Section 1: Why Mountain Biking?

Many people are surprised to hear that the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) is working to establish mountain biking as a high school sport, alongside traditional school sports such as soccer and basketball. Why mountain biking, they ask? There are a multitude of cycling disciplines, and it may not be obvious why mountain biking makes the most sense for a youth program. Here are some of the reasons why mountain biking is changing the face of high school athletics.

CYCLING BUILDS SELF ESTEEM

Research shows that regular involvement in physical activity increases self-esteem. As a coach, you’ll see that as your student-athletes improve and achieve their goals, they will become more confident. In particular, the opportunity to practice and gain competency in a physical skill contributes to young people’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Many high school student-athletes find themselves shedding excess weight and making better dietary and lifestyle choices, both of which foster a more positive self-perception.

“As a freshman, my daughter was struggling in school. She was failing most of her classes and after switching schools twice she joined a mountain bike team. Suddenly her life had some focus; I believe the mountain bike team saved her life.”

HEALTH-RELATED, ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

Students on your mountain bike team will experience a range of benefits. They will become more interested in a healthy lifestyle: one that includes regular exercise, healthy eating habits and smart decisions regarding drug and alcohol use. They will often experience a greater sense of obligation to their schoolwork and community involvement. Many students have increased their interest in academic pursuits and improved their grades through positive involvement in an extracurricular activity. In fact, according to the 2011 NICA Participation Study, one-third of student-athletes reported improvement in GPA as a result of League participation. Students on your team will have the opportunity to socialize with a diverse group of peers, make new friends, develop healthy relationships, and often, youth who haven’t yet quite “fit in” will find a place where they are welcomed and accepted.

CYCLING IS AN EXCITING NEW OPPORTUNITY

At most schools, students can choose from mainstream sports like baseball, football, soccer and basketball, or more up and coming sports like lacrosse, field hockey or crew. Yet, despite all of the sports offered, students are not involved in any organized athletic activity. Some of the most important life lessons – those that are learned through participation in group sport – are being missed. Cycling presents an opportunity for learning a vast array of important lessons, and often proves to be a tremendous builder of self-esteem among students who may be on the fringe, underachieving, and full of pent-
up energy. Often these are students who do not thrive in P.E. classes and have never been interested in mainstream sports. Whereas these students were once falling through the “athletic cracks,” they now have an opportunity to gain the skills and experience necessary to continue cycling throughout their lives. Involvement on a high school cycling team that puts less emphasis on results and more on developing personal growth and acquiring positive life lessons can help adolescents “find” their way into young adulthood.

**SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

The sport of mountain biking calls for a wide variety of physical and mental skills such as agility, balance, determination and focus. The physical demands of cycling require both upper and lower body strength, agility and cardiovascular fitness. Navigating the bicycle through technical terrain and in competition also demands a strong mind, as well as critical-thinking and decision-making skills. Moreover, responsible riding also develops an ethic of self-discipline and self-care.

**SELF RELIANCE IN THE MODERN AGE**

Mountain biking depends upon advanced technology – the bicycle. Learning how to maintain your bicycle, repair flat tires and broken chains builds confidence and problem solving skills that lend themselves to a wide variety of challenges and needs faced during life. In the fast changing world of new devices and software, self-reliance and an ability to learn, adapt, and generally utilize technology to your best advantage is invaluable on virtually every career path.

**IT’S ABOUT THE TEAM AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

High school mountain bike clubs/teams allow young people to participate in a sport in which they are an integral part of a team and experience the corresponding benefits, such as working with a coach, interacting with and supporting teammates, representing their school and team supporters (and learning to respect the natural environments in which they ride). Mountain biking is also an individual sport where a key goal is to become a better, stronger student-athlete. In contrast to other team sports in which only a handful of athletes participate at one time on the court or field, in mountain biking everyone is riding their bikes simultaneously, improving their abilities at the same time.

**CONNECTION TO THE OUTDOORS**

Mountain biking allows student-athletes to explore new open spaces, parks and trails that traditional high school sports would not have allowed them to visit. For many student athletes, this outdoor experience is transformational in that it provides participants an opportunity to interact with the natural environment in a manner that leads to a greater interest in ecology, geography, biology, and other natural sciences. In this day and age of video games and media screens, it is critical that we help foster a stronger connection to the natural environment. With proper coaching, student athletes can be taught to become stewards for the environment and respect the other trail users encountered while riding.

