



# BRAIN DEALER TOUR SAN DIEGO

Photos by **Jake Orness**

## Cycling nirvana transcends sport to embrace transportation bikes

**S**kip McDowell calls San Diego “cycling nirvana.” And he may be right. With near-perfect year-round riding weather, scenic coastal roads and an active cycling community, this is a hotbed for roadies and triathletes.

North County stores such as Nytro Multisport and B&L Bike and Sports benefit from being smack-dab in the local triathlon scene on a stretch of Coast Highway popular with cyclists. “This is the heart of the tri community,” McDowell, president of Nytro in Encinitas, told guests on the BRAIN Dealer Tour earlier this month.

While much of their customer base is local multi-

sport enthusiasts, San Diego is also a popular winter destination. McDowell has taken advantage of his location with a Fly N’ Ride program that flies customers in from around the country to try and buy bikes when other areas are still covered in snow.

San Diego is still grounded in tri and road bike sales—Trek Superstore owner Mike Olson cites strong sales of Trek’s Speed Concept tri model. At the other end of the spectrum, Olson will participate in an e-bike pilot program Trek will launch this spring. It’s a sign that San Diego is becoming more diverse as residents, who combat gas prices among the highest in the nation, see bicycles in broader terms.

“San Diego was completely tri and racing when we started. It’s new that people think of it as transportation, not a sport,” said Sky Boyer, who opened Velo Cult in its downtown location two years ago.

Boyer is one of a new breed of retailer in San Diego’s hip North Park and South Park neighborhoods that is focused on transportation bikes.

As a testament to cycling’s viability, Boyer has convinced more than 70 local businesses to join a program to give discounts to customers that arrive by bike. The support for [sdbikecommuter.com](http://sdbikecommuter.com) speaks to growing interest in bikes as transportation in the downtown area.

“If you’re a restaurant with 15 bikes out front, you look hip and young,” said Boyer, adding that it also saves parking spots for customers that drive.

Niche shops like Velo Cult point to a resurgence in small specialty bike shops over the past six to seven years in a city that nearly lost all of its independent local stores a decade ago.

Continues on page D14

Continued from D1

## Specialty Shakeup

In 2001 Performance bought the locally-owned seven-store Bike USA chain, dramatically altering the specialty retail landscape in San Diego. “Performance was trying to expand and put pressure on Trek and Specialized to sell to them. They were convinced they would sell to them,” said Charlie Skerleckz, a former employee of Bike USA and now owner of Cal Coast.

Trek elected not to do business with Performance, and instead tried to find a way to recoup volume it lost from Bike USA. Unable to find dealers willing to open additional doors, Trek opened its first two concept stores in the country in San Diego in 2002. Olson purchased the stores the following year and expanded the chain locally.

The four Trek Superstores now have a big footprint in the San Diego market. Locals peg the market as worth between \$35 to \$40 million in annual retail sales. As in many markets, they say the 80-20 rule applies with 20 stores doing the majority of business.

Longtime retailers who weathered the storm have seen the market change

over the past 20 years, becoming less of a military town and more of a tech center. And they’ve adapted their offerings accordingly, focusing more on family-oriented cruisers and mountain bikes.



BRAIN's Dealer Tour group visits with Skip McDowell, president of Nytro.

Much of the economy was once tied to the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base and the Miramar Air Station. The city is less dependent on the military now, but it still is an important contribu-

tor to business.

“In a down economy, we had our busiest March last March,” said Jim Russell, owner of Alan’s Bike Shop in Oceanside, near Camp Pendleton. “What happened? 6,000 troops all came back on a changeover.”

Bryan Whitbeck, owner of Black Mountain Cyclery, recalled when his East County store was in the midst of “100 homes and a pile of dirt.” Now, he said, telecom and tech firms such as Qualcomm, Sony and HP all have set up headquarters nearby. And the addition of many corporate campuses has brought more families to the suburban area, where planned housing developments have sprung up.

But Whitbeck said despite the influx of local companies, he still sees a conservative spending mentality among local residents that translates into sales of value-oriented bikes.

“They still have tuition and car payments and mortgages. They’re conservative in that respect,” Whitbeck said. “They need more for the amount of money they spend.” —Megan Tompkins

### Dealer Tour Guest Editorial

## Riding a bicycle from shop to shop is truly magical

**T**here are many wonderful aspects that I appreciate about the BRAIN Dealer Tours. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting the dealers, hearing their feedback and exchanging ideas in an open and informal setting. And while I loved the riding, camaraderie, breathing fresh air, etc., my favorite part of the BRAIN Dealer Tours is building relationships.

There is something wonderful about riding a bicycle from shop to shop. Not only does one get to feel like a kid again riding a bike all day, but there is also an instant bond between the participants and shop staff that is magical. At every stop, no matter what kind of bike you are riding, everyone came out to check out the gear and see if you really did ride to the shop!

