

Starting a U19 / Junior Racing Program

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Note: Throughout this article, the terms junior and U19 are used interchangeably. Both refer to racing cyclists from age 10-18. While the traditional and official name for racers is this age group is "junior," we have found that many kids find "junior" a pejorative label. We are therefore adopting the U19 designation used by some other sports.

The current state of cycling today

For the past 10 years, we've all been aware of the need to focus on junior development in bike racing. However, with the ever-increasing number of master riders entering the sport, clubs, race promoters and the industry were compelled to cater to a target demographic with money to spend. Most grass roots programs for juniors were short-lived for lack of participation or interest. Even with Lance in everybody's living rooms, the growth in the under 19 ranks of our sport was minimal.

- **Now, all that has changed.** U19 racing here in New Jersey is exploding. Some clubs cannot keep up with the growth. What has happened to affect this change? We feel that there are several reasons for the tremendous growth we are experiencing:
 - First, we cannot ignore the impact Lance Armstrong has had upon the public perception of road cycling. He has introduced the complex sport of professional bicycle racing to countless Americans. We now see people, who haven't ridden a bike since they received their driver's license, discussing racing tactics throughout the month of July and closely following The Tour. Americans finally are starting to understand some of the dynamics of bicycle racing, and how it is not just like a running race on bikes. Lance and bike racing has become a part of American culture.
 - The second, and probably the most significant factor, at least in states like New Jersey, is that mainstream team sports like hockey and soccer are taking over family's lives. These sports place huge demands on parents' time and budgets. With traveling leagues for pre-teens that force parents to take their kids all over North America, parents are tiring of these demands. As a result, parents are discouraging their kids from even entering these sports, for fear of the strain it could place on their family. More recently, we are seeing many businesses cropping up to take advantage of this situation. Individual coaching, expensive clinics and even flying trainers in from England! I think parents are starting to draw the line. Parents are looking for alternative sports that go back to the basics of kids participating in sports, which are to have fun, build self-confidence, learn a healthy lifestyle and make friends.
 - Another great aspect of the sport is that every kid gets to race. Nobody has to sit on the bench. Kids don't have to "try out" to race their bikes. If they are driven, they can succeed. Finally, parent cyclists can take an active part in the "practices," and be more involved in the child's life. For these reasons, as well as others, bicycle racing has become very appealing to both kids and parents.

- **So what makes a U19/junior team successful in today's society?** One of the most important components is to have a specific structure. Raising children in today's society is very different than it was 20 years ago. Parents drive their kids everywhere, and families' schedules are calculated affairs. The successful U19/junior program needs to have very specific structure, geared specifically toward juniors. Rides need to leave from a set spot at a set time, and then return at a set time. The parents need to know when and where to drop their kids off and when to pick them up. They need to know the racing schedule in advance to put it on the family calendar. For the team/club to be successful, they need to provide all that for the kids and their parents.

- **Cycling and bicycle racing in America have gradually become an adult activity.** It's a reward after a hard day's work. Group rides provide motivation and camaraderie for people who like to ride their bikes. When a new rider (junior or adult) shows up to group rides, they are often ignored and as a result, put-off from the sport. The experienced riders want to talk to their friends, before, during and after the ride. Therefore, with the exception of a few shop group rides, there are few people committed to teaching new riders or juniors.

- **For a U19/junior racing program to be successful, it has to break the mold and establish bicycle racing as an organized team sport, just like any other team sport a child may enter.**

Beginning a program

First, identify what type of a program you want to start. We will describe 3 types of U19 development program, each with an increasing amount of commitment, work and infrastructure required.

■ Mentoring program

- This type of program is perfect for the busy master's rider who does not have the time to devote to a large-scale junior program. The coach or mentor develops a close personal relationship with the junior and their parents. He/she coaches the junior through an existing club structure. Much of the coaching takes place "hands on" during the club group rides. The other component of the coaching takes place through email and phone calls, at the coach's convenience. This can be an extremely rewarding experience, with a relatively small commitment of time. We suggest you sit down and plan out long term and short term goals for the junior, that should focus on them reaching their peak both physically and training wise in their last year as a junior. Having a structured program is not the most important part of this relationship. It is more about 2-way communication, and the relationship between the coach and the rider.
- Through your relationship, the junior will learn how to train smart and listen to their body. Set a plan on how to deal with burnout. Prepare them for it and explain the ups and downs of a long racing season. Help the junior set realistic goals and help them to work toward those goals.

■ The 15-18 junior team.

