

Lilienthal's career keeps rolling along

BY KATHRYN BOUGHTON
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Sal Lilienthal did not set out to have a bicycle tour business. Neither did he grow up harboring dreams of traveling the world as a bicycle mechanic for some of the sport's top racers. It happened because he couldn't find a job as a bartender.

Mr. Lilienthal, who has operated the Bicycle Tour Company in Kent since 1998, will describe his peripatetic career in a talk at Backcountry Outfitters on June 3 at 7 p.m. The program, "A Day in the Life of the Tour de France," will be a behind-the-scenes look at bicycle racing.

Mr. Lilienthal has traveled the globe as a bicycle tour leader as well as a cycling professional with the Motorola and Saturn racing teams and has worked with cycling greats such as Lance Armstrong. He also served as a mechanic for the IME Cycling Team from 1991 to 1993 when the team was preparing for the Olympics.

Mr. Lilienthal's involvement in the world of biking began when he was a 15-year-old sent abroad on a biking tour of



Photograph by Kathryn Boughton

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Above, Sal Lilienthal at his Bridge Street business site; below, a contributed photo of a tour of Spain.



Lilienthal to speak on racing

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France. He enjoyed it so much he got a job the following summer with the same touring company.

"I'm a tourist and a recreational cyclist," he explained. "I was never a racer."

But that did not stop him from traveling with cycling teams for 10 years, working as a mechanic for top racers. As he described it, his evolution into this world was propelled by pure chance.

"It was just coincidence," he related. "I graduated from Hobart College in '88 but I didn't want to do the corporate thing. My idea was to go to Vermont, ski during the day and work as a bartender at night. The only problem was, I couldn't get a job at a bar. Then I noticed a bicycle shop next to the bar with a sign saying they needed a mechanic."

Mr. Lilienthal had spent his summers during college leading tours through Europe, but had no experience in repairing bicycles. He had, however, spent his sophomore year studying economic development in Sri Lanka and found he shared a familiarity with the country with the shop's owner. Based on that connection, he got a job.

The future threads of his life began to knit together the next summer when he led an Amsterdam to Paris bike tour. "I was actually in Paris on July 23, 1989, when Greg LeMond won the Tour de France," he related. "It was very exciting because he had been losing by 50 seconds and then he won a time trial by 58 seconds, letting him win the Tour by a total of eight seconds."

Excited by this brief contact with the racing world, Mr. Lilienthal went back to the shop in Vermont for the rest of the summer

and soon found himself volunteering to work events such as the Tour du Canada. "I had a great time and liked the atmosphere," he reported.

It was not long, however, before he and some friends decided to cycle across the country. "It seemed like a great idea," he said with a wide grin, "but we only got as far as Colorado when it started snowing—so we decided we should go skiing. We had been camping and biking and we were really scruffy, but I managed to get a job with a ski area in Winter Park, Colorado."

Then, his life really began to coalesce. He heard about a training course being offered in Colorado Springs for bicycle mechanics to work with the Olympic team. The four-day course cost \$75 and Mr. Lilienthal had \$90 to his name. "That was great because I needed that extra \$15 to get through to my next paycheck," he explained.

He enrolled in the course, hitchhiked to Colorado Springs, took the exam and passed, only to learn that his license would cost an additional \$20. "I had to send the \$20 for the license later," he said.

He worked with the U.S. team during the time trials for the '92 Olympics and found work successively with the IME, Motorola and Saturn cycling teams. "I loved bike racing," he said. "I loved traveling from town to town. It was fun, like traveling with rock stars. But by 1997, I had accomplished all my goals with cycling. It becomes very routine—actually, you want it that way. If [your work is routine, then if] there is an emergency in a race, you just do it without thinking."

During his 10 years on the road, he worked with many great racers, including Lance Armstrong. "I worked with Lance for three years," he said, hastening to add

that he was not Mr. Armstrong's personal mechanic. "At that time, there were no personal mechanics," he explained. "We did everything the same on each of the bikes."

He said he does not believe bicycle racing is about technology or equipment. "At that level, everyone has the best equipment," he said. "It is about the athlete, not the equipment."

Tiring of the road, he returned to the Northeast in 1997 and settled on Kent as the place for his business. The town reminded him of Vermont, he explained, but was still close enough to Greenwich so he could see his family regularly.

Mr. Lilienthal started his business by offering guided tours of France and Spain, but has since decided to focus more on tours along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. "When the business gets a little bigger, I would like to take groups to Europe again," he said.

Meanwhile, he provides equipment and tours for anything from the individual cyclist up through groups of 80 to 90 people. "The current terminology is 'a motor coach load,'" he said with a smile. He said he needs a staff of at least three for larger groups and that when the cyclists are camp kids, camp staff is also pressed into duty. "You need a larger ratio of guides to riders when they are kids," he said.

While rural Connecticut provides perfect biking routes, The Bicycle Company does not confine its tours to the country. He has developed day trips for both the Big Apple and Washington, D.C. Bicycles, support vehicles, tour guides, BTC t-shirts and water bottles are included in the tour rates, with costs ranging from \$60 to \$85 per person, depending on

the complexity of the tour and the services needed.

Mr. Lilienthal says he rents bikes to individuals for \$25 a day. "My services aren't only for tourists and weekenders," he said. "I'm also here for local people to use as a resource."

"I can't imagine doing anything else," he concluded.

His presentation June 3 is to be held at Backcountry Outfitters. Admission is free. The store is located at 8 Old Barn Road, near the intersections of Routes 7 and 341. Call 860-927-3377 or 888-549-3377 for more information.