Members of the cycling industry share a unique bond. It is almost like a carnival caravan traveling from shop to shop, event to event, show to show. People are friendly, helpful and really want to make a difference. No matter how buying patterns evolve from year to year it is fun to see people step out of their shop to say hello and ask, “How is the riding today? Where are you riding? You have to join our evening shop ride!”

The cycling culture in Southern California is like no other. The shops from the old neighborhoods were a true surprise as well as those along the coast. We were lucky to visit a few tri-specific shops, a single speed only shop, a genuine road-

ies’ paradise shop and a few others that catered to hardcore mountain bikers as well as daily commuters. It’s this diverse, there’s-something-for-everyone attitude that gives San Diego a true feeling of community. The buying power here is strong and gaining momentum.

And the riding? Don’t be fooled my friends—there are hills in San Diego! Long, continuously rolling steep hills that surprised even this Colorado native. Who knew that I would get to taste my burrito a second time climbing a 7% grade to visit the post-lunch shop on my first day? I learned my lesson quickly and made sure I knew where every hill was on the route the following two days.

My only regret is that I didn’t tip my front wheel into the Pacific Ocean. Next time...

Dorothy Nichols, Todson

## Three-day whirlwind proves refreshing and recharging



Dorothy Nichols

Albert Yeh

**A**s the Ergon crew set out for the first day of the San Diego Dealer Tour, the amount of nevers we were facing had us a little nervous.

We were about to ride bikes we’ve never ridden through a city in which we’ve never ridden and with a group of people with whom we’ve never ridden. Our own Dave Wiens summed up the situation by channeling an old Italian friend’s catch phrase, “Much dangerous.”

Fortunately, the only danger we faced were brutally cold morning temps that hovered around 50 degrees. Our borrowed Masi bikes were fantastic and Tom from Campagnolo was a wonderful guide.

While my home of Los Angeles is only two to seven hours from San Diego—depending on traffic—the two cities couldn’t be more apart when it comes to cycling. San Diego’s bike infrastruc-

ture is incredible. I never fully wrapped my head around how friendly motorists were. Back home I can’t go three feet without getting honked at. Here, I went a full three days.

The range of San Diego’s bike shops ran the full spectrum. From Alan’s Bike Shop stocking more Electra beach cruisers than I’ve ever seen to Nytro Multi-sport being loaded with so much gear it almost made triathlons look fun. Both Velo Cult and Pista Palace took the passion of cycling to a whole new level. These shops proved that if you’ve got the customer base, you can go deep when it comes to specializing in one area.

Our first Ergon sighting was at Bicycle Warehouse. As the tour progressed we came across many more shops promoting Ergon grips. For the few that didn’t, Dave’s good looks and expansive on-the-bike resume served as a nice distraction while our new rep Sean Kneale worked his magic. It didn’t take long before I realized my main role on the Ergon crew was to be the Sherpa carrying product samples across San Diego.

After a three-day whirlwind, I’m back at Ergon HQ refreshed, recharged, and full of ideas on how to move the Ergon brand forward. Many thanks to the BRAIN Tour dealers for their retail insight and also to the BRAIN staff for opening these doors to us.

Albert Yeh, Ergon

## S.D. retailers adjust strategy to remain on solid ground

Just finished up a great week, under sunny skies in San Diego with the BRAIN Dealer Tour. Campagnolo and Masi teamed up to outfit the group of industry colleagues that also sponsored the tour. We incorporated our Campagnolo Revolution 11 Tour demo fleet and riders experienced our range of 11-speed components from Athena up to Super Record. The bikes were outfitted with our 2 Way-Fit wheels and road tubeless tires that worked flawlessly.

We covered an average of 50 miles a day and saw 12 IBDs. It was a diverse group of specialty retailers; some had complete selections of bicycles, accessories and clothing in all categories, some focused on ultra high-end road, some focused on cruisers and urban commuters, and one even focused on recycled steel in various categories. We discussed the state of the economy, the effect the Internet has



Tom Kattus

had on their businesses, the evolution of their business models and the effect rising gas prices is having on our industry.

It's clear that the economy has affected their business as has the Internet. But, they've made strategic adjustments, they're weathering the storm, and their businesses remain on solid ground. Some of the shops were down a percent or two, some were flat, and some were up. Regardless of their situation, their attitude was upbeat and everyone had a very optimistic outlook for the coming spring and their future viability. It's clear that they all enjoy and are passionate about what they do.

I came away from this experience completely recharged, excited for the future and with a better understanding of the IBD's needs. I will definitely join future Dealer Tours in other markets.

*Tom Kattus, Campagnolo North America*

## Vitality of diverse shops is affirming and energizing

Zoic participated in the San Diego Dealer Tour to better educate ourselves on our own market and by extension gain a keener appreciation for the nationwide independent dealer channel. 2011 is our self-proclaimed "Year of the Dealer" wherein we want to (re)introduce the Zoic brand to more IBDs and better position our company to service their needs.

