



Photo courtesy of Digitivation

More than 11,000 cyclists took over the roads as they snaked through Iowa's towns and corn fields in July during the 26th Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI).

Iowa Ride Hosts 11,000 Cyclists

Industry Misses Captive Market

BY JILL JANOV

ELDORA, IA—It was difficult to tell if the 130 airmen were training, pitching the Air Force or just having fun on their bicycles.

Whatever their intentions, their Air Force jerseys made them easy to spot among some 11,000 cyclists at RAGBRAI—the annual ride across Iowa.

The Air Force wasn't the only group cap-

turing the attention of cyclists during the largest organized tour in the nation.

Chevrolet, set up booths in each town along the way to promote their local dealers. SoBe Beverages sold its new tea and fruit drinks along the route and sponsored a group of cyclists.

The U.S. Post Office and United Parcel

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RAGBRAI . . .

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Service were mailing letters and packages, and United States Cellular offered free telephone time. Even religious Iowans appealed to the cyclists, handing out mini-Bibles along the route.

But when cyclist Dave Hendrickson got fed up with his bike and decided to spend \$1,500 on a new one, he couldn't find a bicycle company anywhere.

It was only the first day of the seven-day ride and his seatpost was slipping. His rear wheel refused to stay true. The frame was too heavy, and he was just sick of the 14-year-old relic.

Hendrickson stopped at a store where he looked at a few road bikes, but none were his size. "Softride is usually at RAGBRAI. What do you think of those bikes?" asked Hendrickson, a real estate adviser from a Chicago suburb.

Softride and several other companies have made brief appearances at RAGBRAI during its 26-year history. But this year, the only industry presence was Rob Templin from Burley and 14 Iowa bicycle shops.

"Isn't it crazy? There's no manufacturers out here," said Craig Cooper, owner of Bikes to You in Grinnell, Iowa.

Templin came to RAGBRAI to promote the Burley Birdy—a folding bicycle with 18-inch wheels, and Burley's trailer. The 14 retailers were fixing bikes and selling T-shirts and accessories. But

no one was selling bikes.

"Where is the bicycle industry? That's a good question. They've never come out for this with any commitment," said John Karras, founder of RAGBRAI, which stands for the Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa.

Mike Oswald, owner of Ozzy's Mobile Bike Repair in Des Moines, Iowa, said he is surprised that recumbent suppliers fail to take advantage of the market.

"You have 12,000 road bikers with sore butts. If they came with 100 recumbents, I bet they would sell 700 the week after RAGBRAI. It's interesting to me that the industry puts so much effort into races and their race vans and virtually ignores tourist rides," Oswald said.

Dave Hendricks, owner of Connecticut Yankee Pedaller in Chariton, Iowa, remembers the year a cyclist crushed his bike. It was on a car roof, and he apparently drove into something.

"The guy asked me if he could buy a new bike from me and I didn't have one. I didn't know of a bike shop open on Sunday. The poor guy from California came here for the first time and he didn't have a bike to ride," he said.

Chicago cyclist Arch Bryant, a high

school teacher, is a RAGBRAI veteran. "I like this bike, but I'm ready to get a new bike, and I'm torn about what to get. I'm surprised the industry doesn't have booths here. I'd like to talk to them about what to get," Bryant said.

"I'm planning on spending \$3,000 to



Rob Templin, left, of Burley taped his company's poster to the Espresso stand at this year's ride across Iowa.

\$4,000 on a bike, and I can't be the only person here wondering what to buy. It's probably the largest gathering of committed cyclists in the country," he added.

Jim Green, who coordinates RAGBRAI, and Forrest Ridgway, owner of Bike World in Des Moines, hope to organize an expo to get vendors involved in the event next year.

"What the industry may not know is

that around 46 or 47 percent of people on this ride earn over \$60,000 a year. The market is built-in for them. Maybe the reason the industry hasn't been involved is because there hasn't been an opportunity. I'm ready to do something next year," Green said.

Green and Ridgway want to find a way to make it easy and affordable for companies to attend RAGBRAI.

"The ride has not been overly friendly to vendor involvement, yet we are working towards changing that through an expo," Ridgway said.

Retailer Marty Epstein, who has ridden in RAGBRAI for three years, said RAGBRAI helps the industry and Iowa.

"People are sick of the charity rides, the 'begathons.' They don't want to be forever asking for money. This ride has an economic impact on the state and bicycle shops. Iowans embrace it because they understand it," he said.

He said RAGBRAI does a great job getting people excited about their bikes.

"Everybody saw the Air Force team out here. What the hell was the Air Force doing out there? They're selling the Air Force. And what does the bike industry have out here? Nothing," Epstein said.

"They should step up to the plate. They could be out here building brand allegiance. They could be out here getting people to drool over their stuff," he said. □

letters

'Fly Birdy, Fly' Is Nice, But It's Not Quite Right

Your May 1 Grapevine told yet another great cycling-related tale about Burley's own Ridin' Rob Templin. Rob had visited Continental Cyclery in Wichita, Kansas, to demonstrate the new Birdy Compact Folding Bike.

He was outside the store trying to captivate the shop owner with his sales spiel on the Birdy's speed and maneuverability when two "little miscreants" snatched a bike from inside the shop and rode off.

A shop employee ran out after them, hopped on the flight-ready Birdy, and gave chase. Caught 'em. Recovered the stolen bike. And impressed the shop owner in a big way. He probably ordered a few Birdys on the spot.

Just to set the record straight, though, the article referred to the folding bike as the "Fliege Vogel, Fliege" or the Fly Birdy, Fly."

That isn't actually the name of the bike, but rather the headline we used for an ad which we have run in several issues of *Bicycle Retailer & Industry News*.

The bike is called the "Birdy Compact Folding Bike." It would be great if you could note a correction in an upcoming issue. Thanks for your coverage.

Ally LeCaux

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