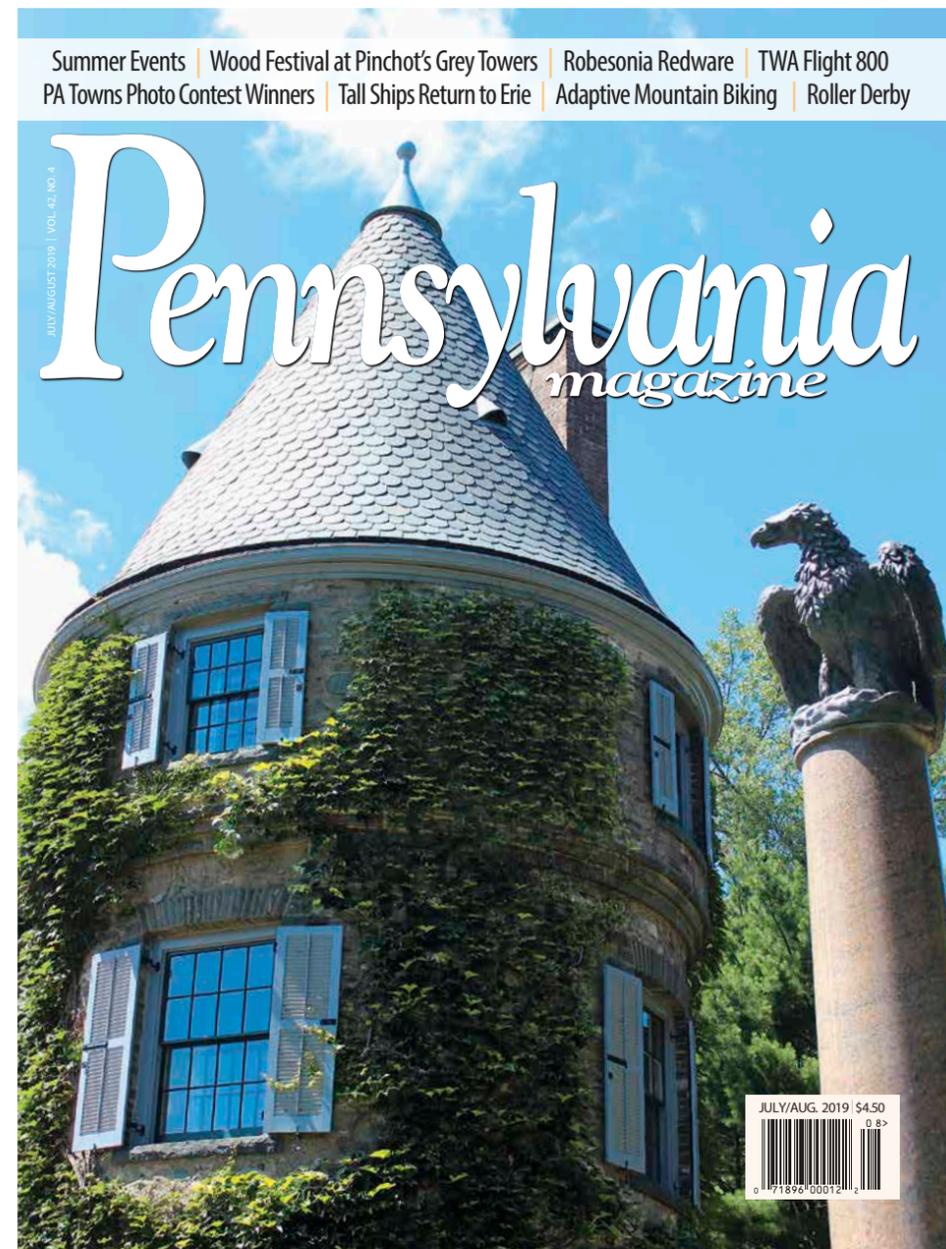
MAKING TRAILS MORE ACCESSIBLE

Thanks to three engineered bridges along Klapperthal Trail at Neversink Mountain Preserve in Exeter Township, Berks County, disabled riders may now cross streams that would otherwise be dangerous or impossible for adaptive bikes to maneuver. Over one weekend in 2017, 25 volunteers from BAMBA hauled timbers to the site to construct the 6-by-15-foot bridges.

Future goals of the organization include adding other bridges and widening trails for the disabled. The organization recently partnered with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to rebuild 30 miles of Blue Marsh Trail that encircle the 1,148-acre lake. Building loops and loop extensions allows more entry and exit points to the trail and offers shorter trail ride options.



BAMBA is committed to making their trails accessible to all cyclists. Riding on the Klapperthal Trail at Neversink Mountain Preserve, John Pacharis crosses one of three bridges that the club built.



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