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TRENDS

Fat Biking Is Riding High

By Dawn Reiss

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Fat isn't a word most athletes like to hear. But thanks to extra-wide tires that have revolutionized mountain bicycles into year-round vehicles, fat bikes are booming.

The winter sport has become so popular that in 2015, [USA Cycling](#) hosted its first Fat Bike National Championship at [Powder Mountain Resort in Ogden, Utah](#). "Fat bikes are emerging as one of the fastest-growing segments in the cycling community, and they're becoming increasingly popular among our members," says Micah Rice, USA Cycling's vice president of national events.

"Fat biking right now is really like the early days of mountain biking."

Although fat bikes—which have tires typically ranging from 3 to 4 inches wide—were born out of necessity for people commuting through or servicing areas in the snow and sand, Rice says the bikes have become popular among nonskiers or avid cyclists who prefer to ride year-round.

That's why Chris Stuart, winner of the 2007 USA Cycling Collegiate Road Division II National Championships, picked up the phenomenon in 2014. "It was, 'holy crap, I'm riding a bike on the snow and it's amazing,'" recalls the 32-year-old resident of Park City, Utah, of his first fat bike ride.

Last year Stuart raced in the inaugural USA Cycling Fat Bike National Championship and won the 30-39 age group category. Since then, Stuart has turned pro, hired a coach and slimed his 6-ft.-1 frame down to 147 pounds in hopes of winning this year's event, set for Feb. 27 in Ogden again.

Photo Credit: Kent Sanchez

For this year's race, amateurs will ride 12 miles across Powder Mountain's Hidden Lake area terrain while pro- and open-class riders will compete over 18 miles. The course is groomed for riders with powder-packed snow and includes a single path that traverses through aspens.

"It's not our goal to make this the biggest fat bike event in the United States," says Rice, estimating this year's race may have 250 participants, about double 2015's total of 126. "We want to focus on rapidly growing the discipline, to shine the light on fat biking in general and bring it to smaller events around the U.S. We want to grow the sport and get more people on bicycles."

Just how fast is the sport growing?

Last year, Pepsi and its Rockstar Energy Drink decided to throw some financial backing into the race and sponsored Sophie Scothern, a 15-year-old in national championship. It was the first fat bike race for the avid cross-country mountain biker.

"[Scothern] had the skills but wasn't confident she could compete on a larger scale," says Rick Danger, franchise general manager at Admiral Beverage Corporation, the Pepsi Bottling Company of Northern Utah.

After getting permission from Scothern's parents, Danger says Admiral Beverage designed custom gear for her including a jacket and helmet, and organized several training rides with strong female athletes from the community who could help build up Scothern's confidence and skill set.

Both Scothern and Danger say this had a profound impact and helped her earn second place in the 13- to 18-year-old category for girls. "This inspired us to continue the program," says Danger, adding that Scothern will help mentor and coach another sponsored female athlete in this year's race.

Besides growing sponsorship, experts also point to the sport's growing popularity in the Midwest. The national championships next head to [Grand Rapids, Michigan](#), which will host in 2017 and 2018. The world's largest fat bike race, the Wisconsin-based Fat Bike Birkie—an open-class race being held March 5 with 47K (29.2 miles) and 20K (12.4 mile) rides—has turned into a three-day event due to its popularity.

The [Fat Bike Birkie](#), which was considered the national championship prior to the sport's official sanctioning by USA Cycling, began in 2013 with 175 riders. In 2014, it drew 518 riders and grew to 768 riders in 2015, says Nancy Knutson, spokesperson for the American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation. This year, Knutson says, 1,012 riders have registered. Besides the grilled brat and beer post-race party, a criterium course ride and fat bike expo will be held the day before the race this year, while the day after the race will include on-snow fat bike demonstrations and guided rides on the trails.

Ned Overend, a well-known 60-year-old mountain biker in Durango, Colorado, who won the inaugural USA Cycling Fat Bike race in 2015 and has won “the Birkie,” says the fact that USA Cycling decided so quickly to sanction a national fat biking championship speaks to the popularity of the sport.

“Once you do it, you realize it's a ton of fun,” says Overend, who started fat biking to help market-test prototypes he helped develop with [Specialized Bicycle Components](#), a cycling company in Morgan Hill, California. “Fat biking right now is really like the early days of mountain biking. There was a ton of excitement about this new sport and people who did it understood how much fun it was. Some people thought it was a fad, but there was a lot of excitement about being involved in something new and growing it fast. Just like this.”