

# **Bike MS: The Hungarian Ex-Cycled Racing Team**



## **Lifelong friends form the “H.E.R.T.” Bike MS team to fight MS.**

**by Mike Knight**

Recently divorced after a 25-year marriage, Bruce Ungar was at a loss. His teenage daughter had just moved in with him, and Ungar wanted — needed — to find a way to spend their newfound time together.

Then in his 40s at the time, Ungar was stumped. “Finding connections, a way to spend time together with a 16-, 17-year-old daughter, can be sort of a challenge for a middle-aged guy,” he says.



**Bruce Ungar (left) and Alan Iszauk are co-captains of the Hungarian Ex-Cycled Racing Team.**

A casual bike rider at best, Ungar decided to bring his daughter along with him to a downtown bike shop in Mount Lebanon, Pennsylvania, where they lived, to pick up a new tire for his bike. After grabbing the tire, they decided to poke around the shop for a few minutes. He didn't know it at the time, but Ungar had stumbled onto just what he was looking for.

"I saw a brochure about our local MS Society's supported ride called the Escape to the Lake. I approached my daughter and said, 'Hey, is this something that you think we might do together?'"

She was athletic and in good shape, playing high school field hockey and lacrosse. On top of that, Ungar says she had "game."

"She said, 'Yeah, let's do it,'" he says. "I bought her a bicycle, and we started to ride together."

**The first Bike MS ride**

Escape to the Lake is a 150-mile fundraising ride supporting the [National Multiple Sclerosis Society](#). Known by the local cycling community for its impeccable execution, the two-day ride begins just north of Pittsburgh. The ride then snakes its way to Lake Erie, traveling through beautiful countryside, small towns and long, spiteful hills. Created in 1985, the event hosts approximately 50 teams annually and has raised more than \$15 million since its inception, according to Anne Mageras, president of the Society's Pennsylvania Keystone Chapter.

Ungar and his daughter asked friends and family to donate funds to support their ride, then began to train, at first riding around their neighborhood, then taking increasingly longer rides on the converted "rails to trails" in their area.

Ungar is blunt in his assessment of their training regimen. “We were woefully unprepared,” he says.

The pair finished the ride — even if the ride nearly finished them. “We got beat up pretty badly,” he says. “We stopped on the way home to get something to eat, and we couldn’t hold our forks. Our hands were numb and feet sore. We were dehydrated and sunburned.”

Yet Ungar says it was everything he hoped for that day in the bike shop. “We spent all this extra time together, and we had long conversations on the trail,” he says. “It was a growth experience for both of us.”

It was also 1998 and the birth of the [Hungarian ExCycled Racing Team](#) (H.E.R.T.), an ever-changing group of riders that has raised more than \$300,000 via the event over the last 22 years to help fight multiple sclerosis. It was almost the team’s birth, but not quite.

### **Bruce and Alan’s Bike MS adventures**

Though Ungar and his daughter rode in the following year’s Escape, it would be their last as she went to college. Now without a partner, Ungar was stumped.

“I was looking for somebody to do [the ride] with,” he says. But who? “There’s just not so many people that you can approach to say, ‘Hey, how would you like to take a 150-mile bike ride with me?’”



**H.E.R.T. co-captains Alan Iszauk and Bruce Ungar bike to the airport.**

Enter his childhood friend, Alan Iszauk (pronounced Iz-shock). Like Ungar, Iszauk grew up in nearby McKeesport, a city of 19,000 people not far from Pittsburgh. Born just a few months

apart in 1952, the two became practically inseparable. "From the time we were 4 years old, we were pretty much together. Our parents went to the same congregation," Ungar says. "We were in Sunday school and grade school together. We were in Boy Scouts together. We went to different universities but visited each other at university."

Ungar knew he was asking a lot. "It's one thing if it's a three- or four-day gig, and you stay in a bed-and-breakfast along the way," he says. "This is 150 miles in two days, rain or shine, plus you have to raise money to do it." But Iszauk, Ungar remembered, also had game. So he asked him anyway.

Then in his early 50s, Iszauk liked bicycling, but a 25-mile ride was a big deal for him. He told Ungar he'd do it anyway. "I thought he was crazy," Iszauk says. "But I figured if Bruce could do it, I could do it."

The two set their sights on the ride. They began a training program much like Ungar had done with his daughter. "We didn't have road bikes and the kind of spandex stuff that you wear, didn't really understand the whole gig," Ungar recalls. "We just pedaled and had a good time."

"Once again," Ungar says, "we came out woefully unprepared."

That's not all they weren't ready for, Iszauk says, remembering the last few miles of his first Escape ride. "It was a very hot day, and I didn't think I could even get off my bike and walk," he says. "And a woman came up to me and said, 'I want to thank you for what you do.'"