**LIFE-LONG ENJOYMENT**

Cycling is a life-long sport. Due to the relatively low impact cycling
has on the skeletal and muscular systems, one can look forward to a lifetime of riding bicycles. How many high school football or soccer players still put on their cleats later in life and play the game? More often, these individuals enjoy their former sport from the comfort of the sofa or a stool at the sports bar. Cycling, on the other hand, is undertaken by many older individuals, including grandparents well into their seventies and beyond.

AN ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVE

Riding a bike to school or work takes skills, and high school mountain bike clubs are a great place to learn those skills. In addition, the more people leave their cars at home and ride their bicycles, the healthier both our natural environment and overall physical health will be. The presence of high school cycling teams help the sport gain mainstream acceptance. When cycling grows as a high school sport, we cultivate a society where cycling will be embraced and supported. We have the opportunity to engage young people in a life-long cycling lifestyle that is good for the planet and for the participants overall health and well-being.

YOUTH APPEAL

Of all the cycling disciplines, mountain biking has an image which most appeals to youth. Young people who might have shied away from the skinny tires and spandex of road cycling won’t think twice about wearing baggy mountain bike shorts and riding around on a fat tire bike.

BUT ISN’T CYCLING DANGEROUS?

Forget what you’ve seen on television and in magazines. Mountain biking is not all about daredevils careening down hills and jumping off cliffs. The average speed attained on a mountain bike ride rarely exceeds 10 miles per hour. Mountain biking is a sport that gets young people onto trails and away from the dangers of automobile traffic associated with road cycling. There are risks associated with mountain biking, but with proper skills instruction and sound risk management practices many of those risks can be significantly reduced and mitigated. For more information on the risks associated with mountain biking and how to manage them, please see Chapter 5 on Risk Management.

One eye opening statistic for reluctant administrators comes from the New York Times in May of 2006: “Emergency room visits for cheerleading injuries nationwide have more than doubled since the early 1990s, and the rate of life-threatening injuries has startled researchers. Of 104 catastrophic injuries sustained by female high school and college athletes from 1982 to 2005 — head and spinal trauma that occasionally led to death — more than half resulted from cheerleading, according to the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research. All sports combined did not surpass cheerleading.”

As mountain biking has inherent dangers, coaches are encouraged to contrast it with other sports, rather than claim the sport is “safe”.

SOME NOTES

A note to other cyclists: The growth of mountain biking at the high school level has caused a proportional increase of enthusiasm for the other cycling disciplines. As mountain biking takes hold as a sport in our public high schools, there will continue to be a significant increase in the number of youth participating in the other cycling disciplines.

A note to road racers: One of the most common questions NICA receives, especially from road racers, is: “When are you going to start
a high school road racing league?“ While the idea may be exciting, NICA’s experience with high school aged students (especially with most 14 and 15 year olds) calls to question the appropriateness of starting those completely new to cycling with training and/or racing on the road. Specific reasons include:

- Going for a training ride on the road just isn’t considered fun by most of the teenagers out there;
- Riding on the road is actually more dangerous, the speeds can be twice as fast as off-road riding and the pavement is very unforgiving when crashes occur – and they DO crash. There is also the added danger of cars, which threaten catastrophic injuries. Ride with a few 14-year olds and you will understand that the stress of keeping these student-athletes together and riding safely on the road is going to make coach retention difficult;
- Because of tactics (drafting, team work, sprinting, breaking away, blocking) road racing is very complex and unforgiving. Retaining young riders after they get “dropped” from their first races is a tremendous challenge;
- Entry-level road racing bikes are much more expensive than entry-level mountain bikes; and
- Some young road racers do succeed at a young age; many of these youth have a rare combination of talent, initiative, access, and drive.

While NICA has found these reasons to be true, many high school racers have gone on to be top road racers and following in the footsteps of the many professional road racers that started as mountain bike racers.

A note to gravity riders: While it is important to acknowledge students’ interests and the validity of these alternative cycling disciplines, you should also be clear that those activities are not the main focus of NICA teams. The following are some reasons why we discourage mountain bike teams from including these activities:

- The majority of insurance claims due to injury at cycling competitions results from downhilling;
- The bikes and protective equipment are more specialized and expensive;
- The skills required are very specific;
- It’s not appropriate for public schools because few schools would approve;
- It requires specific venues, very much like downhill skiing.

