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How pro cyclists make it in a cash-starved sport

Lisa Scheid
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Ryan DeWald inside Skyline Bike and Skateboards, the Mount Penn shop his family operates, will compete in Saturday's Re 120. DeWald has won more than 100 races, but makes only about $12,000 a year.

Reading Eagle: Susan L. Angstadt

Ryan DeWald has won more than 100 professional cycling races since turning pro in 2003, yet a win in Europe had eluded him.

In June, the Reading native won a race in Mondolfo, a village in central Italy that overlooks the Adriatic Sea. It was an especially sweet win because he's a Type 1 diabetic in an endurance sport in which, at 37, he's considered an old man.

What did he win? A ham. At least it was an Italian cured ham.

With his family, DeWald runs a bike shop in Mount Penn called Skyline Bike and Skateboard, which sponsors the Skyline cycling team. He's got a few sponsorships, a fledgling clothing line and a new foundation, #WinningtheRaceWithDiabetes.

And yet, he makes about $12,000 a year, he said. And that's before medical expenses.

"A cyclist knows how to stretch a dollar," DeWald said.

While you watch the pro cyclists speed by in Saturday's Reading 120, as they make the grueling climb up Mount Penn past the Pagoda, consider their devotion from a financial perspective.

Most professional cyclists, even those who compete in top-notch races such as the Reading 120, are more likely to be hungry than rich. There's even a book detailing the struggle, "Pro cycling on $10 a day" by Phil Gaimon.

Consider that Tour de France winner Chris Froome is paid a $5 million annual salary as the top rider on the world's top team, Team Sky. That's a little more than the $4 million average salary in major league baseball and nowhere near what the top players make.

John Eustice, Reading 120 race director, compared a pro cyclist's career to artists or actors waiting for their big breaks.

"You work your way up," Eustice said. "On a race like the Reading 120, you'll have riders that have been on Team Sky competing with riders who are lucky to get a couple of free tires. And once in a while one of those kids with the free tires gets out in front of all those riders."

Making a living

Pro racing has tiers overseen by the International Cycling Union, said Jasen Thorpe, a spokesman for the UnitedHealthcare team. At the top are about 18 teams such as Team Sky that are world tour teams. They are automatically invited to the top races such as the Tour de France. World T

teams have budgets up to $28 million.

UnitedHealthcare, which is competing in Reading 120, is considered a pro continental team, which is among the teams that compete mostly in a single country but also may be invited to international races such as the Tour de France.

Thorpe wouldn't disclose the team's budget, but he said it's fair to say continental teams operate on about a quarter or less than that of the world tour teams. World tour and continental teams pay their riders a salary while smaller teams cannot.

Transportation and lodging expenses alone can make it tough for a small team from another country to compete in the U.S.

Last year, Eustice said, the Reading 120 paid to bring teams from Guatemala and Mexico to Reading.

"You have to bring the show to town," he said.

This year the International Cycling Union, or UCI, men's pro races will feature 26 teams from the U.S. and Canada, Eustice said. The Reading 120 is one of only seven UCI races in the U.S.

Ride with Rendall, one of the teams competing in this year's race, has a budget of about $70,000, said Jason Cheney, owner of the Ottawa, Canada-based team.

Ride with Rendall does not pay riders but covers their travel, accommodation and equipment costs for races.

"A lot of our team are at a point in their career where they are finished with university and are trying to be on a team where they get a salary," Cheney said.

Two older riders have flexible jobs that allow them to train and race, Cheney said. One is a registered nurse. Another works in information technology and has actually logged in at work while on the road for competitions.

Ride with Rendall is funded by a club of dues-paying lower-level riders and sponsorships.

Staying in school

CCB Racing, another small team competing in the Reading 120, is a nonprofit supported by a membership of 200.

The elite team of 12 is made up of mostly college or graduate school students, said Tim Mitchell, the team's director. The program helps them stay in college while training at a top level.

Unlike college athletes in other sports, there are few options for riders who want to take their education as seriously as their racing, said Mitchell, whose day job is Alpine ski coach at Harvard University.

"Bike racing in the United States is prohibitively expensive," Mitchell said.

Mitchell said he could spend the same amount of money to compete in California as he would to compete in Belgium. That's because cycling is part of a community and the culture in Europe. European communities subsidize cycling more, he said.

CCB can't pay the students a salary, but Mitchell supports them in other ways, including paying for their entry fees, lodging, equipment and clothing. He also advises and coaches them on balancing their lives and pursuing their dreams.

There's no required minimum salary in cycling, Mitchell said. "It's not really pro."

American riders have to pay for their own health coverage and care.

Mitchell said getting an education is important, but riders often push it aside to compete. Then, at the age of 28 or 29, they find they have not made it to the top echelon, have no money saved and lack the education to make a decent living.

"Seventy-five percent of riders don't make it," Mitchell said. "It's a bad situation. It can't be acceptable."

Pro continental riders make about $38,000 to $42,000 a year, he said.

"At that rate you aren't saving any money and you can't do that job for 40 years," he said. "It's tough to think 'I'll be bike rider.' I don't think they should be forced to make an unacceptable compromise. You should not have to sacrifice your education and your future."

Marketing themselves

For those who make it, there is the opportunity to trade on their wins and name recognition for sponsorships, Mitchell said.

"You have to make yourself marketable," he said. "It's about so much more than how fast you can ride a bike,"

DeWald said that at times he's slept on the couch of one friend or another to save rent and done odd jobs to make ends meet.

Now, his mission is to inspire others, coaching up-and-comers as well as setting an example of living a healthy lifestyle.

If he can bank on his skills and charm, he has a future in the sport. He wants to inspire those with diabetes to get and stay active. He's proud of how he's gone from growing up in the 400 block of Buttonwood Street to traveling the world. And he's remained competitive since being diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes two years ago.

"I continue to live the dream like a starving artist," DeWald said.

When he isn't visiting his girlfriend in Montreal, he lives in an apartment above the bike shop.

Mitchell said cyclists bring more to the table than just charm, endurance or ability. Ultimately, the devotion to cycling does not come down to money.

"It's thankless," Mitchell said. "You may only win one race a year. It can't be just about the winning. It's about the struggle, and the struggle prepares them for life.

"The value of the struggle is to find out what they're made of."