- This program needs structure. That is the #1 component. Structure means that there are junior focused group rides. The rides should be on the same route every week. The coach should find the best, most safe route and time of day for the ride. Put a lot of thought into the route. Pick a safe route that combines everything you need. Select designated sprint spots; include some roads that are safe to ride pacelines, as well as some appropriate hills. On the route, have specific spots where the whole team always waits and regroups. Allow the kids to go hard on certain parts of the route, but they must wait for the weaker or younger riders. Junior riders are not like masters riders. They do not mind doing the same route every week. They get comfortable riding the same roads; they learn the traffic patterns, the potholes, the hills and the turns. Keep in mind that the roads can be intimidating for kids. They don't drive cars and for many, this is their first experience sharing the road with traffic.
- Communicate with the kids and the parents. Children rarely tell their parents about upcoming events/races etc. When the parent is behind what you are doing, the child will be at more races and rides. Develop a communicative relationship with the parents, so they feel free to add input, ask questions, etc. When the parent realizes you are there to help their child, they'll bend over backward to support the program. Try to communicate

as much as possible by email. Telephone conversations just take too long. Kids and parents are used to checking email. The kids are very easy going. The parents love specifics so they can plan. Race dates, times, clinics, etc. Giving all that information to parents well in advance is very much appreciated. Also, realize that kids forget things all the time. Plan on having to tell them the exact same things, multiple times, without getting frustrated. They are not adults, and will never write things down that they should.

- **Be consistent.** Kids need that, and their parents do too. If you keep the ride at the same time, at the same place every week, there is never any confusion or unnecessary phone calls to confirm the ride. If a new rider shows up to the shop/ride location, and nobody is there, they will probably never come back. Sometimes kids (and parents) will stop by a group ride to take a look before they decide to ride with the group. A set ride, at a set place, at a set time will really help things to grow.
- **Have a lesson plan each week.** Keep it simple. There is so much to learn, and in the beginning, they are just struggling to ride in a straight line. Tell the kids you are going to repeat yourself when it comes to important things, just in case they forget. The lesson for the week may be as simple as looking over your shoulder to check for oncoming traffic.
- **Whenever possible, race alongside the kids.** Often, as the junior reaches 16 or 17, they are strong enough to race with Cat. 3 or masters - especially at the training races. At the training races, ride behind them, watch their lines and corners. You can help them so much in this environment, and help them to get results in those races too.
- **Lend a helping hand.** When a new junior comes out and is not as strong as his/her more experienced peers, don't be afraid to physically push (make sure you are skilled at it) the rider back into the group. They then don't feel like they are holding anybody back when they are with the group.
- **Keep the group ride relatively short.** (no more than 30 miles). This keeps it fun for the kids and keeps them coming back.

■ The 10-14 junior team.

- **This is usually an offshoot of a successful 15-18 program.** You will often get a younger brother or sister of one of your juniors to join the team. This part of the program is not as hard to build as you may think. Usually if there is a young rider of 10 or 11, the parent will ride with them. This takes the burden off the club. Have the younger riders start with the older riders, then at a pre-determined location, split off into 2 (or 3) groups. The parents of young riders can take responsibility, especially if there are other young riders who come out.
- **Racing their own age group.** Much of this part of the program focuses on getting the young kids to races where they can race against kids their own age. They learn very quickly and always seem to have fun at the races.

Coaching

- When it comes to working with under 19 racers, the younger you start, the better the results will be
- When you have a new team member, sit down with him or her and their parents for a meeting. Go over the sport of racing and what is expected and not expected of them. Depending on their age, explain each year and how they can progress. Don't be afraid to tell them they are not the next Lance! Kids have a tremendous ability to dream big. Be realistic with them and what they are likely to achieve through commitment and a bit of work. At the same time, don't be negative, but explain that if they are 14, by the time they are 17 or 18, they could be racing with the Cat. 2 or Cat. 3 senior men. Help them to look forward, setting realistic goals. Outline a long-term plan for each rider: Cat. 5 this year, Cat. 4 the next year, and Cat. 3 the year after that.
- When they make improvements during the season, point them out.
- Teach the kids proper form, and keep on top of them about it. Explain the power lost with bad form. Kids today need to be told why they need to do something before they commit to doing it.
- Try to avoid giving under nineteens an overly structured training plan. Focus on them getting on the bike consistently (several days a week), which will build up their neuromuscular system. Kids have a greater amount of free time. They should learn to read their bodies, and ride to have fun. Encourage them to ride with their friends and try new things. Teach them about the importance of periodization and how to build a proper base.
- Try to avoid talking AT the junior too much. Many adult cycling coaches talk more than they listen. Kids have so much they have to absorb with school, and other activities, that too much thrown at them will not sink in. Try to get into a conversation with them to understand what they are picking up and what is going in and out their ears. Tell them you plan on repeating yourself about important things (that way they don't think you are just senile!) Much of the junior's training takes place away from the coach. Make sure they fully understand what you are teaching them.
- How does running a U19 program affect your own racing/training? If you are worried about how to fit in your own race training, don't be. You can always ride to the group rides, ride with the U19s and ride again after the ride. If you keep the junior group ride to 2 hours or less (25-30 miles), the older/stronger kids can ride with you after the ride.

