

BRENT PRENZLOW

THE UNSUNG HERO OF CYCLOCROSS

Story and photos by Mark Johnson

Want to find one of the winningest bike racers in California? Head to Carlsbad in North San Diego County and look for a rail-thin athlete who commutes to his job in Rancho Bernardo on a Specialized S-Works Tricross bike. That's 41-year-old Brent Prenzlöw, who works in the software industry by day and has won more than 100 elite-level cyclocross races across the United States. In 2010 Prenzlöw won eight of the 13 Southern California Prestige Series cyclocross races he entered—including Storm the Beach, a race on the beaches of Camp Pendleton that he designed and has never lost.

Cyclocross was originally born in Europe, where road racers looking to maintain their fitness during frigid winters put fat tires on road bikes and started racing around snow-covered parks and cow pastures. Courses now include barriers that riders must dismount to cross as well as steep hills that force riders to shoulder their bikes and run.

Today, cyclocross is experiencing explosive growth across the country; and along with winning races left and right, Prenzlöw has also played an instrumental role in growing the sport in Southern California, where he has lived since 1994.

Prenzlöw got into cycling while at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota. He was doing triathlons and—a born organizer—

also started the school's collegiate cycling team. "I started doing road races and criteriums about 20 years ago, and I never quit," he says.

Moving on to post-college life he remembers, "I thought maybe I could be a good pro triathlete, so I joined the swim team in college as a senior with no swimming background. That was a rough plan. I got pummeled, to say the least. My technique was bad. We would do these interval workouts—all the guys would go finish the lap, and as I'd come in they'd have their 10-second rest and I'd be touching the wall, and it would be time to do the next one. I just never got good enough."

Realizing he'd never make it as a pro triathlete, Prenzlöw set his sights on cycling. "I discovered cyclocross in 1994; I graduated college, saved up some money and moved out to California to live the dream.

"Cyclocross was really small back then, and I never thought that was something I'd be able to make it in. But I found out early that I was good at it, and I stuck with it every year."

Prenzlöw took the experience of getting a college bike team off the ground and put it to use in California. Riding for the San Diego-based Celo Pacific Cycling Team, Prenzlöw began organizing cyclocross races, including a five-race Celo Pacific series in the San Di-

HE WON THE RACE, WENT BACK TO HIS CAR, GRABBED A BEER AND PUT HIS CHAIR RIGHT ON THE FINISH LINE, WHERE HE WAITED TO GREET THE SECOND-PLACE FINISHER WHEN HE ROLLED IN HALF AN HOUR LATER.

ego area. He then coordinated efforts with Dorothy Wong, the director of what is now the 18-race Southern California Prestige Series of Cyclocross, which unifies races across the Southland under a single championship umbrella.

Today, cyclocross races are filling their fields. Also, bike manufacturers are now building and selling cyclocross-specific machines—unheard of just a few years ago, this is a barometer of the sport's skyrocketing popularity. Until now, Wong says the bike industry mostly just ignored the p. 38/→



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the bike industry mostly just ignored the cyclocross market. “Now bikes are selling out,” she points out with awe at the sport’s expansion.

Wong traces the growth in American cyclocross back to Stage 9 of the 2003 Tour de France. On that broiling July day, Spaniard Joseba Beloki crashed while descending the melting tarmac of the Côte de la Rochette. Lance Armstrong avoided him by cutting across a field. When TV announcer Phil Liggett mentioned that Armstrong used his cyclocross skills to preserve his Tour de France title, the previously obscure European sport became legitimate in the eyes of a wide audience, says Wong from her home in the Los Angeles suburb of Altadena.

Wong, who has been racing cyclocross since 1997, says that Tour de France episode fundamentally altered who was showing up at California cyclocross races: “That changed who came. Before, the road crowd was like, ‘Ahh, I don’t want to get dirty,’ or ‘What’s this crazy sport?’ Suddenly guys with beautifully shaved legs came out of the woodwork,” and hardcore road racers started entering her cyclocross events.

“Lance is like Oprah,” she says. “If he does it, then everyone is going, ‘Oh my gosh, Lance is doing it.’” The worldwide media coverage of Armstrong’s evasive off-road maneuver was a blessing; once-oddball cyclocross suddenly became a subject of reverent adoration.

Prenzlow says cyclocross is more accessible than road racing, which can humiliate new riders who enter a race and get popped off the back after one lap. “It’s fun, a good atmosphere,” Prenzlow notes. “It’s a lot more easygoing than the road race scene. Over time people are seeing that it’s a fun thing to do in the winter. You can pretty much grab a mountain bike and come out and try it—it’s more than an event, it’s a festival.”

Prenzlow is well-respected in the cyclocross community not only because he wins almost everything he enters, but also because he continues to give back. As part of Celo Pacific, he runs clinics that teach riders cyclocross essentials like how to mount and dismount their bikes while running. **p. 40/→**

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how to do the barriers, and we have a little practice race.”

