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# Bicyclist Danny Chew: He Runs Pittsburgh's 'Dirty Dozen' Race

Longtime, award-winning cyclist Danny Chew never expected his homegrown bike race to become so big. But now the annual Dirty Dozen Race -- a trek up 13 of the city's steepest hills -- draws hundreds each year, threatening to outgrow its quirky creator's original vision.

BY SEAN D. HAMILL

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PHOTOS BY RENEE ROSENSTEEL

**I**t might sound difficult but doable: Ride up 13 of the toughest hills in and around Pittsburgh in one competitive race.

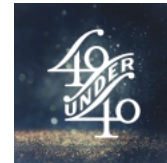
It is the premise behind the punishing Dirty Dozen bike race, an annual Pittsburgh tradition for irreverent cyclists. It takes place this month on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, as it has in

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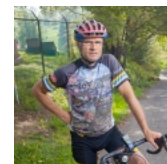
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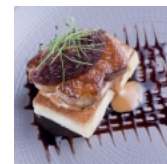
### Bicyclist Danny Chew Runs Pittsburgh's 'Dirty Dozen' Race

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most years over the past three decades.

Maybe you've driven up to Mount Washington by way of curvy Sycamore Street, or peered up the short-but-steep Rialto Street off Route 28 in Troy Hill — two of the race's easier hills. Maybe you've even thought to yourself: "I could ride up that slope."

But riding a baker's dozen of such hills — the race first included 12, but organizers added one more just to be cruel — all in one day, strung together over five or six hours, is not merely hard or challenging. For many riders, it is impossible — even for some of those who have trained for it. Some don't understand what they've gotten into until they're in the race.

"You can't believe Canton Avenue (the steepest of the 13 hills) is as steep as it is," says Klaus Bellon, a software designer and former Pittsburgh-area cyclist who twice rode the DD, as it is known by participants. "Then you go see it and you think, 'Oh my God! It is that steep.'"

"And then you realize you have to ride 12 more of these things," Bellon, now living on the West Coast, says with a happy sigh.

For much of its 32-year history, this quirky, unofficial race has been an underground event, organized and publicized largely by word of mouth. In recent years, though, it's become popular with more riders — local and from elsewhere — largely thanks to Rick Sebak, social media and live-streaming. At its core, it remains an imposing physical challenge for anyone.

All of the hills on its course are so steep that your legs likely would hurt while walking up them. In all, they cover a total of about 5,000 feet of ascent, nearly all of it over a 20-percent grade. At about 200 yards and a 37-percent grade, Canton Avenue, in Beechview, is possibly the steepest paved urban street in the world. Some of the other hills built into the race are so long and steep you'd swear you were in the Rockies or a mountain range on another continent — not our fair river valleys.



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The competition itself is just one part of the attraction of the Dirty Dozen. The other is its heart and soul, co-founder and race organizer. Maybe you've heard stories about him — Danny Chew, the Pittsburgh guy who aims to ride 1 million miles before he dies. Each year, Chew ushers several hundred riders through the race's 50-mile course, guiding them with his distinctively warbly, staccato voice — no police escort, no numbered racer bibs, no electronic timers. The start and finish lines are either drawn in chalk on asphalt or cobblestone roads or signaled by a person stationed at the beginning and end.

While the Dirty Dozen, in all of its grassroots glory, has evolved into an authentic piece of what makes Pittsburgh Pittsburgh, so has Chew, 53, of Squirrel Hill. Blunt, frenetic and idiosyncratic, he displays the kind of singular focus that distinguishes other unconventional Pittsburgh icons — think Randy Gilson of Randyland fame or Craig Morrow of Bicycle Heaven.

In person, Chew can be direct and off-putting, peppering you in your first meeting with questions about where you live, what movies you like, your favorite bands and any other line of thought that pops into his head. But he also is kind to a fault to those who have given him their time or friendship, something he demonstrates in his annual description of each Dirty Dozen race on his website, where he devotes about half the content to naming every person or organization that helped with the race that year.

