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### Lake Erie Lifestyle

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## Dirty Dozen bike race goes to new heights

BY MARSHA MORGENSTERN, Erie Times-News  
 Photos courtesy of Dirty Dozen/by Chuck Kozora

#### ADVERTISEMENT

It is November and there is a chill in the air. Hundreds of people are gathered for a 50-mile bike race with 13 hills, one of which has more than a 30 percent climbing grade. It can be a long day, taking as many as seven hours to complete. Most people are just happy to be able to make it up all 13 hills, but the top three male and female competitors also have their eye on a small cash prize based on points rather than time.

Welcome to the Dirty Dozen in Pittsburgh.

In 1983, Pittsburgher Danny Chew, his brother, Tom Chew, and friend, Bob Gottlieb, organized the Dirty Dozen. "It was designed to showcase the steepest hills in Pittsburgh and challenge bicyclists to make it all the way up without stopping or crashing," says Chew, 50. An avid bicyclist, Chew's goal is to ride a million miles. He is well over two-thirds of the way there with 709,000 miles logged.

The Dirty Dozen started with five participants and has grown to more than 300 riders from across the country. Held on the Saturday after Thanksgiving each year, the steepest hill in the course is about halfway through and located on Canton Avenue in the Beechview area of Pittsburgh. This ninth hill has a steep 37 percent, cobblestone covered, climbing grade.

Many riders are not able to make it up Canton Avenue on the first try, but Chew encourages them to give it another try. "It's really technical so mountain bikers have an advantage over pure road cyclists because they know about technical steep hills," he says.

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Riders take part in the Dirty Dozen, a ride up 13 of Pittsburgh's steepest hills. The 2012 ride takes place Nov. 24./ERIE TIMES-NEWS

### In the know: 30th Dirty Dozen

**Date:** Saturday, Nov. 24  
**Time:** Registration, 8 to 9 a.m. Race at 10 a.m.  
**Place:** Bud Harris Cycling Track, 1401 Washington Blvd., Pittsburgh  
**Route:** 50 miles and takes at least five hours. Includes two snack and

Kevin Sapper, 50, of Erie, began cycling in 1989. He completed the Dirty Dozen in 2006 and describes the course as the toughest 50 miles he has ever seen. "The people that make it first up Canton Avenue kind of cheer the other riders on because most of the time it takes more than one attempt to get up the thing," Sapper says. "It took three tries for me. I saw about 10 people crash on that hill," he adds.

Sapper doesn't plan to try the Dirty Dozen again because he's not involved in cycling anymore.

Canton is the steepest street in the United States, according to Wikipedia. Baldwin Street in New Zealand is recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's steepest street. Although it has a 35 percent grade, it is longer than Canton.

### Preparing for the race

The Dirty Dozen is physically demanding and preparation is intense. "It takes riding a bike regularly several times a week, preferably on steep hills, either the Dirty Dozen hills themselves or other hills you can find that would be similar," Chew says.

Both Chew and Sapper recommend Kinter Hill Road near Edinboro as a good area to practice for the Dirty Dozen. "I would say that is one of the toughest climbs in Erie County and for someone that has never been in Pittsburgh before, I would recommend doing that climb maybe six or seven times in a row," Sapper says.

Sapper had 2,600 bike miles in that year and stresses participants should have at least that many miles, if not more, before attempting the race. "You need a basic skill level but you do not have to be an Olympic caliber athlete to do it. If your fitness is reasonable and you set a pace you can sustain, you can finish the race," he says.

Paul Fiorino, 56, of Cleveland, participated in the Dirty Dozen in 2006, 2007 and 2009. "I have raced all over the world ... I climbed all the mountains in the Alps and those climbs are different because they are long and the average grades are only about 7 or 8 percent," Fiorino says.

To prepare for a race like the Dirty Dozen; people have to have experience with the gradient that exists within that race. "If you are not familiar with the steepness and the length of some of those hills, you are in for a very rude awakening and possibly not even finishing the day," Fiorino says.

Fiorino also stresses that having the right gearing is important because without it, people will never get up the climbs. "Most of the people have road racing bikes. If you don't have gearing that is going to allow you to spin the pedals up these steep grades, your muscles just aren't going to make it through the day."

Sapper agrees, specifically recommending a bike with a triple crank.

drink stops (Millvale's Riverfront Park on the Allegheny River at the bottom of the fifth hill Logan, and at the top of the ninth hill Canton Avenue in Beechview)

**Cost:** Advance registration: \$20, day of event registration, \$25

**Info:** Danny Chew, 5846 Marlborough Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15217; 412-421-3143; [www.dannychew.com/dd.html](http://www.dannychew.com/dd.html)

Cash prizes are awarded for the first through third place, men and women.

### Planning a weekend trip?

Pittsburgh is a popular place for bicyclists and offers amazing views of the city from many hillside venues. "We have really good mountain biking in our parks, about 40 miles of bike lanes and shared lane markings, hundred of bike racks ... people can really ride around and explore the different neighborhoods and shop by bike," says Scott Bricker, executive director of Bike Pittsburgh, an organization that in part works to make shopping and exercising by bicycle safe and fun in Pittsburgh.

One popular spot for bicyclists in Pittsburgh is OTB (Over The Bar) Bicycle Café, a bike-themed tavern. "Two car spaces were taken out in front of OTB so there is enough parking for 20-some bikes and typically those spots are mostly taken," Bricker says.

### Bike Pittsburgh

3410 Penn Ave., Pittsburgh  
412-325-4334  
[www.bike-pgh.org](http://www.bike-pgh.org), [info@bike-pgh.org](mailto:info@bike-pgh.org)

### OTB (Over The Bar) Bicycle Café

2518 East Carson St., Pittsburgh  
412-381-3698  
[www.otbbicyclecafe.com](http://www.otbbicyclecafe.com)  
[mike@otbbicyclecafe.com](mailto:mike@otbbicyclecafe.com)



### Part four, part competition

Alan Marcossoson, 62, owner of Pyro Apparel, a manufacturer of custom cycling and performance sport apparel in Cleveland, participated in the Dirty Dozen in 2009 and 2011. "I'm in my early 60s and I've been a bike racer for almost 50 years. My parents met through a touring cycling so I guess it is in my blood," Marcossoson says.

The Dirty Dozen doesn't compare to events Marcossoson has participated in. One unique aspect is that participants regroup at the top of each climb. The amount of climbing and the fact that the race takes place late in the year also makes the race different. "It's a stop-and-go type event ... kind of an odd mixture or hybrid, halfway between a tour and a pure competition," Marcossoson says.

Although the Dirty Dozen is a challenging event, in the end, it is a fun day and everyone has a good time with a festive atmosphere. "There is a tremendous amount of camaraderie. Between the hills, everybody is talking," Marcossoson says. "A lot of people make a weekend out of it. Pittsburgh is a nice place to spend a day or two and just enjoy the town," he adds. LEL



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