There is often pressure within high school clubs to include road racing and downhilling in a club’s activities. It is NICA’s goal to bring mountain biking into the public schools as an official sport: no different than football or track and field. We feel that our best chance requires a focus on cross-country mountain biking and that as we achieve our goal it will benefit all forms of cycling. Some clubs have a contingency of downhillers and/or road racers, but those activities are not sponsored by the school club. Coaches should take measures to draw very clear lines to team members and families. To include all disciplines within a cross-country team would jeopardize not only your program but high school mountain biking in general.

What about Cyclocross? Cyclocross is gaining in popularity, and mass appeal to youth may also grow. Cyclocross has great potential since school grounds often get used as race venues. However, the skills and equipment are more specific, which adds some additional challenge to growing a program. “Middlecross” programs, which serve middle school aged kids, de-emphasize competition and allow kids to participate on any bicycle have tremendous potential. Search the web for current programs.

Section 2: Why Start a Mountain Bike Program at Your School?

Why should there be a mountain bike team at the school in which you work, the school your child attends, or at a high school in your community? Why should you be the one to make it happen? Below is a
list of compelling reasons. If this is not enough to convince you, talk to someone involved with an active team (a coach, student, or parent) and we trust you will be fully persuaded.

LEADING A TEAM IS FUN AND REWARDING!

“Participation in the league has been incredibly gratifying in that it provided me with the chance to ride my bike with new people and make new friends. It also allowed me to share my own knowledge and love of biking with young people.”

Leading a high school mountain bike club or team is downright exciting. For many coaches, the experience has even been one of the most rewarding experiences of their lifetime. It is incredible to watch the youth on your team develop skills, confidence, and a love for the sport. They finish their first race. They climb onto the podium for the first time. They make new friends. They adopt healthier eating habits. They support each other in moments of frustration and triumph. And you are there for it all and they (or their parent) thank you for providing them with a life-changing experience. When you start a mountain bike club for high school students, you create an opportunity for them to get inspired about their lives. Chances are you’ll also get inspired and, of course, start riding as well.

PERSONAL HEALTH BENEFITS FOR COACHES

Forget about sitting on the sidelines blowing a whistle – when you are a mountain bike coach you get to ride! While you may not achieve professional racing fitness, you will find the regular exercise will help you be a fit, trim endurance athlete. Most teams thrive best when they have coaches of varied abilities, from beginners to experts – because any sizable team also has a great variety of abilities. As a bonus, you just might find that you, too, are feeling better and better. Perhaps you start riding your bike more, eating better, and feeling happier. The regular exercise creates momentum in your days; you rarely feel lethargic or unmotivated. Providing a great experience for young people makes you feel that you are doing meaningful work.

PARTICIPATION CREATES COMMUNITY

When you start a high school mountain bike club, you put into motion a community of diverse individuals and families. It provides an opportunity to become a highly valued member of your community and with that comes great rewards. For many, this new community can help expand a personal business, whether cycling related or not. Inevitably, the experience will build meaningful and lasting connections and relationships with students, their parents, team volunteers and supporters, and coaches and staff on other teams.

“Coaching young racers is a great way to take a break from your own racing while staying involved and keeping fit. Many find it deeply rewarding on many levels and in the 2011 NICA Participation Study 83% reported a stronger connection to the community. Coaches consider these rewards our best-kept secret.”

–Matt Fritzinger, NorCal League & NICA Founder

Section 3: Role of the National Interscholastic Cycling Association

NICA (IT RHYMES WITH BIKE–AH)

The National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) is a youth development organization and governs high school mountain biking in the United States. The NICA mission is to bring high school mountain biking coast to coast by 2020; with the vision of enabling every American teen to strengthen body, mind and character through participation in the sport of mountain biking.
NICA provides leadership, governance, financial and programmatic support to develop and promote high school mountain biking leagues throughout the United States. NICA identifies, trains and supports local leaders to create NICA leagues in different regions across the country.

NICA’s Five Core Principles are integrated into all programs:

- Inclusivity
- Equality
- Strong Body
- Strong Mind
- Strong Character

NICA provides local leagues’ organizational structure, methods, curriculum, coach licensing, race production support, rules and policies, insurance and more. NICA maximizes the impact of high school mountain biking as a youth development activity by giving local leagues the benefit of a national voice, mainstream credibility, proven process, learning tools and field support. This enables NICA to inspire more kids and spread the sport to a dramatically wider audience.