"He's the kind of guy you need to warn people about before they meet him," says one of Chew's best friends, Stephen "Steevo" Cummings, himself a Dirty Dozen legend with an outlandish string of 10 consecutive race victories — a record, and one more than Chew has amassed. "He's one of a kind."

This is not a whispered, off-the-record sentiment. Cummings wrote a story about his friend



for an urban-biking magazine a few years ago and led it with a similar statement. For his part, Chew says he is well aware of what he labels his “quirks.”



“I’m probably OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder]. I know that,” he says, although he acknowledges that he’s never received a formal diagnosis. “People know I’m different, but they think, ‘Hey, he’s harmless. He’s the guy who rides his bike all the time. Just leave him alone.’”

Still, as nearly everyone involved in the race acknowledges, it is largely Chew’s built-in, perhaps OCD-driven determination that has kept the Dirty Dozen going all of these years, through its evolution from a hard ride with a couple of friends to a legitimate, if still unsanctioned, phenomenon that now attracts hundreds of participants — and thousands of spectators as the roving caravan moves from hill to hill.

The race also has captured national and international attention, thanks in part to another Pittsburgh icon: WQED documentarian and Pittsburgh Magazine columnist Rick Sebak. In 2010, Sebak compiled an Emmy-winning segment about the race that has been referenced on many cycling websites; he also wrote about the race in Pittsburgh Magazine in 2011. The results of that publicity boost, though, have collided head-on with Chew’s own drive to keep the Dirty Dozen operating as it has to date: a low-key, unofficial race in which some of the city’s best cyclists ride alongside those just trying to finish.

He has gotten pressure from friends and family — even from his mother. They caution that the race must change, and soon, because it now draws too many riders to hills that are too narrow for so many.

Managing the scope of the race is not something Chew ever thought he’d have to worry

about. “I didn’t think we’d ever have a field this big,” he says.

To understand how the Dirty Dozen came to be, you first have to know some of the history of the family raised by Hal Chew, a special-education teacher and administrator, and his wife, Sara, a former teacher turned stay-at-home mom.

In 1969, after moving around the region for college and teaching jobs for much of their first 14 years of marriage, the Chews bought a home on Marlborough Avenue in Squirrel Hill and moved in with their three children. Their home was near an American Youth Hostel, which then functioned as something of a sports club for children.



In 1971, Danny Chew’s sister, Carol, then 15, and a girlfriend began hanging around the place because they had a crush on a guy who spent time there. The guy was a cyclist, so Carol and her friend also began biking, taking longer and longer rides until they started doing bike tours.

Hal and Sara Chew were supportive, engaged parents, and equipped with their Ford van and later a handmade bike trailer, they served as Carol’s support team. They brought Danny, then age 9, and his older brother, Tom, then age 12, along on her first tours as well.

It didn’t take long for the boys to catch the bug.

“I rode about 25 miles on my [childhood] Stingray [bike] on a tour in Ohio one year,” Tom Chew, now 56 and a mechanical engineer living in Oakland, Calif., says.

They eventually started bringing other kids from the neighborhood. “There would be 13 of us going on these tours, with my dad loading all their bikes in the bike rack he built,” says their sister, now Carol Perezluha, 58, a math professor at Seminole State College in Sanford, Fla.

She tried racing but enjoyed the more leisurely bike tours most. Her brothers developed more intense passions. Tom Chew quickly became one of the country's best sprint cyclists on the road circuit and made his way onto the U.S. National Team, nearly qualifying for the U.S. Olympic team in 1980 and 1984. Danny Chew gravitated to long-distance races, some of which involved riding 200 or more miles in a day. In the 1990s, he became renowned in the international biking community for twice winning the coast-to-coast, 24/7, Race Across America, or RAAM, considered to be one of the toughest bike races in the world.

In both of his winning rides in 1996 and 1999, covering about 3,000 miles each time, Chew finished RAAM in eight days and seven hours. A jersey from his 1996 win and his helmet and medal from his 1999 win are on exhibit at the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum in the Sen. John Heinz History Center.

"I feel like I created a Frankenstein out of my brothers — in a good way," Perezluha says with a chuckle.



