

A Golden Legacy

A godfather of grass-roots racing passed from this world on May 6 when Bill McLain died of cancer. He was only 48.

No man is perfect, but McLain's life in the New Mexico cycling scene set a high standard. Whether officiating or orchestrating races, encouraging newbie racers or mediating between hotheads, McLain's calm was unflappable, his competence complete and his humor constant.

As recently as late March, McLain was still working the races. Cancer had aggressively spread in his lungs and brain, but there he was, megaphone in hand and sense of humor at the ready. After McLain had run through his pre-race spiel at the starting line of a recent event, a racer asked to use the bathroom. "Sure, go ahead," McLain replied. The man scrambled to a port-a-john. As soon as the door banged closed behind the racer, McLain cracked a smile, and sent the field on its way.

McLain came into cycling about 15 years ago in Albuquerque. As general manager of a Honda dealership, he worked six days a week, year-in, year-out. As a father and a husband, his connection to cycling began as it does for most of us — as recreation. But when McLain saw a need in his community, he stepped up. When most idly complained about a lack of races, McLain organized one. When most whined about a shortage of officials, McLain became one. When most grumbled about an arrogant racer, bad weather or lousy luck, McLain cracked a joke.

Despite his work schedule, family and his own desire to race, for the last decade McLain promoted more races than anyone in New Mexico. And he worked as a USCF or ACA official at dozens more.

McLain promoted a number of signature New Mexico events, such as the season-opener Highway 6 Road Race, the Sandia Crest Road Race — one of the few local races guaranteed to have a tidy purse — and the always well-attended Tuesday Night Crits.

None of these were big-time UCI races, but damned if McLain didn't run them smoother than some pro events. He also ran the Record Challenge in Moriarty, New Mexico, where time trialists from around the country make annual pilgrimages to take a whack at John Frey's 47:35 U.S. 40km record set on the flat, high-altitude highway.

As anyone who has promoted or officiated can attest, sacrificing a day so weekend warriors can race is thankless work; complaints come thick and fast, and expressions of gratitude are few and far between. But whether it was Bart Bowen or a Cat. III racer with a Bart Simpson attitude, McLain's demeanor was the same with everyone: relaxed and professional.

"Calm, steadfast, witty and wise — just what you need in

a person who was the face of bike racing in New Mexico for so many years," longtime racer Larry Coons wrote on an nmcycling.org forum, which is filled with page after page of tributes to McLain. "Most recently we knew Bill as the organizer of organizers, and the person who mentored so many. I always felt some sense of confidence knowing that Bill was in charge of a race."



BILL McLAIN 1957-2006

"Some may also remember Bill during his racing days," Coons continued. "He was a strong competitor, and on any given day, he had the ability to win any type of race. When he actually spent the time on himself to train, he was a gifted bike racer."

When officiating, whether for pros at the Tour of the Gila or beginners at a Tuesday nighter, McLain got the job done right. He was always promoters' first point of reference for guidance, and their first choice for chief official. Many New Mexico races were held on Sunday — McLain's one day off from his day job — specifically so he could officiate.

Similarly, racers knew any race put on by McLain would be a safe, solid affair. He was, as many called him, the gold standard — a title that applied equally to his personal life,

said his friend and teammate Randy Corcoran. "It is apropos to Bill as friend, teammate, employee, family man and citizen," Corcoran said. "He always listened and always made me laugh. He always left Christmas presents for my kids on the back porch. He fixed my bikes. He loaned his equipment without my asking."

Another teammate, Geoff Mather, recalled a time McLain waited at his dealership after-hours to help with a car battery. "Knowing the shop was closed and it was late, I told Bill that I'd install it at home," Mather said. "In his clean white shirt and tie, Bill removed the old battery — with the motor still running! Watching Bill carefully put his hands next to moving belts and a spinning fan, I asked him if I should turn the engine off. He responded, 'If we leave the engine on you won't lose the radio's preset stations.' Here was Bill staying late to assist a friend and only thinking of how he could be most helpful."

Mather offered this story as an example of McLain's character, and as a metaphor. "Most of us don't fully appreciate a car battery until it doesn't work," Mather said. "Even the most energetic of us don't realize our potential until we are properly connected. Bill quietly gave his energy to his friends and community, from a little spark to a full jump-start. Positive to positive and always grounding the negative."

Tom Spross now runs nmcycling.org, but he first met McLain years ago at his first race, where McLain explained the basics of cycling competition to him, and afterwards listened to his complaints.

"It soon became clear to me that Bill was not only 'the man' in the New Mexico cycling community, but also a very patient and forgiving person," Spross said. "One of the last times I saw Bill was at this year's Highway 6 race. He was obviously struggling with serious physical and mental challenges, but did his best. And that was still better than any other promoter/official I have met in the years since that first encounter. I know he was working on another Crest race right up until his last week with us. Bill was still clearly 'the man' in cycling right to the end."

"In the few years that I knew him, Bill was my mentor and role model in so many ways," Spross continued. "He helped me become a promoter and official. More importantly, he showed me how one person can be strong, patient, committed, humble, calm, joyful, reliable and full of integrity. It is now clear to me that Bill was also 'the man' in a much larger sense."

We used to joke that if McLain ever died, local racing would dry up and blow away. But he inspired and taught so many, we know that will not happen. The question is not whether other people will take his place, but rather just how many will be required to do what was done by this one man.

Thanks for the ride, Bill.