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Taking it to the dirt

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Vermont seems to have an inexhaustible network of dirt roads. A challenge during mud season and a natural hazard to the appearance of one's vehicle, a dirt road symbolizes ageless romanticism of country living. Think dirt road and one pictures a rolling strip of brown meandering up and down and through woods and meadows, over brooks and bridges and beyond the humdrum of workdays and city sounds.

Travel on a dirt road cannot be hurried. Some walk, some ride. Most value air quality, wildlife and Sabra Fields scenes.

Some, however, are drawn to the dirt for training benefit. It is one thing to run or ride on a paved surface and quite another to do so on a soft, gravelly, rutted one. In fact, a demanding charge up a steep, unpaved road is affectionately referred to as a "gravel grind." You know it when you do one.

Opportunities are plentiful to enjoy Vermont's dirt roads. Take, for example, the Central Vermont Cycling Tour scheduled for Father's Day, Sunday, June 17. What a great way to celebrate being a dad and to model a healthy, active lifestyle for your family.

It's not a gravel grind; nor is it a casual tour of the area. The Cycling Tour is a bike ride. It is demanding but doable. Of the three options to ride, the long distance of 59 miles is a humdinger. The medium tour of 33 is stimulating and the short tour of 14 miles is designed for family fun. But, you will need to push your pedals.

Jim Libby of Montpelier, Volunteer Coordinator of the Tour, explains the nominal fees charged for the event. "This is the premier fundraising event for Cross Vermont Trails," he said and noted that the funds raised go a long way to help build new sections of trail, engineering studies, permitting, and other costs involved with efforts to build and maintain safe, secure recreational rail trails in Vermont.

Bill Merrylees of East Montpelier serves on the Board of Cross Vermont Trails. "The Tour is a fundraiser and a friend-raiser," he said, "a celebration of dirt roads. It brings the biking community together and celebrates the gravel road landscape we have in Vermont that is untraveled by cars."

Both Libby and Merrylees are avid cyclists and, between the two, enjoy all kinds of cycling – mountain and road biking and even unicycling and tandem. Both were participants in this event when it was The Eco Bike Tour and now find themselves organizers.

"Casual riders are happy," Merrylees said, "but it's also a challenge to cyclists." Suggesting that participants will find the effort rewarding, Libby added, "This is riding."

Though the tour is all about having a good time, enjoying the company of family and

friends, beautiful scenery, the inevitable food stops and palate-teasing barbecue finale, it is also about the Vermont cycling community and one man in particular who helped to make this happen. Dave Blumenthal created the course, designed the poster graphics and left behind as his legacy an intense appreciation for Vermont and local cycling. Blumenthal's heart and soul are in this tour and it is to him that the event is dedicated.

Each year something new is added. The start has been moved from the State House lawn to Morse Farm on County Road, just outside of Montpelier. In 2011 runners were invited to join the event. Two participated and, with the increased interest in trail running as significantly beneficial training, more are encouraged and expected.

New this year will be a timing clock for those who like to know, and a silent auction to enhance the fund-raising potential for those who wish to vie for exciting gifts and products.

To ride through what Merrylees characterizes as "the working landscape of farms and forests in East Montpelier, something well worth the effort," one needs only to come prepared to ride with an appropriate bike (mountain, hybrid, cyclo-cross), helmet, water bottle and a chunk of motivation.

"The people who ride it really like it," Libby said, but urges that you pre-register.

Travel a Vermont dirt road and come home with a memory. Merrylees has several but one comes easily to mind. "The downhill coming into Worcester Village from Curtis Pond – ripping on a tandem with my daughter – suddenly the road turned to pavement and my daughter let out a yeehaa – it was so exhilarating," he said.

Give your dad or yourself the gift of a memory. For more information, go to www.centralvtcyclingtour.org or contact Eric Scharnberg at (802)498-0079, eric@crossvermont.org.