In fall 1983, as Tom Chew was gearing up for the Olympic trials the following summer, he, his brother Danny and one of their biking friends, Bob Gottlieb, began talking about creating the ultimate hill ride around Pittsburgh. No one remembers who first proposed it, but they obtained some topography maps and tried to figure out which city roads were the most challenging.

"We'd pick a few hills and then do these scouting rides to see how steep they were and early on, maybe one out of every four we'd find would be a staircase, or just not as tough as it seemed on the map," Tom Chew says.



Eventually, they settled on 12 vicious, lung-searing hills. After years of small variations to the course, nine of those original 12 are still part of the race. That first course began on Center Avenue in Aspinwall and ended on Flowers Avenue-Kilbourne Street-Tesla Way in Hazelwood — hills that still are the beginning and end of the current-day course.

That first race, which Chew dubbed “Tom’s Dirty Dozen,” occurred on Saturday, Dec. 17 (the race date itself moved around in those early years). The temperature on that cloudy day was 27 degrees, and light flurries fell in the middle of the ride. The Chew brothers and Gottlieb joined biking friends Ron Reider and Oscar Rattenberg, who did not finish the race. Hal Chew followed in a car, providing hot tea after one of the most difficult hills, No. 7, covering Suffolk-Hazleton-Burgess streets in Perry South.

We know these specific facts because Chew, in pursuit of his oft-stated goal of riding 1 million miles in his lifetime, has kept detailed, hand-written journals of every bike ride or race in which he has taken part since he was 16. The journals function not only as a count on his march to 1 million miles, but also as personal diaries that enable him to track his life and quirks.



They are so important to him that he now is trying to figure out how to scan all 37 years of journals into a digital format — not because he wants the world to see them but because he says he is terrified something might happen to them.

“They could burn in a fire, and that would be terrible,” he says. “It would be a bigger loss to me to lose my logs than my bikes.”

That is saying something, because perpetual single-guy Chew’s oft-made joke about himself and his nearly monastic, bike-riding life is that “I’m not married because I’m married to my

bikes.”

He is able to devote nearly all of his time to biking because he still lives with his mother — his father died in 2007 — and sleeps in the bedroom in which he grew up. He gets by each year on a few thousand dollars of income generated from sponsorships and Dirty Dozen shirt sales. He also is supported by a small army of friends — most of them living within a couple of hundred miles from Pittsburgh — who regularly welcome him into their homes, feed him and let him stay for weeks at a time while he takes epic 100- and 200-mile rides.

“If you ride with him, and you pass a road you have not ridden down, he will shame you with, ‘What do you mean you’ve never ridden down this road? That’s keeping you from riding a beautiful new road or new ride,’” says Cummings, the Dirty Dozen repeat winner and a Lawrenceville real-estate agent who has been a frequent riding partner of Chew’s over the years.

Chew’s obsession with new roads is another way to make his monumental goal enjoyable: Chase 1 million miles by trying to ride on every road he can at least once.

And what of that million-mile target?



“It was to give me a long-term goal, alright?” he says. “A long-term goal gives you a picture of the future, and that helps me. And there are only 10 to 20 people in the world who have ever done it.”

Part of Chew’s nature is an obsession with numbers. He says he thinks about them all the time but particularly in relationship to his life goal.



“I was a mathematics major in college,” graduating with a math degree in 1987 from the University of Pittsburgh. “So that probably has something to do with it.”

He enters his daily, weekly, monthly, yearly and ongoing miles-ridden tallies on his website — [dannychew.com](http://dannychew.com) — in various spreadsheets for all to see. As of this fall, he has accrued more than 760,000 lifetime miles — putting in about 15,000 to 20,000 miles each year — and he says he believes he will hit the 1 million mark before he is 70.

As important as completing 1 million miles is to him, he acknowledges he has been surprised by the growth of the Dirty Dozen over the years and by his own love for the race.

“I wouldn’t say the Dirty Dozen is as important as [the million-mile goal], but it’s damn near now,” he says.

Most stunning to the stalwarts of the race is how it has grown in significance to people beyond the dozen or two of the Chew brothers’ biking buddies who made up the bulk of the competitors in the race’s first two decades.