- If you don't hear from a rider for a few weeks, CALL HIM OR HER. They can sometimes get out of the habit and slip out of the sport. If you encourage them to come back out, you can help prevent that from happening. Kids really like the personal attention you give them, and will make a concerted effort.
- JUNIOR GEARS. Make sure your riders know about junior gears and rollout. When a child is in tears after winning their first race and they get disqualified for not blocking their gears, you'll understand...!
- Teaching racing strategy and teamwork is one of the most significant things you can teach the kids. Immediately after every race, ask the riders to explain what took place during the race that led to the final outcome. Every kid may have a different perspective on the race, and usually the most experienced rider knew the key moments in the race. Have that rider explain what happened and why. If your team did not win the race, this session could be perceived as a negative experience. Explain regularly, that the post race analysis is an important part of learning, and be totally positive during these sessions. It's also important to analyze the race even when you win. There still may have been mistakes made even though you won. If it's a big win, let the rider and team share in the celebration and put off the analysis for another day.
- Force the kids to work as a team. Explain to them that you recognize that they all want to win bike races and that as a coach you are going to try and facilitate that. As a strong team, opportunities for everyone to succeed are a real possibility. Have the team focus on team goals, rather than individual ones. If you have one rider who is stronger and more experienced, and can win the majority of races, have him/her help the other riders do well in less important races. Then, when it comes time for everyone to work for the stronger rider, in bigger races, they will be 100% committed. What you may find is that the younger riders (14 and under) will more readily sacrifice themselves for the team than an older rider who starts racing.
- Another important thing to do is to hook new kids in immediately. When a junior comes on his first group ride with the team, lend them a team jersey so they feel like they are part of the team. Then ride with them the whole ride and make sure they are riding safe and staying with the group. If they fall behind, push them into the group. They will finish the ride, excited, motivated and immediately feel like a part of the team.

Safety and Liability

- Liability insurance.
 - **Coaching license.** Have all your coaches take out a USA Cycling racing license. It is an at home study course with an open book test.
 - **Coaches liability insurance.** This can be obtained through USA Cycling (currently \$100.00 for \$1M coverage). This is for parent's peace of mind and your own protection.
 - **Club insurance.** This can be obtained through USA Cycling. It helps to protect the club and its members from liability and protects the club when holding club sponsored group rides.
- A good way to practice safe riding is to stress safety issues, especially during group rides. One way to get the riders to follow these rules is to explain how the same safe group riding skills will be applied in races.
- Have parents put their child's name and emergency contact number inside their helmet.
- Kids do CRASH occasionally. Most crashes are not severe: usually a little road rash and some cuts. Some kids have a high tolerance for pain, but most don't. Be prepared. At the races make sure you have all the First Aid materials you will need. Also, a crash can discourage a young rider. Make sure you call him or her every couple of days after the crash to make sure they get back on the bike.

Parents

- **Parents can be a huge help.** As the team grows, there are too many tasks and small jobs to take care of. The parents really want to help, even if they know absolutely nothing about bike racing (and many of them do not). There is always something they can help with: car pooling, snacks, fund raising, maintaining email lists, finding used equipment, organizing team parties, pinning on race numbers, etc. If your team becomes very large, parents can drive as a sag vehicle behind the group rides. The parents who ride will often take responsibility to ride with slower or younger riders. Try to identify motivated parents who understand the program and are effective leaders. They will become your greatest asset.

