

“Like NASCAR on Bicycles....”

Written by Marie McAden
Monday, 23 April 2012 19:55



The Sixth Annual Beaufort Memorial Cycling Classic will bring 190 professional cyclists to town May1 for another hair-raising, heart-pounding race through the Historic District.

The 70 female and 118 male competitors participating in this year's event will be riding a .6-mile course that begins on Bay Street, turns onto the one-lane Scott Street and continues around Craven and Newcastle streets. At top speed, the cyclists will hit 40 mph.

“It's like NASCAR on bicycles,” said Joe DeVito, one of the race organizers. “They're diving into turns at very fast speeds in a constant battle to stay in front. And they're riding just inches from each other.”

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The women will make 50 laps—the equivalent of 30 miles. The men will ride around the course 75 times or 45 miles. Averaging speeds of 25 to 30 mph, it will take the cyclists one and a half to two hours to finish their heat.

Unlike long, arduous road races such as the Tour de France, criterion racing involves short, fast courses in urban areas, providing cycling fans with non-stop excitement.

“At the Tour de France, you stand by the side of the road and see the cyclists for five seconds, and they’re gone,” said Don “DG” Veitch, a race organizer who helped bring the event to Beaufort. “With criterium racing, they go by 75 times. And you can walk around the course and get different perspectives of the action.”

In the Beaufort competition, the first turn is one of the most harrowing as the cyclists come off Bay Street’s long straightaway onto the narrow Scott Street.

“They’re coming into a very tight turn at top speed,” DeVito said. “They don’t really slow down. They may ease up on the power, but they don’t hit the brake.”

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This is the sixth year Beaufort Memorial Hospital has sponsored the event, part of the USA Crits Southeast series that includes seven races in nine days, each in a different Southeastern city. The Cycling Classic is the third race in the series.

“The best of the best come to this event,” Veitch said. “They’re high-level athletes who are constantly training.”

The cyclists typically ride six days a week, 40 to 80 miles a day, to prepare for the grueling competitions. At peak performance, their heart rates will accelerate to 150 to 200 beats per minute.

Riding as teams, the cyclists strategize their moves to protect the sprinters who have the best shot at winning.

“When the gun goes off, the team will dispatch guys to the front of the pack to get the speed up and rip the legs off the weaker riders,” Veitch said. “In racing, it’s all about aerodynamics. You can’t stay in the front for very long and keep up a fast pace.”

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The event, which is free and open to the public, will start with a kids' race at 5 p.m., followed by the women's race at 6 and the men's heat at 7:30. Approximately 3,000 people are expected to line the streets to watch the competitors vie for a slice of the \$15,000 purse. Spectators are welcome to bring chairs and blankets.

To ensure pedestrians are off the roads as the cyclists whiz by, a pace car stays in front of the riders during the entire race. This year, an all-electric Leaf provided by Hilton Head Nissan will serve as the pace car.

In addition, course marshals are stationed throughout the route to assist spectators who want to cross the street to watch the race from a different angle.

“It's very exciting watching them race,” said DeVito, an avid cyclist. “They back stretch is where they make their moves. They're jockeying for position on Craven. As they turn onto New Castle, they really pick up speed.”

For more information on the Beaufort Memorial Cycling Classic, visit www.lowcountrycyclist.com

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