Woozy from the grueling ride, Iszauk struggled to make sense of what she was getting at. "All I wanted to do was take a shower and go to bed, and she kept thanking me, and I just wasn't computing," he says.

She told Iszauk that she, too, had once participated in the ride but no longer could. "She pointed over at a wheelchair," Iszauk says, "and it dawned on me what she was trying to communicate. Once that connected, she threw her arms around me, we embraced, I'm in tears, and no matter how much I was hurting at that moment, I was thankful that I was able to do it. She made a difference in my life."

Iszauk vowed to return the following year to fight MS. "I said to Bruce, 'Next year, if we do this again, let's get serious about raising some money. We've been a top fundraising team ever since.'"

### **H.E.R.T's so good**

The first order of business was coming up with a team name. "In order to form a team [for the event], we needed a team name," Iszauk says. "We were brainstorming and we were working with the idea of the pain we experienced by our lack of proper training. The word 'hurt' kept coming up in phrases, like 'I hurt,' 'We hurt,' and 'I can't think because I hurt.'" Trying hard to shoehorn the acronym into life, Iszauk remembered McKeesport's heavy



Hungarian population (Iszauk and Ungar are both of Hungarian heritage), settling on the Hungarian ExCycled Racing Team. ExCycled? “We couldn’t come up with a good ‘U’ word,” Iszauk says.

Over the years, the team has sharpened its approach to distance biking, upgrading their bikes and gear, and studying how to ride more comfortably and safely. H.E.R.T. has grown from Ungar and Iszauk (now team co-captains) to some 50 members, recruited in its typical freewheeling fashion. “As we’re riding down the trails, we meet people on the trail and engage them in conversation and invite them to join us,” Ungar says. “When I’m riding around my neighborhood, when I see people who are riding along, I’ll try to catch up with them, ride with them and encourage them to join us. I invite people to come with me on a life-changing adventure.”



**H.E.R.T. members Bruce Ungar, Gary Dubin, Alan Iszauk and Larry Sachs (left to right) pedal to Pittsburgh’s Mount Washington.**

Iszauk is even less discerning, subjecting unsuspecting friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances to on-the-spot interviews. “I will ask anybody, ‘Do you ride a bike? Have you ever been on a bike ride longer than 25 miles? Would you like to join us? Come on for a ride with us,’” he says.

Iszauk is an equally zealous fundraiser. “He and I are both shameless about getting people as a part of the team,” Ungar says. “But he’s a shameless fundraiser. It’s positively amazing to watch.”

One particularly brazen example stands out in Ungar’s mind. Traveling past a scenic vista while on a training ride, the team happened upon a young bride and groom having their photos taken at the overlook. The unwitting young couple was unprepared for what was about to hit them.

“We, of course, congratulated them,” Ungar says. “But they engaged us in conversation, and it wasn’t five minutes before Alan was hitting up the groom for a donation to MS. We were a good-sized group, and I have to say the rest of the riders were agog.”

The long-running team, Ungar says, “is the oldest and the heaviest, that’s for sure.” Ungar was in his 40s when he took his first Escape ride over two decades ago. He turned 68 in September 2020. Iszauk will turn 69 in June 2021. The passage of time, says Ungar, has taken its toll on the team. “I’ve been doing this long enough that members of my team, good guys, have passed already,” he says. “We’ve actually taken rides to go visit their graves.”

### **Riding the storm out**

The coronavirus shut down countless activities and events across the United States in 2020. The Society’s fundraising walks and rides, including [Escape to the Lake](#), was among them, although many events transformed into virtual events.

Not content to sit idly by, the Hungarians organized three self-supported “replacement” fundraising rides in the event’s absence. The second ride in July was nearly 50 miles long. The ride featured a 4,300-foot vertical climb with temperatures in the mid-90s and took the team from Laurel Hill State Park, 65 miles south of Pittsburgh, to the Flight 93 National Memorial near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Both Iszauk and Ungar like writing “travelogue” emails, filling them with photos of the wildlife, scenery, quaint towns and architecture they pass along the way. They send their writing to ever-growing lists of family and friends, colleagues, plus would-be team members and donors.

“Yesterday was a day of superlatives...,” wrote Iszauk in one email dated July 20, 2020, one day after finishing the ride. “...The toughest bike ride I have ever participated in, the best peanut butter and jelly sandwich I ever ate, the hottest bike ride that I can remember, the most grateful I can be for the support, love and friendship of so many ... the list goes on.” Iszauk says the team raised more than \$65,000 in 2020.

Chris Pfeiffer, Bike MS manager, says he’s come to expect the team’s dedication to raising money to beat MS. “The Hungarians represent a commitment to the cause and continue to increase fundraising year to year. They bring others along and have a fun time doing it,” he

says. "The spirit of Alan and Bruce drives the team. They are the backbone of our wonderful events."

**Mike Knight is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in 2013.**

Join the [Hungarian ExCycled Racing Team](#) or donate.

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