

For Love of the Sport – The Dirty Dozen Bike Race

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Pittsburgh is well-known for its hilly terrain and unique landscape. Situated on the outskirts of the Appalachian Mountains and manipulated by an integral river system, this area is a one of a kind place to live, work and play. Houses are built into cliff sides, neighborhoods are connected by scales of sporadic staircases, and the roads are nothing short of an enigma. Certain streets such as Suffolk Ave., Canton Ave. and Ravine St. are notorious for their formidable presence and lasting impressions. Some people deliberately avoid such roads due to their sheer intimidation. There is however, a small population that deliberately seeks out these bizarre and unbecoming streets with the sole intention of riding to the top, on a bicycle!

Since 1983, the Dirty Dozen Bike Race has tested the physical fortitude and biking prowess of anyone who dares. Every year, an organized group of cyclists set out to conquer Pittsburgh's most daunting hills all at once. Originating as an outlandish challenge between a few close friends, the Dirty Dozen has grown into a competition that is now attracting participants of all ages and abilities from all over the country. But this challenge is not for the faint-hearted. It is a grueling and at times painful excursion that leaves many of its participants deturbed and defeated. "Of the 305 people that signed up last year, I would say only half finished," says Danny Chew, event creator and living legend among the cycling community. When asked about how and why the Dirty Dozen transpired Chew responds, "I basically wanted to find the toughest hills around." This of course was before modern GPS technology and utilities such as Google Maps were available. "We used the old U.S. Geological Survey Topographic Maps to identify the steepest and longest hills. Wherever the contour lines were close together, you knew there had to be a steep hill around, or even a set of stairs in some cases. We would then go on rides looking for roads and would be delighted if we found one." Chew, along with his brother Tom and friend Bob Gottlieb identified thirteen streets worthy of their recognition. They decided to string them all together into one ride and the Dirty Dozen Bike Race was born.

Some of the streets included in the Dirty Dozen are so dramatic they are reminiscent staircases. Canton Ave. for example is one of the few remaining cobblestone roads in the race. At a maximum grade of 37% it is among the steepest streets in the world. Just walking up this street requires a climbing and stepping motion that causes one to breathe heavily. Imagine what it's like on a bike! Reaching the top of each hill requires outstanding cardiovascular endurance, tremendous leg strength, technical riding skill and straight up guts. For some, the challenge of simply completing the ride in its entirety is not enough. Since its inception, the Dirty Dozen has evolved into a "race you to the top" competition.

Though a majority of the 50 total miles consist of casual biking and friendly conversation, riders put their game faces on and switch to attack mode once they reach the base of each hill. The most competitive riders make their way to the front of the pack and wait anxiously for a signal to initiate the climb. Points are awarded to the top finishers of each hill and totals are calculated at the end of the race to determine an overall champion. A modest grand prize of \$150 is awarded to the winner, but it seems that bragging rights are the most sought after accolade.

As participation and notoriety have expanded, so have the ages and range of talent. Registration is open to anyone. “The youngest to finish was thirteen, and the oldest to finish was 65,” Chew recalls. In addition to standard road and mountain bikes, some people have tried rather unconventional methods to complete the Dirty Dozen. People have completed it with tandem bikes, single speeds and fixed gears. “One year we had a rider with a recumbent bike,” says Chew. “He made every hill but Canton Ave. He just couldn’t keep his front wheel on the ground and gave up after five tries.” The event is definitely eccentric and borderline maniacal, but it is also awe-inspiring and consequently appealing. “I don’t know of any other rides like this” indicates Chew.

The Dirty Dozen Bike Race is one of a kind and so is Danny Chew. In addition to being icon of the Dirty Dozen, Chew is known for several other extraordinary accomplishments. He has completed the Race Across America (a nonstop, coast to coast bike race) eight times, winning it twice in 1996 and 1999. He is also on track to complete one million logged miles on a bike, a feat that has required a lifetime commitment to riding...a lot! Chew currently has a total of 712,000 miles logged. “The goal is to log 20,000 miles by the end of this calendar year. I allow for myself to get slower and ride less as I get up into my 60s, so I still plan to get one million miles by at least age 70.” To accomplish this goal, Chew spends an absurd amount of time on his bike. “In the summertime I can average about 150 miles per

day. In the winter time it's much less. I probably only average 500 miles each week." Chew is also known for spending time at the cycling track in Highland Park, accumulating miles. "I'll do over 100 miles sometimes," says Chew nonchalantly. "As long as I have my health I'd like to continue riding, I'd like to do at least 1.1 million miles, because that would allow of a ten percent error."

Call it obsessive, call it abnormal, call it what you will. For Danny Chew it's all for love of the sport. He continues to build on an outstanding list of cycling accomplishments and recognitions, giving him a resume that is virtually untouchable. For his lasting legacy, Chew would like to be recognized as the "million mile man" who created the Dirty Dozen Bike Race, an event which he hopes will take place for many years to come. One thing is definite, as long as the Pittsburgh landscape remains the same, there will be plenty of challenging hills for ambitious cyclists to climb.

To learn more about the Danny Chew and the Dirty Dozen, visit <http://www.dannychew.com/>

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