Our time spent visiting shops across San Diego affirmed the vitality and diversity of IBDs. In the face of persistent news reports of a struggling economy, every store we visited is trying something new: opening more locations, investing in back-end systems, adding categories, expanding community outreach. All of which hint at a healthy industry where owners are acting not out of desperation to survive, but with confidence in the future.

And while these entrepreneurs are charting the course, consumers are powering the change. Activity at the grassroots level in and around San Diego indicates more people are spending time on their bikes and in support of riding, advocating for new pathways and trails and volunteering in force to build and maintain them. True, Southern Califor-

nia has a deeply rooted car culture; the passing motorist who shouted at us "Get a job and buy a car!" certainly showed that HE won't be in the market for a commuter bike anytime soon. But our tour ride, the shop visits and the cyclists we see everyday confirm that bike commuting and urban cycling are as valid in San Diego as the triathlon, road and mountain biking we are known for.

The growth and diversity of the San Diego bike community give us confidence in similar trends that we hear and read about in other parts of the country. These trends compel us to continue designing Zoic clothing for anyone who rides a bike. For 16 years our brand has pushed the boundaries of cycling apparel. Although often pegged as a "mountain bike clothing" brand, we have long recognized the appeal of our products among a variety of cyclists: commuters, couriers, touring riders, and yes, even some roadies. Energized by our Dealer Tour visits, we are eager to engage with independent dealers across the country, learn about your unique stores, and show what Zoic can offer you and your customers.

*Paul Wyandt, Zoic*

## First-timer enjoys visits by bike

New to my position here at Masi, I attended the BRAIN San Diego Dealer Tour with my co-worker James Ayres not exactly knowing what to expect. I knew we were supplying bikes, and along with Campagnolo's Tom Kattus, we worked out bike sizing and who would ride which bikes.

First day of the Tour I met Sean Kneale, our outside rep for the Southern California region who planned the day's routes to each of the shops. Next, we unloaded and prepped all of the Masi carbon Evo and lugged Gran Crits that were to be ridden for the next three days. After a quick meet and greet with the other tour attendees including MTB legend Dave Wiens, we were ready to roll.

After four shop visits and 50 miles under our belt for the day, I had seen everything from the local family business who carries every category of bicycle in a variety of entry-level to enthusiast price points, to one of the most advanced race shops in the world which is setting a standard in how to use technology to grow their business.

I was really looking forward to day two as we would get a good ride in on the way to the downtown area of North Park and South Park followed by a great ride back up. Word of the day here was vibe, and lots of it. Very cool shops deep in cycling culture all within a close proximity and all co-existing with considerable success. Rack up another 50 on the Garmin!



Phil Tinstman

By day three some were feeling the effects of the mini stage race. I was pumped to be on the bike for a third day in a row. Again, we visited a wide range of stores including a concept store, which was very educational, and a down-home MTB store next to the trails ready with beers as we walked in...Awesome!

With over 130 miles and only a couple of flats, this was an awesome experience. The open arms and overwhelming openness the dealer owners and managers had towards us was nothing short of amazing. Growing up with a passion for bicycles I am very confident in the future of the sport as well as the future of the bike shop.

*Phil Tinstman, Masi*

## Dealer mortality rate improves

While many of us in the industry feel we are connected to the realities of retail, we believe you don't know if you don't go.

In addition to collecting 150 training miles, we walked away with two salient points about the state of affairs in bicycle retail from the Dealer Tour. The first is, the retail mortality rate has improved dramatically since the last two recessions. Dealers are better. You can attribute this to a host of factors including a more professional ownership base, vastly improved inventory management, more sophisticated cash flow management, and a more refined consumer base with improved appetites.

In San Diego and coast to coast, retailers are considerably more responsive to their customers' needs and adjusting the shape and feel of their shopping environment to the specifics of their market. Day two of our tour showed that in spades with Adams Ave., Cal Coast, the passion-forward Velo Cult, and high-zoot boutique Pista Palace, with each outpost feeding the specific needs of their highly diverse market. All within a few pedal strokes.



Chris Zigmont &amp; Lance Camisasca

The second take-away was how evolving and fluid retailer's trade business efforts and needs are. With full disclosure, as business partners in Dealer-Camp and therefore having a dog in this fight, the intel gathered confirmed our belief that intimacy and relationship building trump scale and frenetic, sweaty-brow business every time. When it comes to the business of the business, one-on-one is what retailers want.

As it turns out, it is the same way the evolved being of the successful dealer built his retail business: one relationship at a time. The mortality rate improves as the being adapts.

*Christopher Zigmont and Lance Camisasca, Lifeboat Events*