

The way we roll: How COVID-19 has changed cycling



Brad Burton, owner of Cadence 120 in Mobile, talks about the battle to keep the store stocked amid a surge in demand driven by the coronavirus shutdown. The bikes behind him are among dozens awaiting repairs; the boxes along the far wall are part of a major shipment of new bikes.

By [Lawrence Specker](#) | lspecker@al.com, July 10, 2020

Alabama bike shop owner Clint Jameson got one warning before COVID-19 turned his whole industry into a madhouse.

"About two weeks before it all hit, before the shutdown, I had a guy come in, a guy I know. He comes in with his family and says, 'I need nine bicycles today, Clint,'" Jameson said.

"He knew," said Jameson. "How he knew, I don't know, but he knew."

A couple of weeks later, everybody knew: Kids from preschool up to college age were flocking home as schools shut down. Adults were working from home. Bars, restaurants, gyms were closed, sports was going away. Meanwhile there suddenly were a lot fewer cars on the road and the weather was fabulous.

"They're looking for something to do," recalled Tommy Reagh, managing owner of Trailhead Bike Shop in Huntsville. "Get out of the house so they don't kill each other, get out of the house to get some fresh air, whatever."

It's no secret at this point that the COVID-19 shutdown drove a massive surge of interest in bicycling and a tsunami of demand for bikes and repairs. But a few months in, people in the business are just now getting enough of a breather to think about the long-term impacts. Cycling advocates are just beginning to see hints of the potential long-term effects that could emerge, thanks to having thousands of new riders hitting streets and trails. They're beginning to hope it could have long-term benefits for children, families and communities.

"I don't see it as a 2020 thing," said Jameson, owner of Adventure Earth in midtown Mobile.

THE SPRINT

Bike shop owners seem to agree on major points of their 2020 experience. There was a day or two of uncertainty as state leaders ordered a shutdown of non-essential businesses in late March. Then once it was made clear that bike shops were considered essential, they were slammed.

"'Tsunami' is a great word," said Phil Hooper, owner of Eastern Shore Cycles in Daphne. "It just was instant. As soon as they said, stop going to work, find some outdoor activities, it was like a wave that just kept coming."



Eastern Shore Cycles' showroom floor usually is crowded with bikes for sale. A spring sales spree and a shortage of fresh inventory has left it, and many other bike shops, with empty racks.

It wasn't just that new bikes were selling like hotcakes. People were bringing in bikes for repairs. That's always a part of the business in spring, but not like this.

"In 30 years, I've never seen anything like it," said Hooper. "We saw bikes coming out of garages that looked like they hadn't been touched in five, six, seven years." Such a bike needs a thorough overhaul that replaces dry-rotted tubes and tires, rust-frozen chains, stuck cables. It's a two- or three-hour project for a mechanic, and Hooper's shop was taking in a dozen or more of them a day.

If the surge brought opportunity, it also brought headaches and tough choices.

At Cadence 120, a shop that's been a fixture for decades in west Mobile, owner Brad Burton was seeing a level of business comparable to his annual Super Bowl Sunday sale, day after day. While the level of traffic was a boon, it meant his staff had no time for repairs. Eventually he posted a notice on Facebook that he was cutting back on showroom hours so that his staff would have more time to put bikes together.

Many shops made similar adjustments. Some owners said that they had to meet the surge short-staffed, because employees had child-care obligations now that schools and daycare facilities were closed.

"We kept thinking any day this surge is going to end," said Hooper. "And it didn't."

With repairs backlogged for weeks, shop owners anguished over how to handle things fairly. Hooper said the hardest thing of all was telling regulars that he couldn't do a quick job for them on the spot -- such as installing a new inner tube -- because, like many, he'd gone to a strict first-in, first-out policy on repairs. He had to shut down his online ordering system, which had never been built for this kind of demand: He'd arrive at work in the morning and realized the system had accepted three buyers for one bike on his showroom floor, or an order for a bike in some distributor's warehouse that was no longer available.

There was also an awareness of how much pain the shutdown was causing for others. "I have several friends whose businesses have closed," said Jameson. He was busy, but it didn't seem like a time to crow about it.

The surge created jobs. In Mobile, Jameson added a second shift of mechanics to work on bikes after hours. Burton hired more people. So did Hooper. Keeping the mechanics supplied with the parts they needed rapidly became an issue, because wholesale channels had been sucked dry. Owner after owner said that basics such as chains, tubes and tires remain scarce even now.

Reagh, in Huntsville, said at one point he had to tell a customer that he couldn't sell him a simple floor pump, the most basic accessory a bicyclist could desire, because he couldn't get his hands on any. "He was looking at me like I was crazy," Reagh said.

"I cannot order a kickstand," said Jameson. "I can't find a kickstand anywhere."



At Adventure Earth in Mobile a stack of boxes suggests a rich inventory of new bikes. But many of them were already sold before they arrived.