“In those years, we pretty much knew everyone in the race or got to know everyone else by the end of the race,” says Tom Chew, who last year came back to ride in the Dirty Dozen for the first time in more than a decade. “That wasn’t the case this last time.”

Of the five friends who rode in 1983, three finished, setting a precedent that still hold true; a good chunk of the riders generally don’t finish all of the hills. For its first two decades, the race drew 10 to 50 riders each year, swelling to more than 100 in 2006 after social media latched onto it.



And it may have stayed a bike-world-only, wacky weekend event, had Sebak not discovered it in 2010. Attendance jumped 60 percent, to more than 300, for the 2011 race; it continues to grow, hitting a record 328 riders last year.

Fueling that growth even more over the past three years has been live-stream coverage by the website [cyclingfusion.com](http://cyclingfusion.com), which is part of a team of biking-related companies owned by Gene Nacey, an entrepreneur from Oakmont. He's a Dirty Dozen enthusiast who became the race's first-ever finisher with two artificial hips.

In 2010, the first year he tried to live-stream the Dirty Dozen, several thousand people logged on to watch the coverage even though it was not advertised.

"I was dumbfounded by the numbers," Nacey says. "But I think it's such a great atmosphere. There are people out watching on every hill. It's probably the most-watched bike race in Pittsburgh now. And that translates to viewers."

The Dirty Dozen also has had support from the biking community and bike shops, including Big Bang Bicycles in West Mifflin, a supporter last year. But now those ranks include corporations such as Eat'n Park, MINI of Pittsburgh and even Red Bull, which have taken note of the race's growing popularity and numbers.

All of this has many of the Dirty Dozen's biggest fans and organizers — and even Chew's mom — wondering if the race, in the form conceived by its founders, is near a breaking point. How big is too big?

"I just think it's too much. I get worried about it. There's too many people," says Sara Chew, 82, who spends the day of the Dirty Dozen preparing and serving a huge batch of chili for exhausted and depleted cyclists at her home after the race.

Tom Chew has the same concern: "I've told Danny I think it's getting too big and we may have to do something, maybe split it into two groups. But Danny does not like change."

Danny Chew acknowledges his disdain for change, but he also says he recognizes the increasing challenge of safely conveying the ever-larger caravan of riders, support vehicles and fans up and over all 13 hills.



“We might have to do something soon if it keeps growing,” he says with palpable reluctance.

Among the changes being considered: Splitting the race into two groups, with those who think they can compete for points starting earlier than the group of riders who are merely trying to make it up each hill. Another alternative: holding a recreational version of the race on a separate day, possibly the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

Chew is not fond of either option.

“I like that everyone is in the same race,” he says.

To date, Pittsburgh’s city officials have not required him to obtain a permit for the race; nor have government officials from the other four municipalities through which it passes. A couple of years ago, however, Pittsburgh Police asked Chew to stop taking the Dirty Dozen riders through the Liberty Tunnels because doing so was dangerous and illegal; he has complied with that request.

“This doesn’t really require permits the way it’s run because it moves through the neighborhoods,” says Timothy McNulty, a spokesman for Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto. “This is one of the things that makes Pittsburgh great. It’s volunteer-based, grassroots, and it gets Pittsburgh great attention.”

Such praise for the race has meant that many more people now know of Chew for the Dirty Dozen than for his million-mile goal or winning the RAAM twice. While Chew weighs changes in the race and continues his life’s pursuit of a goal that to many is unfathomable, he mulls questions posed about both: Does this all mean something? Is there a higher purpose to the race or his life’s goal? Does there need to be one?




He has a quick answer.

“Yeah, if riding 1 million miles can let me inspire other people, that means something to me,” he says. “Just like if having the Dirty Dozen might inspire people to be their best. I hope it does.”


*Sean D. Hamill is a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette staff writer who lives in Sewickley. In addition to Pittsburgh Magazine, his work previously has appeared in The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune and other publications.*

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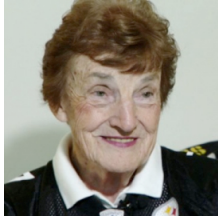
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