

# Getting in gear for today's bike race



The Philadelphia Inquirer / GERALD S. WILLIAMS

**Carl Norman Blum, 8,** leads a pack of midget-class racers in the CoreStates Amateur Bike Challenge. Following close behind is Jontel Braun, 9. Yesterday's competition for youths ages 8 to 18 gives way to the adult contests today. **Sports, C1.**

By Richard Jones  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Twenty-three hours to race time, and the wizard of two wheels was hard at work. Before the sale-seeking Saturday morning shoppers, the Hawaiian-shirted tourists and the hard-core weekend warrior cyclists were up and about, Sal Lilienthal had already worked up a sweat. He'd been up since a little after dawn. He

would spend the rest of his morning — and the rest of his day — leaning into a van parked just outside the Independence Mall Holiday Inn, headquarters of the CoreStates U.S. Pro Championship.

A mechanic for the Motorola cycling team, Lilienthal was adding bike wheels, adjusting bike saddles, taping bike handlebars, screwing on bike computers, changing bike gears and taking care of just about any-

thing else bike-related.

Like an anxious soprano gargling one last time before her big solo, Lilienthal and the other players in today's 156-mile competition all tended to their little pre-race rituals yesterday.

For some — such as the mechanics and trainers — it meant frantically filling water bottles for a cycling team or hurriedly as-

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**RACE** from A1  
sembling \$5,000 bikes. For others — the riders and coaches — it meant nothing more strenuous than eating or taking a nap.

For all of them, it was one last chance to bounce nervously backstage, to get ready for today's performance.

The big solo. Race day.

The day of preparation was especially important for Lilienthal. He is like most mechanics, or "wrenchers" as they're affectionately called, who are mostly unacknowledged scholars of cycling. Nary a wheel turns without them.

Lilienthal had a typically tough day ahead. He and his partner, Mike Kosmatka, would have to put together 10 bikes (six bikes for the race, and four more standing by in case of an emergency) and put together about 30 bike wheels in all. It would be a short day for them. Only 10 hours.

Lilienthal said he got his first mechanic's job when he was a college student. "I knew how to change a flat," he said. "Other than that, I didn't know anything."

Three years ago, he was hired by the Motorola team, and now he can tell you the best way to get glue off bike rims (paint thinner), his favorite new bike wheel (Mavic CXP30) and how the guys on the team like their bikes (fast).

He lives near Kortrijk, Belgium, a town not far from the French border. That's the base for many U.S. cyclists — including the now-retired Greg LeMond.

He doesn't get home much. He was looking forward to a chance to see his younger brother, Ryan, who was coming from New York to visit for the day. Lilienthal said he looks forward to coming to CoreStates for more than just the racing.

"I love Philly, man, those cheesesteaks," he said. "We went over to Jim's for cheesesteaks the other night. It was great. They don't have Jim's in Kortrijk."

