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Cycling coach Bart Bowen, center, shares training advice with Mark Reinecke, right, during a computer-based group cycling class at Rebound Sports Performance Lab in Bend last week.

Biking by the numbers

Computerized cycling classes simulate outdoor experience with indoor comfort

By

Heather Clark / The Bulletin

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A low-hanging ceiling of gray clouds spits light, dry flakes of snow in a swirling wall of white.

A layer of ice blanketed by two inches of snow in west Bend makes already slick roads even more treacherous, and daytime temperatures stay well below freezing.

No matter, it's an ideal day for a bike ride.

Dave Bowman is training to race in the half-ironman triathlon at Central Oregon's Pacific Crest Sport Festival this June.

Matt Engel, fresh off the fall's cyclocross season, is already ramping up for 2007. He wants to be top three in his division.

Chris Maley is eyeing Bend's mountain bike races in May and June, and he wants to hang tough with the strong riders on the weekday Hutch's noon rides.

Sami Fournier is preparing for early-season road-bike races in Northern California, where she'll compete in the elite women's field.

Information

These competitive amateur cyclists and a dozen others aren't tackling hill repeats up Awbrey Butte after work on a frigid winter evening. They're watching their progress, and their efforts, on a

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What: Computer-based cycling classes.
Where: Rebound Sports Performance Lab, 133 S. W. Century Dr., Bend.
When: Through March on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5:15 and 6:15 p.m.; Wednesdays at 9 a.m.
Reservations: 322-9045.
Cost: \$15 per class; \$120 for 10 classes.

computer screen. Indoors.

Here, the bike course is safe (no cars!), and a whirring fan provides welcome respite from the body heat generated by sweaty riders clad in summertime attire.

Bart Bowen leads the "ride." He shares words of encouragement, records technical data, and explains training terms like "lactate," "threshold," and "wattage."

Bowen, a retired professional cyclist and two-time national road-race champion, is offering computer-based indoor group cycling classes for the first time this winter season.

Bowen moved to Central Oregon from Albuquerque, N.M., last spring and joined the staff at Rebound Sports Performance Lab in Bend as a coach for endurance athletes. He says similar computerized indoor training sessions are offered in Portland, Seattle and Chicago - places where the weather forces cyclists to park their bikes inside for the winter.

So far, Bowen's classes have been a hit among working yet race-minded cyclists in Central Oregon - especially those attracted to the science of training. And, with only eight spots available during each of five weekday classes, riders must register well in advance to secure a space.

"The big thing that attracted me," says Engel, a 39-year-old Bend dentist, "is that I didn't want to lose (fitness) over the winter. So far, I feel like I'm stronger and training smarter."

Participants ride their own bikes, securing them to one of eight CompuTrainers. The device allows the bike's wheels to spin without the bike itself moving forward. Wires connected to the bike and the CompuTrainer send information to a computer operated by Bowen, indicating a rider's wattage (power), speed in miles per hour, and pedal revolutions. All that information and more, along with the details of the ride, is projected on a large wall-length screen for all to see during an hourlong ride.

Each class focuses on a different workout objective, and riders travel "virtually" across varying types of terrain. Bowen says there are "endless" courses from which to choose, from a tour of New York's Central Park to well-known triathlon race routes, and from flat time-trial rides to hill interval workouts. Riders can even compete in a simulated race.

Bowen emphasizes that the objective of the class, however, is not for riders to race each other - although it does aim to prepare riders who want to kick-start their 2007 race season.

"It's not always about how hard you go, but how smart you ride," says Bowen. "They're not racing each other. It's about their own individual numbers."

In this way, classes cater to varying abilities because the computer controls the difficulty, which is tailored to each rider. When cyclists arrive at a virtual hill, resistance is automatically added to the bike's wheel.

As they warm up, participants talk about the weather and their kids, or compare notes on an upcoming bike race. Once the hill sets in, the chatter quiets and rhythmic heavy breathing takes over, save for some occasional playful ribbing.

Once the effort is up, Bowen performs a blood lactate test on one of the riders. With a penlike device, Bowen pricks one of the rider's fingers and one drop of blood ekes out. A test meter measures the amount of lactate (acid produced in muscles during exercise) in the rider's blood. Too high, and Bowen instructs the rider to ease up on the hill; too low, and he ramps up the intensity.

Over weeks and months of collecting data throughout the winter, Bowen can compare numbers and measure a rider's improvement.

"Bart's got the science and he knows how to apply it," says Engel. "It keeps me focused, and I'm learning stuff I didn't know."

Bowman, the triathlete, says after two months of participating in a weekly class, he's noticed a difference.

"Starting last week, I felt a big jump," he says, "and my heart rate reflected that."

Not all the riders in Bowen's classes, however, have racing aspirations. But they all have one thing in common: They want to start this spring riding faster than they did last year.

"I just want to ride strong and be fit," says Dave Kaplan, following a workout of six three-minute hill intervals. "I wanted to try to maintain my fitness in the winter."

Kaplan added that he likes the classes because he can ride his own bike.

"(Stationary) spin bikes don't fit me right," he notes. "It didn't make sense to ride a bike that doesn't fit."

Fournier, a recently crowned national cyclocross champion, says she enjoys the group setting.

"It's nice to interact with people, and Bart is very knowledgeable," says Fournier. "He's so upbeat and fun."

Renee Mansour, a 36-year-old mother of three and a beginning bike racer, was even more succinct: "I just want to be fast."

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