

SPORTS



Bob Luckey Jr./Staff photo

Greenwich High School graduate Sal Lilienthal took his interest in cycling and turned it into a career — first as a bicycle mechanic working with the likes of Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong and now as the director and co-founder of The Bicycle Tour Company, a Kent-based business that runs bike tours throughout the Northeast and in Europe.

GHS grad has turned his love of cycling into ...

His own world tour

By Mark Nacinovich
Special Correspondent

After traveling around the world for several years as a mechanic for professional cycling teams, Sal Lilienthal went to where he really wanted to be: close to home.

Home is Greenwich, and close to home is Kent, where in October 1997 Lilienthal, 32, co-founded The Bicycle Tour Company, a small business that provides cycling tours in the Northeast and Europe.

"The thing I've enjoyed the most about this has been being able to be back in Connecticut, to be with my family," said Lilienthal, a 1984 Greenwich High School graduate.

Lilienthal set up shop an hour-and-15 minute drive from Greenwich, where he grew up and his parents still live, and he has involved his family in his venture. Lilienthal's father, Peter, a business consultant, gives him business advice, while his younger brother, Ryan, and mother, Evelyn, work with him during tours.

Besides being close to his family, Lilienthal has found Connecticut to be a good place to give tours. Kent is in Litchfield County, a part of the state with rural roads ideal for cycling through vintage New England countryside; Greenwich, which hosts several day tours each season, has good cycling paths, too.

In its first year, The Bicycle Tour Company had 10 tours from May through September, including a one-day trip in Greenwich, several weekend trips in Litch-

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Greenwich's Wendy Shriver

A participant in one of the bicycle tours run by former town resident Sal Lilienthal

field County and a week-long tour of Spain.

This year, the number of tours has increased to 23. Although many of the trips — including four day tours of Greenwich that drew about 100 riders total — have already taken place, Lilienthal still has a packed schedule in front of him — a tour of France (August 29-Sept. 4); a trip to Spain (Sept. 27-Oct. 3) that he is organizing with the American Lung Association of Connecticut; a weekend tour in Litchfield County (Aug. 6-8) that will include a trip to the Litchfield Jazz Festival; a week-long trip to Litchfield County and the Berkshire Mountain region in western Massachusetts (Sept. 13-17); and a weekend excursion in Princeton, N.J. (Oct. 22-24).

Tour size is usually limited to 15 people, including company personnel. There are still openings available for all trips.

Lilienthal, the company's director, hopes to add a tour of Italy for the 2000 season, as well as trips to

Martha's Vineyard and a possible tour of the British Isles. Lilienthal eventually plans to have tours year-round, offering visits to warm-weather spots during the winter. (A 2002 tour of Australia and New Zealand is in the works.)

Although his tours have taken him all around the Northeast and across the ocean, one of Lilienthal's most memorable trips came earlier this summer, only miles away from home.

"Actually, on June 20th there was a group from New York that wanted to arrange a special trip all throughout the city," Lilienthal said. "We decided to route it from Brooklyn Heights to the Brooklyn Bridge and that was a really exciting experience. Just trying to get down the logistics of it all was really a fun challenge."

"We kept it on the side streets and were just kind of weaving our way through the city. We had lunch at one of the cafes and it was all extremely fun to do."

After raking in more than 100 customers last season, one of Lilienthal's goals for this year was to double that number. He's already surpassed it with more than 300 sign-ups with much of the season still remaining.

"We've been working very hard with our marketing and we've also had a great deal of help from a lot of different organizations," Lilienthal said of his company's success. "When people ask me what do I want to get out of these tours, I think about the couple who has been saving for a while to go on a European vaca-

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tion and who has chosen to do it on bike. I want to make their week with us memorable.

"I want them to get the most they can out of the week, whether it be with sightseeing, with our staff or with the hotels."

The tours consist of a mix of cycling, sightseeing and eating. In Spain, cyclists stayed at top hotels. On the cycling side, Lilienthal provides customers the same support professional cyclists receive — massages two to three times a week, transportation of bikes, mechanical help and roadside assistance. For the trip to France, Greenwich resident Veronique Mertl will serve as a translator.