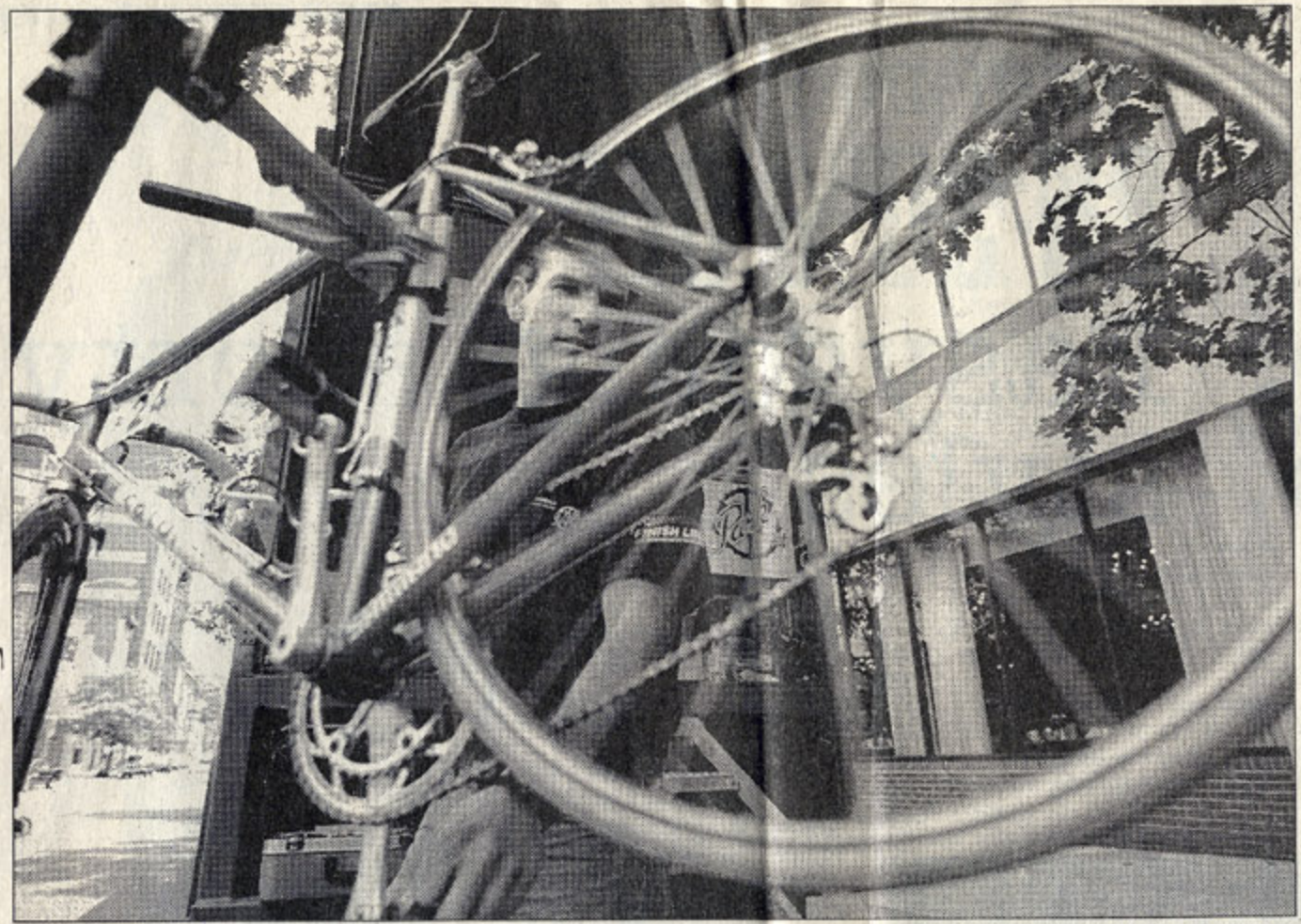
Wrenchers such as Lilienthal say they don't mind anonymously toiling over grease-spattered gears for hours at a time while the riders get all the attention.

"This whole thing is just one big moving show. They're the stars," Lilienthal said. "I don't mind being behind the scenes."

For most of those stars, yesterday consisted of eating, sleeping, getting a massage and, oh yeah, riding their bikes for a little while.

"The idea is just to eat as much as possible and rest as much as possible," said Paul Sherwen, acting coach of the Motorola team. "The riders today (Saturday) will only go out on their bikes for about two hours."

"Saturday night is the big meal — 2,000 or 3,000 calories," he said. During the day "they'll have rice, pasta



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**Sal Lilienthal, a mechanic** for the Motorola team, is responsible for making sure the bikes are ready to race. The Belgium resident has enjoyed his visit here. "I love Philly, man, those cheesesteaks," he said.

and omelette on top of a normal breakfast. They'll need this because they're going to burn something like 5,000 calories in the race."

Besides eating, the riders will also have to drink.

That's where folks like Emma O'Reilly come in.

O'Reilly killed a few hours yesterday morning filling water bottles.

Like 100 of them.

Technically, she is known as a *soigneur* — say it: swan-yure — a term which, like so many in the sport, comes from the French. Translated, it means trainer, but folks like O'Reilly are much more than that.

They prepare meals, carry suitcases, wash clothes, handle first-aid, offer psychoanalysis, translate when necessary, and, of course, fill water bottles.

"We don't want the riders to worry about anything at all," said O'Reilly, a native of Dublin, Ireland, who works for the U.S. Postal Service team. "We want them to concentrate on the racing."

And, say the riders, even when they try not to, they do.

"You think about it constantly, constantly," said Norm Alvis, who rides for the Saturn team and who won the race last year. "You're going over and over it in your head. When you go out for a ride, you say, 'I rode with so-and-so today and what was their attitude like.' You don't want to be too tense, so you just try and relax."

To that end, Alvis had planned a gentle day.

Ride 54 "easy kilometers" (about 33 miles), take a nap, have a massage, check his e-mail on his laptop, read a little bit (he just started *The German Lesson*), eat that 2,500-calorie dinner, attend a team meeting, watch the Stanley Cup finals (a resident of Colorado Springs, he's rooting for the 'Lanche), then go to bed.

And as the racing begins at 9 o'clock this morning on the Parkway — 10 laps of a course that stretches from Manayunk and back again — there'll be no more preparation, no more rituals, just the big solo. Showtime.

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