Owners confessed to adopting what Reagh called a “toilet paper mentality:” If you can find it, buy it.

“I bought every seven-speed derailleur my distributor had,” said Burton. “I just got 20 chains, and I ordered 30 more.”

Reagh said he’s spending a lot of money on shipping, because he buys stuff wherever he can find it. Likewise, “Pretty much all I did yesterday was chase parts,” Burton said Thursday.

When it comes to new bikes, nationwide scarcity also is the rule of the day. Hooper and Jameson both said they’d sold new bikes to buyers as far away as Houston.

A recent visit to Eastern Shore Cycles found a showroom full of empty display racks. “Right now we have four or five bikes in here that are actually new bikes for sale,” Hooper said. The same was true of a sister shop in Foley, he said.

Hooper said he’d gotten in four new bikes the previous week. The week before that had been a little better.

The general expectation seems to be that supplies are going to be uneven for the next few months. At Adventure Earth, Jameson had at least a dozen bikes available for sale, but a lot of his showroom floor was taken up by repair jobs. A stack of boxes against one wall looked like a jackpot, but it was at least partly an illusion.

“I’ve been lucky the last couple of weeks getting some inventory,” Jameson said. “But a lot of those boxes are spoken for.”

“Spoken for” has also been the case at Cadence 120. “We haven’t assembled a bike for the sales floor in three months,” said Burton. “We’ve been building bikes that have already been sold.”

As at Adventure Earth, a lot of Cadence 120’s floor space was eaten up by bikes awaiting repairs. As at Eastern Shore Cycles, only a few new bikes were available for sale. But dozens and dozens and dozens of boxes were stacked floor to ceiling along one wall. A shipment of about 135 new bikes recently came in and they’re up for grabs.

Burton said he doesn’t think that shipment signals the end of the drought. He expects things to be a little uneven into September.

Hooper said manufacturers had done their 2020 production runs based on expectations that had been blown out of the water. Now they’ve been rushing to ramp up what would have been their 2021 season. “We’re pacing the floor for that to be done sooner rather than later,” he said.

BUILDING A BIGGER PELOTON

To use a phrase made famous by Lance Armstrong, “it’s not about the bike.” Long-term changes, if they come, will be about the people. One of the big unknowns at this point is whether a short-term surge in cycling will transform people into long-term stakeholders in cycling issues.

And the epidemic’s impacts haven’t all been positive. Road cyclists in particular are known for riding in tight groups that allow them to draft each other, cruising farther and faster than they could individually. Fears about airborne coronavirus transmission virtually killed off those group rides for a few months.

On a popular route like the one that carries roadies from downtown Mobile around the Brookley airfield and down the shore of Mobile Bay to the Dog River Bridge, bicyclists remained a commonplace sight throughout spring. But they tended to be alone or in groups of three or four, not the swarms usually seen on any Tuesday or Thursday evening or weekend morning.

Only recently have riders begun to congregate the way they used to, and as they've done so they've had to figure out where they stand in regard to the increased emphasis on masks.

One particularly illustrative group is The Riders, a Mobile group founded, in part, to encourage and support cycling among people of color. Because it quickly became clear that the epidemic was hitting Black Americans particularly hard, the group's response was pro active. It basically shut down its group rides for a few months.

Victor Lett, one of the ringleaders of the group, said he wasn't about to make people sign a COVID liability waiver: The Riders just isn't that formal an entity. He also wasn't willing to run the risk that group rides would make people sick.

"I didn't want that to be on my watch," Lett said.



Victor Lett and members of the cycling group The Riders show off custom face coverings on a recent ride. The group is standing atop the Dog River Bridge, a common turnaround point for road rides starting in downtown Mobile.

"Even though we weren't seeing each other, we were still connecting on Strava and we still connected with the leaderboard," Lett said. Strava, a popular cycling app that lets people share routes and statistics, can function as a cycling-specific social media channel, Lett and other sources said. A weekly virtual leaderboard also helped keep interest up, letting everybody know who was putting in how many miles. (Many sources who spoke for this story mentioned Strava as a tool for new riders to find popular routes and connect with more experienced cyclists.)

When The Riders did return to group activity recently, they didn't just meet the mask question head-on, they owned it: Member Eric Young had a batch of face coverings printed up with the group's name and logo. They've put their brand on COVID-era cycling.

The Riders roll from Serda's Coffee at 7 a.m. every Sunday, and like every other publicized ride in town the trip is open to whomever can show up and keep up. The racial makeup depends on who shows up and can range anywhere from 50-50 to 90-10. As for who can keep up, the pace tends to be moderate. The group vibe is more about support than raw speed.

Lett said he's seen new riders getting interested during the spring of COVID-19. Welcoming them into the pack dovetails with what The Riders already was doing.

"I think cycling breaks down barriers," said Lett. "It doesn't matter what color you are, what race, what gender, what sex, what religion. I feel like it's one community. I feel like, across the board the cycling community has been very welcoming here in Mobile."