Support of the program

- **Running a U19 team doesn't involve a lot of expense.** You don't need a lot of sponsorship initially. Pass the real costs back to the parents. Parents are accustomed to paying for their children's activities and you should not hesitate to make them aware of the necessary costs. However, there are a lot of resources available for junior grass roots programs. Once you build it, getting support is much easier than getting money for other types of cycling programs.
- **Clothing and equipment.** Get used tights, shoes, trainers and winter clothing from the experienced riders in the club. These initial expenses can really stretch a parent's budget. Almost all masters racers have extra clothes they are not wearing (or don't fit into) any more.
- **Your local bike shop.** The majority of U19 programs are run out of a bike shop. The shop can be your greatest asset! The shops recognize that the initial investment in cycling can be difficult for a junior and their family. They will often help out where they can. Speak to the shop owner and ask to buy a case of tubes and some tires at a discount. Most bike shops will bend over backwards to help kids new to the sport. Also work out an agreement with the shop to repair the kids' bikes quickly. Most kids are going to have one bike, and it can get banged up. The rider may be intimidated bringing the bike to the shop. If the shop says it will take two weeks for the repair, the rider may just accept that. Prepare for this in advance.
- **Loaner bikes.** They can be obtained from your club, from a shop or from touring groups. Once you put the word out that you are looking for bike donations, they will come. Have an inventory of spare, used equipment. Kids bang their bikes up. For instance, having a spare derailleur can save the parents a \$100.00 and they really appreciate every dollar saved.
 - Give the bike for only a couple months. Many parents think that bike racing is a passing phase and don't want to purchase another piece of sporting equipment that will go unused. By providing a bike for one or two months, the parent sees the child's commitment and is often more likely to then purchase a racing bike.
 - If the rider is not showing up to the rides, contact them, take the bike back and give it to another interested kid.
 - Make sure loaner bikes are in good condition before giving them to a rider. A used bike may have been sitting in somebody's garage for a couple years, rusting.
- **Make sure you have spare wheels.** And bring them to the races. Have enough so if a kid breaks a wheel in a race, you can loan him one until he gets it fixed. New riders are probably going to start with one bike and one set of wheels. The team/club should have a supply of equipment to keep the kids going. This equipment is often used, donated equipment from the team or bike shop.

Where to find the kids

- **The first place is your local bike shop.** There are always kids hanging out there. Keep the shop involved and they will get you a lot of kids and help support the program. Also go to other bike shops in your area. Some shops know about bike racing, and some don't. Kids don't know this. They go to the shop closest to their house. Make sure that all shops in the area know who you are and how to contact you. Leave a supply of literature describing your U19 program and listing contact information.
- **Bring a friend.** Once you get one or two kids, encourage them to bring a friend, or brother or sister along. Once they ride with the team they will be hooked too.
- **Racers' children.** Your master's riders usually have kids they would love to get into the sport. Spread the word. Many of these kids have bikes already!
- **Local recreational or touring groups.** These can be a great source for parents who want to get their kids out riding. Most kids don't like to ride with the old men/women in the touring groups, but love to ride with the other kids. There is also a big gap between the touring and racing community. The touring community often has no knowledge about bike racing. Every kid that is riding a bike wants to race!
- **Search engines.** Get a website up. Every kid is on the web!! Make sure if a child searches on Google or Yahoo "*Junior Bike racing in _____*" that your team's website comes up.
- **Training buddies.** When kids join together with a friend, they are more likely to stay involved and train. They then get other kids in their school interested in racing. Ask the kids on your team if they know anybody in their school who has a road bike. Get their email and tell them to join a group ride.
- **No Stealing!** Don't steal kids from other teams. It sets a bad example. The best thing to do is to have kids new to the sport that you can train and teach the way you believe in. Kids (and parents) who come from other programs have ideas and habits that are often hard to break.
- **Other clubs.** When a club that does not have a U19 team is contacted by a prospective junior, make sure they contact you. Keep spreading the word.

Where to find out about the races

- **The NJBA** has an email list which sends out emails about upcoming U19 races, clinics, camps and scholarships. Contact calldano@aol.com to be placed on this list.
- **Other U19 programs.** Reach out to other big U19 programs in your area. They will help guide you to the best races for U19 riders.

Other Resources

- **NJBA** The New Jersey Bicycle Association (NJBA), in partnership with USA Cycling, is the governing body for road bike racing in New Jersey. Its membership consists of more than 30 competitive cycling clubs, also affiliated with the USCF, with members who reside in New Jersey. www.bike411.com
- **USAC** USA Cycling is the official cycling organization recognized by the USOC and is responsible for identifying, training and selecting cyclists to represent the United States in international competitions. USA Cycling, doing business as the USCF, NORBA, NCCA and USPRO, controls nearly two dozen major events each year and issues permits for up to 3,000 more. www.usacycling.org

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