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Courtesy NICA

TEENS TAKE CHARGE

OF NICA ADVOCACY EFFORTS

by Trina Ortega

The National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) currently involves about 4,500 students per year in mountain biking, many as first-time mountain bikers. The oldest league, NorCal, grew 20 percent last year alone, and these figures don't include the 1,800 licensed coaches who also spend time on the trail with the kids. In simplest terms, NICA is bringing more people onto the trails, and with the organization's goal of having student teams coast to coast by 2020, the numbers are only going to get bigger.

To ensure the presence of so many new young riders doesn't create resentment from other trail users, NICA and IMBA are working to incorporate a stewardship and ambassador program into the fast-growing high school race association.

"It's a lot of people. In some places, where it is already a hotbed of trail conflict, if schools are out practicing one day, there could

be up to 150 kids on the local trails," said Austin McNerny, NICA executive director. "Sometimes that can create a lot of negative heat from people who don't want to deal with that many people. To help this situation, we need to teach responsible trail riding and stewardship, and ensure that our student-athletes respect other trail users and give back by volunteering for trail work."

Founded in 2009, NICA develops high school mountain biking programs for student athletes across the United States and also provides comprehensive training for coaches and volunteers and technical assistance and support for team formation, races and camps. NICA already has strong tenets built into its mountain bike racing philosophy: to promote the development of "strong body, strong mind and strong character" in students via cross-country mountain bike racing. McNerny says it's equally important for students to gain a trail stewardship ethic.

"It's critical that we do this, in my opinion," he said. "With the number of young mountain bikers entering the sport through NICA's growing interscholastic cycling programs—approximately 4,500 students participating this fall in 15 leagues across 14 states—it is important for the bike industry to help ensure trail access and improved relations amongst all trail users."

To get the wheels spinning, NICA and

IMBA recently launched the Teen Trails Corps program aimed at increasing and expanding youth trail advocacy efforts and has asked students to define the program. This program picks up on a concept begun by the Marin County-based Drake High School team and later called the "Spirit of Howdy." The idea was just that: when riding a trail, you must slow down enough that you can say hello to other trail users and they can say hello back.

NICA and IMBA want to encourage all trail users to demonstrate respect, empathy and compassion toward fellow trail users and the environment by working to improve trails and respecting other trail users. According to McNerny, the goals are to:

- teach NICA student-athletes to "do the right thing" on the trail at a young age, which will help improve the perception of mountain bikers for generations.
- encourage NICA high school mountain bikers to take the lead in showing respect, empathy and compassion on the trail. Friendly interactions between bikers and nonbikers will create positive goodwill that helps open and maintain access to trails.
- serve as a rallying cry for all trail users, not just young cyclists, who want to engender a sense of community on the trails and ensure continued access to our trails.



Steve Messer

Student athletes from Moorpark High School in Southern California work on a trail reroute in October at Triunfo Canyon Park. The students were among eight crews that worked with the IMBA chapter Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association.

To take the program to what McNerny calls the “next level,” four NICA student athletes were invited to attend the IMBA World Summit in August and contribute to roundtable discussions about how to shape the program. Specialized (also the founding national sponsor of NICA) funded the four students’ travel and lodging, and IMBA waived their summit registration fees to the summit in Steamboat Springs, Colo. Hannah Eckvahl of San Gabriel, Calif., Lyta Foulk of Steamboat Springs; Olivia Nicholls of Scottsdale, Ariz.; and Cam Eng of Highlands Ranch, Colo., won the golden tickets.

During the three-day summit, the students got to mingle with national and international advocacy leaders, meet land managers and key politicians, attend breakout sessions, introduce a showing of the film “Singletrack High,” ride bikes at Steamboat Ski Area and surrounding areas, and take a dip in Strawberry Hot Springs.

But one of their primary tasks was to work with IMBA leaders to define their own advocacy program built on both the Spirit of Howdy concept and the IMBA motto of “speak, build, respect, ride.” The students took the charge and ran, starting with a name change for the program to Teen Trails Corps. It will encompass a merit badge program of sorts in which students can earn points for participating in stewardship events and for undertaking advocacy-related efforts. As students reach certain levels, they will

earn the title of “Trail Captain” along with some swag.

Eng, 16, attends ThunderRidge High School in Colorado and is the co-captain of the Highlands Ranch Composite Team. He said he had a fantastic time at the IMBA summit, made “awesome friends” and rode the Steamboat bike park with other NICA student athletes and the IMBA Trail Care Crew. He’s been mountain biking for only three years, but it already has taken over his life.

“I first started to think about advocacy when I took a month-long road trip to Park City, Sun Valley, Oregon, Washington, B.C., Alberta and Montana. I was privileged to ride awesome trails and continually saw many of IMBA’s great works along the way,” Eng said.

Eng was proud to represent NICA at the summit, but also viewed it as a chance to get involved in the greater mountain biking community. He says he gained perspective on the aspects of advocacy and what it takes to be an ambassador in the community.

“Trail advocates cannot be put into one idea but rather a culmination of ideas and people working together to create something special, such as an absolutely killer trail to ride and benefit the community,” he said.

It’s not just talk for Eng; this season, his team helped complete four new trails within his local trail system. He considers his involvement in advocacy an example for peers to emulate.

“I personally would like to help my teammates understand how to be a steward on the bike and off it as well. I think leading by example is great especially coming from a peer to teach kids about basic things and etiquette so it will eventually become habit, and every kid can go teach their friends.”

Stewardship “off the bike” is equally important to IMBA. McNerny says NICA does not just work with students who want to race but also pulls in kids who may be interested pursuing careers in trail science, natural resources, biology or some aspect of the sport aside from competitive racing.

“We’re seeing a lot of that and it’s really cool,” said McNerny, who himself has a background in environmental planning. So he sees trail stewardship through the lens of an expert who is sensitive to the boundaries between human population and development with the natural world. Some kids on teams that already participate in trail workdays, have reported that trail work is the most fun they’ve had during a race season. The groundwork is furthermore getting translated into a love for the earth. In NICA’s annual survey, 80 percent of students stated that they’d gained a newfound respect for the environment and trail work.

Specialized Advocacy Manager Lucy August-Perna met Eng and the other three students at the summit. She was blown away by their preparedness, attentiveness, insights and participation.

“It was refreshing and inspiring to have them there, and while there were only four of them, they had a strong presence throughout the event. When we—NICA, IMBA and Specialized—first started talking about how to engage more youth around the summit, I don’t think we could have anticipated four better candidates,” August-Perna said.

She added that other industry leaders should support NICA’s efforts because it’s an investment in the sport’s future, and the programs are resulting in far-reaching benefits as a school sport. “These benefits are going to continue to have profound effects on schools and communities,” she said.

Eng agrees and believes fellow students are buying into the idea ... despite the few who still show a little rebellion. Once their friends sign on, however, they will, too. Eng added: “If we can get kids to think of trail advocacy and mountain bike advocacy in general as a necessity that goes without question then mountain biking will have a bright future.” 📸