

Home Again.....

Written by Karen Chávez
Monday, 12 August 2013 13:20

The kids in helmets and mini-sized mountain bikes, bearing gifts of banana

bread, swarmed around Tour de France rider Brent Bookwalter and his wife, Jamie Bookwalter, happy, giggling, excited.

But turns out, most of the youngsters weren't that impressed with either Bookwalters' cycling exploits across Europe.

"What's your name?" one child asked Brent Bookwalter. And another wanted to know, "Do you playsoccer?"

At one point on the ACES (Avery's Creek Elementary School) Bike Club ride from the N.C. Arboretum to Lake Powhatan on Tuesday evening, one of the kids nearly fell asleep in Brent's lap.

Fitting, the couple says, for how they want to assimilate into Asheville — just another couple of cyclists blending into the mountain background.

"They were an impressive little group, how fast and fearless they were riding," Brent Bookwalter said. "It was nice to see bike riding at its purest

form, the excitement and the fun. It was a reminder that there's a whole other world outside of the world of professional cycling that I'm in, and kids are a good example of that."

Both Bookwalters are professional cyclists — Brent, 29, rides for Team BMC Racing and Jamie, 27, for Colavita/Fine Cooking. They could live anywhere in the country, but settled in Asheville nearly two years ago after getting married, mainly for what Brent calls the "tremendous" road and mountain biking.

Two weeks after competing in his third Tour de France, and in the midst of their road racing seasons, the Bookwalters took time out for a ride this week with the children and their parents. They say it's something they want to do more of as they settle into the Asheville environment.

"Having professional cyclists who live in the community, who are willing to dedicate their time to youth, it's so great," said Avery Jones, a parent who started the school club last year to encourage children to ride and outdoors.

"They can see adults living these healthy, active lives."

"We definitely would love to get more involved with getting kids on bikes," Jamie Bookwalter said.

"They're so excited about being out in the woods."

Reflections on 100 th Tour de France

For now, it's back to racing for the Bookwalters. The season lasts from January through October. For Brent, it included three weeks of the most grueling race on Earth — the 100 th Tour de France, which traversed more than 2,100 miles starting in Corsica and ending July 21 in Paris.

Bookwalter said he's still recovering physically and emotionally from the Tour — his third in four years. He was one of only four American riders who finished the race out of nearly 200 mostly European competitors. British rider Chris Froome of Team Sky was the overall champion.

Bookwalter finished in the middle of the pack, his usual spot since his main job as a "domestique" is to help his team's leaders, including Australian Cadel Evans, and young American Tejay van Garderen, who finished second in the most prestigious Stage 18, Alpe

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d'Huez.

"The tour is a pretty violent experience. It takes a lot out of you. I'm trying to decompress mentally and emotionally," Bookwalter said. "As an American cyclist, it means a lot to anyone who rides for the U.S. Our team (BMC) does 200 race days out of calendar year. The Tour is 21 days. It's the most important race, but it's still a small part of the racing season.

"It's too early to know now if I will be a part of it next year. It's a race that means a lot to me in my heart. It's been without a doubt the hardest thing physically and mentally I've ever done. I definitely want to do it again, but whether it will be next year or another year, I won't know for a while."

Bookwalter suffered injuries in a crash early on in the Tour, mostly damaging muscles and shredding skin, but said he continued to race every day, and has recovered from the flesh wounds. The deeper, internal exhaustion takes longer to heal, he said.

"For three weeks in a row, you're pushing your body to exhaustion the whole time. Yeah, we're trained, but it's always horribly fought," he said.

"Every day you wear yourself down a little more, a little more, and by end, you're just running on fumes. Physically, it doesn't seem logical you can do it. It is a testament to the body and the mind. It can take a while to recover. The sore legs and muscles can recover in a couple of weeks, but that deep tiredness and fatigue can last a long time."

Brent and Jamie both continue to compete in races across the country through October. Then they will take some down time in Asheville with family and friends, and in January will head to training in Europe, where they maintain another home base in Girona, Spain.

While Jamie, who has a master's in forestry from the University of Georgia, said "when this all calms down," she'd like to find work locally in forestry, especially in her field of specialty — invasive insects.

She said that competing in the Olympics — like fellow Asheville resident pro cyclist Lauren Tamayo, who just announced she will try for a gold medal at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio — is not in her plans, but Brent said it is an event on his bucket list. "The pool for men's road race at the Olympics is a really big pool. As of now, every pro American cyclist has a chance to go and is eligible," Brent Bookwalter said. "As we get closer, it will start to narrow down a little bit. There's young riders coming up through the ranks who aren't pros now who can come out with guns blazing closer to the Olympics. It's something that's really hard fought and it's also complicated because cycling is a team sport. I spend a lot of the year working for other guys, which doesn't bode well for the Olympics because you need to shine for yourself."

Looking forward to fall

Jamie said having two pro cyclists in one marriage is rare, and it's more difficult than many people realize, due to the wildly varying schedules, the global travel required and the time apart. "It's really hard to plan anything when we have one week of notice," she said. "Not many people plan international travel one week in advance."

But what makes their marriage work is the insider knowledge of their rare profession, she said, as well as their shared interests outside of cycling.

Both Bookwalters say they are excited for fall in the Western North Carolina mountains, where they have been vacationing and mountain bike riding for years. Brent, who grew up in Michigan, graduated in 2006 from Lees-McRae College in Banner Elk with a degree in biology. "We love camping and hiking and most of our spare time is spent on camping trips in Pisgah and mountain biking," Jamie said.

"That's what brought us here to begin with. I used to race mountain bikes professionally for four

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years. Now, mountain biking is just for fun. Pisgah is such a jewel. We love all the trails. I don't think I could pick a favorite one."

Neither could they pick a favorite restaurant. And as many calories as they burn by tearing up the trails and town roads, they need to eat a lot. "We like the Admiral. We ate at Table and loved it. Mamacita's is our go-to place," Jamie said. "We really have like Curate, especially from living in Spain. We think the Spanish food in Asheville is better."

Brent says he enjoys the local brews, as well as eating at Farm Burger and City Bakery. They also enjoy the farmer's markets and cooking at home. Jamie said they like catching local live music, although their training and racing schedules don't allow them to stand up at all-night concerts. Brent said he is developing an appreciation for it at downtown music spots.

"The longer we're here, the more it feels like home," Brent said.

"When the season is over we plan to do a lot of catching up with friends, beer, food, tubing on the river, mountain biking, checking out what's going on and seeing all the interesting characters in town."

Photo Courtesy: Brent Bookwalter, LMC Athletics