How many new riders will stick with it long-term is an open question.

"You're certainly going to have a percentage who lose interest when their lives get back to normal," said Hooper. As for the others, he said, "That's going to be upon us, as the shops and as the bike community, to cultivate them and keep them."

Hooper and other owners contacted for this story said one sign of long-term hope is that bikes with 24" wheels had been a particularly hot item this spring. That's the last size before kids move up to adult-sized bikes, so the sales mean that a lot of 9- to 12-year-old kids have been hitting the roads.

"I ordered 10 24" bikes this morning, because they became available," Jameson said on Wednesday. "There's no 24" tubes, there's no 24" tires," said Burton.

"What we're seeing now is more families riding together and more kids riding," said Jameson. He's excited by the thought that he's seeing the reversal of a longtime societal trend.

"We've turned into a world where, if your best friend lives a mile away, prior to COVID your mom would drive you there," he said. Now maybe you hop on a bike, the way kids used to do.

"I'm calling it a back-to-basics movement," said Burton. "Have we overscheduled our kids? Have we let our kids be kids?" The COVID-19 shutdown, for all the pain it has brought, has given people a chance to step back. Maybe, he said, it's put the focus back on simple things, like having a family meal together, or going for a ride together.

Charlotte Lee, a longtime cycling advocate with the Baldwin County Trailblazers, shares such hopes. For 25 years the group has pushed for projects such as the Eastern Shore Trail, a pathway that gives pedestrians and cyclists a route from the north side of Daphne all the way through Fairhope to Weeks Bay.

"People who haven't been on a bike in 10, 15, 30, 40 years are going hmm, there's a bike the garage," she said. They're rediscovering that there is "a joy that comes from being on that bicycle and having the wind in your face, and a sense of freedom," she said. If they're anything like her, she said, it takes them back to the days of being "a free-range child."

She's not overly worried that summer heat will kill of the springtime boom.

"Walking's wonderful, but walking is *hot*," she said.

The Trailblazers recently announced that with their support, bicycle racks are about to be installed in downtown Foley. That deal had its share of moving parts: The money came from the Barry Lee Booth Family Fund at the Community Foundation of South Alabama, the racks required approval from the Foley City Council and they'll be installed by Foley Main Street Inc.

Lee said that having bike parking in place is "an enormous physical indicator" that a community has embraced cycling and wants to support it.

"It's a real indication there's a commitment," she said. Racks are a small thing, and certainly an inexpensive one, compared to dedicated bike lanes. But the long work to connect Baldwin County communities via the Eastern Shore Trail has shown that there's a chicken-and-egg factor. Communities are slow to invest in cycling infrastructure unless they see interest in cycling, but the lack of safe routes suppresses interest.

"The paradox is, the more people get out, the safer it gets," she said.

She's hopeful that the current surge in interest will be pivotal in showing communities that more investment is worthwhile. It's a hope that Reagh shares in Huntsville.

"My hopes are that if half the people who have brought things out of the deep recesses of the garage stick with it, maybe we'll get some bike lanes," Reagh said. "I hope, I really hope, and not just because I'm in the business, I hope it sticks with a lot of people, because I would love to see Huntsville put in some key bike lanes."

"That's a reasonable theory," said Jeff Feet, president and education chair of the Alabama Bicycle Coalition. "It's a reasonable theory and getting kids out riding is the place to start."

However, Feet said, hope isn't a strategy. And while the surge of interest definitely is a positive thing, he said, some of it will have to turn into activism before things change.

Feet said he thinks sweeping pro-cycling initiatives at the state level are unlikely. The push for cycling infrastructure has to start at the local level, he said. Recreational cyclists and utilitarian cyclists both have to get better about pushing elected officials for bike lanes and other infrastructure.

Whether it's a city council meeting or an Alabama Department of Transportation town hall on some road project, "it doesn't take a lot but it does take somebody showing up, somebody local," Feet said.

It may be a while before new cyclists emerge as new cycling advocates. But there definitely are signs that a lot of new riders are catching the bug. They're making return visits to the shops, buying better bikes, buying cycling shorts and other specialized gear. They're the ones who lead shop owners to think 2020 won't be a flash in the pan.

"We get three or four of those people a day," said Jameson. His conversations with people in the industry lead him to think this will be a three- to five-year lift. But who knows? He's still mystified by the one customer who beat the rush, buying bikes for himself, his wife, his kids, his in-laws and his parents in one swoop. The guy isn't a stockbroker or a politician or a medical professional who had some inside information. He's got a specialized business in construction and woodworking. All of which is to say it's hard to know whose prediction will be correct.

One thing he's sure of, though, is that some new riders will discover a lifetime love. He's seen it happen before. He still goes out for rides with at least one guy who got interested when Armstrong won his first Tour de France.

"That's 21 years ago," he said.