

Boulder County documentary explores winter commuting on two wheels

A dozen workers parked the car last winter for 52 bike commutes back and forth to work and home

By John Aguilar Camera Staff Writer

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"A Winter of cyclists"

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"Each year, the first wave of cold weather causes riders to put away their bicycles for the rest of the season. As the months get more wintry, fewer and fewer riders commute to work by bicycle. By December, the bike lanes and paths are empty. Is the connection between bicycle and summer so strong we can't see any other possibility?"

That somber recitation on cycling in the cold kicks off a newly released local documentary that aims to dispel the notion that pedaling on snow-packed streets as the thermometer hovers near zero is anything short of glorious -- if not gloriously insane.

"A Winter of Cyclists," from amateur filmmaker and Erie resident Mike Prendergast, tells the story of a group of commuters from Erie, Lafayette, Louisville, and Boulder who emerge on mountain bikes from warm homes in the predawn darkness, endure frigid temperatures and ice-slicked streets on the way to work, and then suit up again -- after putting in eight hours at the office -- for the post-dusk ride back home.

Their mission: commute to work and back home on a bicycle at least 52 times between the beginning of October and the end of March. It is known as the Icy Bike Winter Commuting Challenge and last winter was its inaugural run.

Not only did the challenge highlight the tenacity and dedication of a dozen riders from Boulder County, but the winter warrior spirit spread to other communities around the world via Facebook.

"If people set a goal for themselves, they can accomplish things in life they say they're going to do," said Prendergast, himself an avid cyclist who spent the last decade biking part of the way to work in Aurora from his home in Erie. "It's not as daunting as it looks."

Oh really?

Managing the 'daunting' cold

"The cold is such a daunting obstacle," says Scott Dresser, of Lafayette, in the documentary.

Dresser and his fellow riders show off on camera the warmest bike gear they can find to handle the bite of a 10-degree morning, as snow collects on the pavement and their studded bike tires dig into crispy ice at the start of another morning commute. But behind the smiles are the less-than-jovial days when leaving the car at home just didn't seem to make sense.

"There were days when I rode my bike home and it was black because of all the dirt and mag chloride on it," said Scot Stucky, who conceived of the Icy Bike Winter Commuting Challenge last year while trying to figure out how to extend his riding days to work into the cold season.

Stucky, who lives in Arvada but works at Ball Aerospace in Boulder, knew he would need camaraderie to make the two-wheeled trek -- generally a 20 to 30-mile round-trip journey from where he drops off his car in Superior or Broomfield -- a long-term endeavor. He started up a Facebook page for the challenge and got the word out to friends.

"I wanted people to do it with me -- otherwise, I would have probably bailed early on," he said.

Stucky said he chose a target of 52 days over a six-month span because it would mean commuting by bike about twice a week, a reasonable goal that wouldn't seem overwhelming to the average rider.

"It was a good number -- it was not easy to hit but it was attainable without a harrowing effort," Stucky said. "I wanted to make it so that anyone can do this if they set their mind to it."

Prendergast heard about the challenge and decided to document it on film. The 53-year-old aerospace engineer used a bike-mounted camera and a handheld unit and went about filming the various riders as they made their way across Boulder County during rush hour.

"The hardest part for me was working solo and trying to get a good angle," he said. "It was a real challenge to think quickly and get a good shot."

Sometimes the road shoulder was snow-covered and barely discernible and sometimes there was black ice on the pavement. In the deep of winter, it was almost always dark.

"Trying to film those guys and stay on the road at the same time was a challenge," Prendergast said. "It was definitely nerve-wracking."

He shot 26 hours of footage and edited it down to a 64-minute film, which is available on DVD and Blu-ray for purchase and for download on vimeo.com.

Prendergast ventured out of Boulder County for part of the documentary, filming scenes in Boston and Ontario, Canada, where commuter cyclists who heard about Stucky's challenge on Facebook shared their thoughts about winter cycling in their hometowns. Canadian Dave Krentz told the filmmaker his hope was to turn his country into a "cycling superpower." In Beantown, Everard Huggan, said his bicycle-crazy, 80-something neighbor inspired him to use his bike to get back and forth to work and home.

By the end of the challenge in March, more than 150 participants from around the world had joined the Icy Bike Winter Commuting Challenge, posting photos on Facebook of successful finishes with cyclists holding up signs with the number 52 printed on them.

But Prendergast said few other places have done as much as Boulder County has to encourage bicycle commuting. Whether it is the many miles of bike lanes, or dedicated bike paths all over the land, the county makes cycling as inviting as it can even when the weather is socked in and the mercury barely breaks out of the single digits.

"There's a cycling culture here, a cycling infrastructure here that other places simply don't have," he said.

'Doesn't matter how old you are'

Beth Skelley, who biked from her home in north Boulder to her job at the Colorado Technology Center in Louisville, said she took the challenge on to prove that she could still do something new at age 50. There were plenty of times -- including an episode of freezing rain in October during which she lost sensation in her feet -- that nearly put her back behind the wheel of her car.

But she persevered.

"You can always have new goals -- it doesn't matter how old you are," Skelley said.

Rob Redmon, who completed the challenge with girlfriend Heather McCullough, huffed the 10 miles or so from his home in Louisville to his job at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Boulder. Up to then, the 38-year-old meteorologist had primarily hit the road on his bike when the weather was favorable.

He acknowledged that winter bike commuting is not for everyone -- it helps that NOAA has bike storage and also has showers and a place to change after those particularly sloppy rides. But he said the opportunity is there for most people if they want to take advantage.

As far as tackling the elements and deciphering the dark goes, Redmon said it all comes down to

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state of mind. Instead of seeing night as a scary and foreboding thing, Redmon said he develops a "focused vision" out on the road once the sun goes down.

In the end, he said, arriving by bike beats arriving by car every time physically, spiritually and emotionally, no matter how difficult Mother Nature decides to be.

"Even if it's bad weather and I'm wet or cold, I've never shown up at work in a worse mood after bike commuting," he said.

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