He also takes great pride in designing Celo Pacific’s annual race, Storm the Beach, which takes place on the sands of Camp Pendleton. “I try to make it like the Koksijde race in Belgium where they have all these sand dunes that they race on. I’d always dreamed of doing that race.”

Because Prenzlou focuses on the September-February cyclocross season, he doesn’t do much road racing during the summer. The Category 1 road rider says, “In the summer I try not to race too much, but I do a lot of longer rides. I train a lot. I try to get myself into the best overall fitness I can.” He fits his training into his full-time job at Hewlett-Packard by commuting 25 miles each way to work and doing hard lunchtime rides.

Looking ahead, Prenzlou is excited about the growth of a sport that has been central to his life for two decades. He points out that while the Pacific Northwest and New England have had healthy cyclocross scenes for years, Southern California has only recently picked up on the sport. “I’m excited to see SoCal has two UCI race weekends this upcoming season—that will be four races total. It’s going to be great. Out-of-town riders will come for those races, and they will be in our neighborhood for once.”

Beyond 2010, Prenzlou looks forward to racing Europe’s top riders when the Cyclocross World Championships take place in Louisville, Ky., in 2012 and 2013. Racing



masters (age 30-plus) at the Worlds is “very exciting for me,” says Prenzlou. “I’ll definitely be attending those races and am interested to see firsthand just how good the top Euro-pro guys are.”

B+L Bikes and Specialized are two of Prenzlou’s sponsors, along with Oakley, Challenge tubular tires, Crank Brothers and Celo Pacific. B+L mechanic Gordon Yeager keeps Prenzlou’s machines in tune and says Prenzlou is “one of those real positive guys. At all the races he’s super friendly, and he actually goes up and talks to everybody before and after the race. Everybody looks up to him.”

Yeager recalls the year Prenzlou showed up at the Julian Death March, a grueling 86-mile off-road race that demolishes riders with over 12,000 feet of climbing on its way from the mountain town of Julian down to the Anza Borrego Desert and back up to the top.

The first time Prenzlou did the event, he showed up with his cyclocross bike. His competitors, Yeager recalls, were all on full-suspension mountain bikes. “They were making fun of him: ‘There’s no way you are going to finish this race. You came on the wrong bike.’”

Yeager says Prenzlou went on to finish the race on his suspension-free bike. “He won the race, went back to his car, grabbed a sandwich and a beer and put his chair right on the finish line.” And there he waited to greet the second-place finisher when he rolled in half an hour later. **CM**

CYCLOCROSS: HOW TO GET STARTED

While the prospect of jumping off your bike while flying down a trail and jumping over wooden barriers might seem intimidating, cyclocross is actually an easy sport to pick up.

Cyclocross race organizer Dorothy Wong offers these tips when you are ready to give this exhilarating sport a go.

GET STARTED WITH A CLINIC. Both socalcross.org and socalcycling.com list the 2009-10 cyclocross schedules for California. In August and September Wong’s Southern California Prestige Series of Cyclocross hosts a series of Early Bird Cyclocross Ride and Happy Hour Clinics from Ventura to Bakersfield to San Diego. (Note the happy hour part of the title-partying is an essential element of ‘cross culture.) Throughout the season each Prestige Series race also has clinics; you might even get coached by the master Prenzlou himself.

DON’T WORRY ABOUT BEING OUT OF SHAPE. “You

can take it at your own pace,” Wong explains. “In a criterium you get dropped and that sucks. In a cyclocross race everybody cheers for you even though they have no idea where you are because everyone is chit-chatting; they see their friends go by and they yell ‘Go!’ You could be in last place, but everyone is happy that you are zipping around. It’s a festive atmosphere.”

CYCLOCROSS IS EASY ON YOUR EGO. Races are generally less than an hour. Because drafting is not as important as it is in road racing, getting dropped by the leaders is not a big deal. While you can be as serious about the sport as the elite-level Prenzlou, it’s also a relaxed way to get exercise during the chilly winter months. With a laugh, Wong explains: “In the end it’s about camaraderie and fun and beer.”

If you fall, the ground is usually soft. Cyclocross courses are often set up in sandy, muddy places and on grass. The cushy ground makes for a more challenging course because it takes more effort to

push wheels through sand and mud, but that also means it’s more forgiving than concrete if you take a spill. “When you do a tight turn and you lose your balance,” Wong points out, “you just kind of tip over in the grass.”

YOU WON’T BE ALONE, SO YOU’LL MAKE LOTS OF FRIENDS. “I went to Nationals last year, and there were about 100 women competing in the elite race,” Wong recalls. “The men were competing at close to 200. Now the complaint is, ‘There are too many people racing!’”

YOU DON’T NEED SPECIAL EQUIPMENT TO GET STARTED. If you have a mountain bike, that’s all you need. While Wong explains that full-suspension bikes are not very efficient for cyclocross racing, the Prestige Series has a trailer full of ‘cross bikes you can rent on race day for a nominal fee. Don’t use road shoes and pedals. Clipless mountain bike pedals or simple platform pedals and tennis shoes are best, since road pedals clog up with mud.