The tours, Lilienthal said, are geared toward cyclists who are in good shape but are not necessarily ironmen or ironwomen.

"What I suggest to people is that they should be able to ride 20 miles one day, and the next day feel good enough to ride another 20 miles," Lilienthal said. "It's generally designed for the person whose interests are cycling, history, good food, good wine."

Jim and Wendy Shriver received a sampling of all of the above when they participated in Lilienthal's weekend trip to Litchfield last season. The Greenwich couple, who are longtime friends of Lilienthal's parents, were taken not only with the scenic view, but with Lilienthal's rapid success.

"It's great to see our friends' kid starting his own company and doing so well," Wendy Shriver said. "We took the weekend trip up to Lake Waramaug and we had a wonderful time. It wasn't a difficult ride, but it was very scenic. We stayed at a charming little inn and were even able to tour through some little art galleries."

"This tour is wonderful because you can really appreciate the beauty of riding around Greenwich and places in Connecticut, but also around the world as well. You see the world through different eyes when you're on a bike. We would definitely like to do one of his overseas trips if we could fit it into our schedule."

The cost of the tours ranges from \$60 for one-day trips, to \$390-\$490 for weekend trips to \$2,250-\$2,450 for the week-long European trips.

That Lilienthal is running a bike-tour company seems to be a fitting way for him to settle down after spending five itinerant years as a bicycle mechanic. His love for cycling and touring began the summer after his sophomore year at Greenwich High, when he took a cycling tour in France. He enjoyed the experience so much that he worked for the company that gave the tour — The Student Hostel Program — each of the next five summers.

After graduating from Hobart College in 1988, Lilienthal worked for four years at bike shops in Vermont. During that time, he became a licensed bicycle mechanic, a certification that enabled him to work for the U.S. national team, the squad that trains for the Olympics. That background launched his five-year stint as a

mechanic for U.S. professional cycling teams that traveled the globe.

During his final tour of a duty, a year as a mechanic for a team sponsored by Saturn, Lilienthal and two of his friends — Dave Bolch, the massage therapist for the 1996 U.S. Olympic Team, and Chann McCrae, a racer on the Saturn team — decided to start a tour business, McCrae, who is still racing professionally for an Italian team, isn't involved in the day-to-day operations of the company. Bolch, who lives in Texas, works with Lilienthal on a seasonal basis as the massage therapist for the European trips.

In addition to helping to provide some of the inspiration for his tour company, Lilienthal's extensive background on the professional circuit has also sparked a new endeavor. On Nov. 15, he will teach a one-day, continuing education course at Nonnewaug High School in Woodbury focusing on a day in the life of the prestigious Tour de France.

"I used to work for a lot of professional athletes so I'm familiar with the inside and behind the scenes working on what goes into a race like that," Lilienthal said.

Lilienthal said American Lance Armstrong's inspirational victory in this year's race should "no question" increase interest in both competitive and recreational cycling in this country.

Lilienthal actually spent three years working side by side with Armstrong. From 1994-96, Armstrong was the captain of the Motorola team, for which Lilienthal worked as a mechanic. Three other riders on that Motorola team — Frankie Andreu, Kevin Livingston and George Hincapie — rode with Armstrong on the U.S. Postal Service team at the Tour de France.

Lilienthal didn't catch much of this year's Tour on television, but he followed Andreu's daily Internet diary and cheered along with the rest of the U.S. cycling community when Armstrong, a cancer survivor, took the title.

"It was great," Lilienthal said. "I visited him in the hospital in 1996 in Indianapolis (when Armstrong was undergoing treatment). Despite all the stuff he was really positive."

Armstrong's win was a testament will as he covered the grueling, 2,288-mile course in 91 hours, 32 minutes, 16 seconds. Lilienthal's tours are a bit less taxing.

"I kind of joke with people that I'm going to change the name of the company to The 30-90 Company," Lilienthal said. "Thirty percent biking, 90 percent eating. It's definitely a little more relaxed pace."

For more information on The Bicycle Tour Company, please call Sal Lilienthal at 860-927-1742 or 888-711-KENT, or visit the company Web site at www.bicycletours.com.

— Staff Writer Alicia Winecz and Sports Editor Eric McHugh contributed to this report.