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Birmingham Bicycle Co. focuses on business professionals, providing bikes and accessories, as well as customizing training methods for their clients.

By Verna Gates

Photos by Caroline Baird Summers

By the time dawn breaks with rosy fingers brushing the sky, Will Hill Tankersley has traversed 20 miles, driven only by his own power. He returns home to a hot shower and a click on the computer. He reports miles and times to his road bike trainer, Tim Heard at Birmingham Bicycle Co. Progress means more challenges tomorrow.

A partner with Balch & Bingham LLP, Tankersley faces stressful days after his morning interlude. Often, he joins other professionals, retirees and athletes for these morning rides, as well as weekend races, Tour de France parties and a lifestyle on two wheels. At his company retreat, he organized a bike ride with seven associates. The bicycle is one of the few activities capable of clearing his mind, essentially hitting the restart button.

"There are no briefs or depositions on a bike. Just how to get over the next hill," Tankersley says.

A former officer in the First Battalion 10th Special Forces Group in Bad Tolz Germany, also known as the Green Berets, who used to jump out of airplanes with skis and an 80 pound pack, Tankersley makes fitness a priority. However, when his knees began to rebel, Tankersley, 49, began looking for alternatives.

At first, he rode his heavy hybrid bike, until defeat cast its shadow on this high powered, competitive litigator. "An old guy passed me on a road bike," he admits. "And I couldn't catch him. I thought 'This will not do.' That guy single-handedly made a lot of money for the bike shop." That's when he marched over to the Birmingham Bicycle Co.

At first, he just went for equipment. His Internet searches had located several available online trainers, ranging in cost from \$225 to \$400 per month. Instead, he found the same service at the local shop, with someone he could consult with face-to-face, at a price of only \$80 per month. Prices start at \$40.

"It's a deal," says Tankersley, who lost 20 pounds and "feels great."

Catering to Business Professionals

At the shop, owners Heard and Mike Fisher cater to their clientele, consisting mostly of professional men, like Tankersley, from 35 to 50 years old. Heard, the only bike trainer in Alabama with a USA Cycling national accreditation, offers customized training programs via the Internet. Before designing the exercise program, Heard tested Tankersley for power, not heart rate.

"We test power watts. It's how much energy you create when you exercise. Power is a better indicator of your real capabilities," Heard explains.

On a machine in the shop, Tankersley pumped the pedals to the point of exhaustion. A consultation on strengths and weaknesses followed. From these measurements, a fitness program including riding, weight training and aerobics was custom designed. Heard details, with colorful charts, activities, time to spend and the level to work on to maintain fitness. Daily, Tankersley downloads his morning workout and sends back results.

To encourage riders, the shop sponsors daily morning rides, led by prominent bikers. On Saturdays, rides leave every half hour, starting at 5:30 a.m., usually between 25 and 50 miles. Twenty to 60 people will join together to ride distances as long as 200 miles. For some rides, 700 people will join together at places such as Mount Cheaha for what are called centuries, 100-mile rides.

"It surprised me how social it could be," Tankersley says.

For stockbroker Stuart Roberts at Merrill Lynch in Birmingham, the social aspect turns business aspect. He estimates that at least half a dozen clients resulted from biking relationships.

"Just pick your favorite career and there is someone involved in cycling. It is a big foundation of my life in Birmingham," says Roberts, age 45, vice president and senior financial advisor. Another benefit: he met his wife training for a racing event.

While mountain bikes were the rage in the 1990s, the old-fashioned road bike returns, with its ease of entry. Open the door, hit the road, and a busy executive can return in 30 minutes to an hour feeling righteous about his daily exercise. With mountain bikes or gym workouts, it takes driving somewhere before you can get started.

"Road bikes are quicker, easier and safer," Tankersley says.

Designing a Niche

While the actual fitness part may be efficient, the bicycle shop also offers the slower pace, as it virtually becomes a substitute for the old gentleman's clubs. Four out of five riders are men. They will come browse the shop during off times and gather there for riding and loafing.

"It's a lifestyle sport that can take more time than running, but it is a heck of a lot more fun," Roberts says.

Adds Tankersley, "They provide more than a service: it's a destination."

Only two years old, the shop has gained popularity, growing by 200 percent in its young age, with more than 500 customers. In their first full year of operation, they netted \$500,000, remarkable for new retail and such a small shop.

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"We debated between a gigantic shop and specializing. Since bike stores are a very odd retail business with tremendous customer loyalty, we chose specializing," Fisher says.

Clients like Tankersley demand more than what can be pulled off the rack. With a certain pride in fitness, and a man's love for equipment, bikers prefer the custom products the store stocks and orders for them. Customers can be measured and tested to assure the right purchase is made for their body type and fitness level.

Of course, Heard and Fisher, both 35, brought reputations and loyal customers. They came together to open the shop after years of working in other bike shops. With the help of angel investors, they opened as a viable competitor from day one, according to Heard. They located in a prime area, off Montclair Road, with an average income of \$152,000, according to their market research.

"In this one mile is the most affluent neighborhood in the country," Fisher says. Many of those neighbors cycle past the store daily.

While biking is a democratic sport anyone can enter, the custom bikes average \$3,000, but can run to \$11,000 for exclusive brands. And then there is \$250 to \$500 in outfitting, from helmets to water bottles. Typical riders are college-educated professionals, much like the golf and tennis crowd.

So far, there is just one women's-only ride on the shop schedule, although women are welcome on any ride. However, Fisher finds that men prefer the fastest pace, while women prefer more recreational riding, with exceptions on both sides.

"Men suffer from testosterone poisoning. They are inherently competitive. It can be intimidating for women," he says.

On the cycling racing team sponsored by the shop, a few of the 32 members are women. Tankersley counts himself as a member, although more for fun than for medals. Even his two daughters follow him on the circuit, making cycling a family event. Most likely, he doesn't reveal his real reason for riding to his children.

"It makes me feel like a kid again. Riding a bike is thrilling. The wind in your face, the sun on your back — it's just beautiful. It is joyful."

Soon, more roads will welcome cyclists. The Birmingham Bicycle Co. plans to expand into towns around Alabama, opening the road to new customers.

Verna Gates is a regular contributor as a freelance writer for *Business Alabama*.