

Geared up



For some people, Bike MS is more than an annual event—it's a way of life.

by **Matt Alderton**

While Bike MS happens just once a year in each of nearly 100 locations across the country, it is, for many people, a year-round experience. Just talk to venture capitalist Andrew Forsdick, who promotes and trains for the National MS Society's Bike MS fundraiser all year long. For him, Bike MS is a daily source of inspiration and motivation.

Building excitement, endurance

Forsdick, 45, of Memphis, Tennessee, has been an avid cyclist for 10 years, and he participated in Bike MS for the first time in 2011—two years before he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. “I wanted to do this multiday bike ride I’d heard about. I had a vague idea that it supported a cause, but at that point, for me, it was more about doing the ride,” he recalls. “After my diagnosis, however, it had a deeper meaning. MS is a condition that can be easily misunderstood, so raising awareness has become really important to me.”



Andrew Forsdick promotes Bike MS when he is not riding in it or preparing for it. Not only does it raise money for the cause, but it's also fun and healthy, he tells people. Photo courtesy of the National MS Society

Bike MS has been an ideal platform for year-round advocacy, Forsdick says. "One thing I do all year long is evangelize the event," he says. "I wear my Bike MS jersey when I'm training, and I talk about it constantly."

When he hears people lamenting their stale exercise routines, he always chimes in with a plug for Bike MS, which he suggests will help them reach their fitness goals by giving them a concrete objective to work toward on their calendar. With nearly 100 annual bike rides ranging from 15 to 150 miles across the country, with fundraising that supports everything from research to programs to advocacy and awareness, most people can find an event that's just right for them, he says.

"The more people who participate in Bike MS the better, because the more money that's raised, the better the chances of finding a cure," Forsdick says. "Plus, it's just a lot of fun. I want to spread the word because whether you have MS or not, riding in Bike MS is a great opportunity to do something that's different, healthy for you and helps a good cause."

Prepping for the pedals

When he isn't talking about Bike MS, Forsdick is training for it. While his own regimen is

relatively rigorous, he feels that a thirst for activity is all anyone really needs to participate in Bike MS. There are rides for everyone, from amateurs to athletes, whether they want to ride one day or two. Not only are route lengths variable, but participants don't even have to use a traditional bicycle; cyclists of varying abilities can also use a tandem bike with a family member or friend, or a hand cycle.

"If riding one day and 15 miles is your goal, that's great. You can do that. Or you can do more if you want. It's up to you," says Forsdick, who participates every year in I Ride with MS, a program that promotes Bike MS participation by cyclists who are living with the disease. "We wear jerseys that say 'I Ride with MS' so somebody who's sitting on the sidelines will see us and think, 'Maybe I can do this, too.' "

That's not to say participants should go straight from the couch to the bike. Whether you go just a couple miles or a couple hundred, riding safely and successfully takes preparation. Here are some important considerations to get you started:

- **Start with easy routes:** Industrial designer Maria Boustead, 38, rides her bike to and from work every day, so she's learned a few things about riding with MS, which can be helpful for training. "I suggest starting with short rides to places in your neighborhood; ride a mile or two to the park or the movie theater just to get comfortable being on the road with cars—then expand from there," advises Boustead, who splits her time between New York and Chicago. "If you have trouble with heat, like I do, plan a shadier route or a route with less traffic, because the exhaust from cars is extra hot."
- **Mix it up:** Limiting your exercise to a single activity will also limit your physical gains. "If somebody is cycling all the time, it's good to sometimes run or swim—anything that gets the heart rate up, but uses different muscles," explains Forsdick. He says workouts like swimming or indoor cycling also can be good alternatives for people when their body—or the weather—doesn't cooperate with their training plans.
- **Equip yourself:** Boustead—owner of a company called Po Campo, which makes cycling bags—says the most important piece of equipment a cyclist can have is a custom-fitted bike. "When people say they don't like biking, I think it's usually because their bike doesn't fit them. It's either too large or too small, so it's not fun to ride," she explains. "Going to a bike shop and getting a bike that's fit to you is probably the most important thing."
- **Practice pedaling:** "The most important thing is to be comfortable—physically and mentally," explains Forsdick. And that comes from time in the saddle, so it's a good idea to ride several times a week for several months prior to the event.

Other basics include a helmet for safety and bike lights to improve visibility if you're doing training rides at night.

As you get more experienced, Forsdick says, you might also consider clip-in pedals for more efficient and powerful pedaling. While it's not necessary, spandex cycling apparel provides padding around the seat, bright colors to make you visible on the road, and moisture-wicking

fabric to keep you dry.

Regardless of how often you ride, what equipment you buy or what route you choose, treating Bike MS as a year-round lifestyle instead of an annual event will help you live your best life, Forsdick and Boustead agree.

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer.

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