

Corporate teams energize Bike MS



Riding or volunteering with a team builds camaraderie as people work toward a common goal.

by Shara Rutberg

Though it was still autumn in Orange County, California, the whoosh of winter winds and rollicking Bavarian accordion music filled the air. An abominable snowman roared among the palm trees, as cyclists in matching team jerseys adjusted their helmet straps and clipped into their pedals. It was just the start of the 2016 Bike MS: Bay to Bay for those riding on Walt Disney Co.'s team.

Most Bike MS corporate teams selected rock anthems to launch their rides, but for the more than 100 Disney employees and their friends and family, who had fundraised and trained for months as part of Mickey's Bike MS team, this was a way to show their unique Disney community spirit and style.

So as the soundtrack for Disneyland's iconic Matterhorn Bobsleds ride cranked over the loudspeaker, the Disney riders whooped and cheered. Then, the musical medley shifted to Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, another famous coaster in the park, with fiddles, harmonicas and a twangy announcer who warned: "Hang on, folks. This here's a wild ride through the wilderness!"

Their tunes may have been straight from Disney's themed areas, Fantasyland and Frontierland, but in training and raising money for the event, the Team Disney riders had their minds on Tomorrowland—a future without MS.

Money that matters

Bike MS is the largest fundraising bike series on the planet. Every year, nearly 100,000 cyclists across the country participate. The effort has raised more than \$1 billion since 1980.



Philip Luongo, second from right, with friends, from left, Vito Basso and Lisa Sailor, and fiancée Elise Feeley, at the starting line of the 2016 BP MS 150. Photo courtesy of Philip Luongo

That money makes a difference in research and services that Philip Luongo says help his father and sister, both of whom live with MS. Luongo rides for Team BP, the Houston-based oil company's corporate team. His father was diagnosed and using a wheelchair before Luongo was born. "It's amazing the difference in treatments and awareness from when my father was diagnosed in 1986 and when my sister was diagnosed three years ago. You'd never know my sister even has MS. She's pregnant and doing amazing. The money raised from this event makes a difference."

Bike MS participants can sign up to be individual riders, or to be part of a team of four or more. Twenty-three percent of the 7,500 Bike MS teams are corporate teams, which can include employees, clients, suppliers, and family and friends of employees.

"Riding on a corporate team builds camaraderie, provides a friendly group for training and increases motivation as you're all working toward a common goal," says Stacy Mulder, vice president, Bike MS. It can also be a great networking opportunity, she adds.

The most successful Bike MS teams, at least from a fundraising perspective, have 10 or more people. "And the bigger the team, the more each person usually raises," says Mulder. This is due to organization and communication efforts, inspiring leaders and the competition that can come with a united group.

Maximizing the impact

When Team Disney's group of Disney VoluntEARS formed in 2000, the team's four riders raised \$3,000. In the years since then, membership has grown to nearly 200 people, including employees, their family members and friends, and the team has raised more than \$1.5 million.



Ryan Giannetta, captain of Team Disney, with team member Rona Kay. Photo courtesy of Ryan Giannetta

Ryan Giannetta, who joined in 2002, is now team captain, though he has changed how he participates over the years. That first year, he volunteered at a water stop. Several times, he pedaled. In recent years, he's managed logistics, attending to a core planning team and, on ride weekends, managing team support and amenities such as massages.

Companies can help maximize the funds their teams raise in a variety of ways. They can match donations, or pay for employees' registration through dollars budgeted for marketing or health and wellness funds, says Mulder. "Some companies donate when an employee raises a certain amount of money. Others ask clients and suppliers to donate or join their teams. There are so many ways companies get behind their employees."

There are lots of ways to participate on a corporate team besides pedaling a bike. For instance, Team Disney runs rest stops for riders where volunteers hand out water and snacks, and take photos. Team members can also take part as virtual riders—not by getting in their bike saddles, but fundraising and communicating with donors just the same way biking team members do. Virtual riders are eligible for the same incentives for fundraising at

certain dollar levels. Other people help with fundraising activities, designing and ordering jerseys, and helping promote the event via social media and other communication channels, says Mulder.

Team events and communications throughout companies' offices spur conversations about MS among employees, too, she says. "Over the years it's helped us build community from people sharing their experiences with MS," says Giannetta.

The experience during the ride itself is extraordinary, says Luongo, who admits biking is far from his favorite activity. He does it for his family and for the greater MS community. "I'll be out there and see someone pass me with an 'I Ride with MS' jersey and remember how many people, like my dad, wish they could be out there riding. I ride for them.

"You look out and it's quite emotional," he says, "to see how many thousands and thousands of people are there. They're raising all this money and everyone is there for MS. Everyone is coming together, supporting each other and riding to fight the disease."

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Interested in joining (or starting) a corporate Bike MS team? Learn more at [Bike MS](#).