



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BURRUS FAMILY

getting into GEAR

Freshman shows determination in his competitive cycling around the Kansas City area

WRITTEN BY SOPHIE TULP

When freshman Will Burrus was eight years old, he biked five miles up Colorado's 3,000 foot incline at Hoosier Pass. His dad, David Burrus, told him that the only way he would buy him a new road bike would be if he proved that he was dedicated. With weakened legs, sweat-soaked clothes and gasps for air, Will didn't just reach the top. He sprinted. He poured on the most effort his father had ever seen him put into anything, climbing those last 100 yards.

"[Riding Hoosier Pass] showed me how much drive he has," David said. "He does not like to lose at all and I did not realize that because he's such an easy going kid but...I promised him a new road bike and it showed me for the very first time how competitive he was."

They caught another glimpse of this competitive spirit when Will pretended to ride in the Tour De France as a kid, sprinting up and down Wenonga Road on his earned bike. A resiliency that showed through when he broke his jaw during a downhill accident, and got back on his bike weeks after recovery, ready to ride again.

At 5-foot-1 and barely 80 pounds, Will is hardly the biggest, fastest or strongest kid that cycles. But, what he does possess is a determination that his family and coach agree is unparalleled to many other athletes his age. Just this past December, Will's 280 point total, earned from high rankings in his Kansas Cycling Association competitive races awarded him 2013's Kansas Best All Around Rider (KBAR) for his 10-14 year-old age

group. "I wasn't surprised [when he got the award] because I know how much he sacrifices as an athlete," Will's club cycling coach Jim Whittaker said. "He does things that other riders won't do. He's a little guy, not the strongest competitor but he still goes and does his best. He's brave. The kid's a racer."

Will has just come off his best cycling season yet as the KBAR recipient. However, having entered into the Juniors 15-18 age group for the 2014 season, Will says he is now an underdog.

So, Will is back training for the Spring Fling on Feb. 29, the race that marks the beginning of this year's season. The Spring Fling races span five Saturdays and often go on snow or shine, with temperatures that can plunge into the single digits. It will be Will's debut in the Juniors 15-18 age group, and he knows that the odds are not in his favor.

"Being smaller is a double-edged sword," Will said. "Going uphill and on the flats, bigger people have a lot more power, but going downhill if you are lighter, you're small obviously and can hang on in the race until a hill and then...I can sorta level out the playing field for the next part of the race."

In preparation, instead of sledding and snowball fights over the recent snow days, Will went to work with his dad at Fitness Gallery, completing interval workouts on the stationary bikes — sprinting for minutes at a time, resting and beginning again — all to train for the upcoming races.

Will receives more specialized

training through his club cycling team, GP VeloTek. Junior, young-adult and adult riders can all be members of the Lawrence-based cycling club, which Will's mom Jennifer Burrus says creates a great environment for practice and learning.

"You don't actually have to be on a team to compete, but a team can be a great tool to train with," Jennifer said. "You learn lessons from some of the more experienced riders."

Joining the team has taught him about the cooperation and teamwork it takes to be a cyclist. While some people see cycling as an individual sport, riders support each other, often traveling in packs during races to get one chosen person across the finish line. As David says: one person riding their bike is just a person riding their bike, but when a rider works in a group, then he becomes a cyclist.

Will employs these qualities and skills that he learns during club practice, at races such as the Tour of Overland Park and the Tour of Lawrence.

He considers last year's Tour of Lawrence one of his personal best races. Fans, family and spectators lined the streets, creating a high-intensity atmosphere. After a rough start, having the chain of his bike fall off, Will says his anger fueled him to pass a majority of his competitors. He willed himself to push past his normal weakness of letting his knees give out towards the end of the race. Continuing to fly on through the hilly course, Will crossed the finish line in second place.

Although Will competes to earn titles — like his five first place medals,

and four state championships — his favorite races are the ones that don't count for anything.

Unofficial races like the "Tuesday Night World's," held every Tuesday during the summer in Lenexa, again, bring out Will's competitive side. He says it has made him a lot faster to be able to race altogether with not only Juniors but adults in high categories of cycling as well. It pushes Will to keep up with some of the fastest riders, giving a gauge of how he is doing, and putting his skills to the test.

"What I like about cycling is that you decide when you train and you decide how long you train and how hard," Will said. "But eventually, all the training shows up on the actual race course."

With the accomplishments of last year's season behind him, Will is trying to keep an optimistic attitude towards the upcoming one. He knows his new division will make it a more challenging season than his last four years of competitive cycling put together. But, what he lacks in physical size, he makes up in his determination and drive. Qualities that his parents know will carry him far in life, and what his coach says are essential to cycling success.

"[A good cyclist] must be a self-starter," Whittaker said. "And you better be aggressive. I mean racing is like driving your car during rush hour in New York City. And Will, he is a passionate fighter. He is fiercely determined."

essential racing GEAR

padded shorts



racing gloves



a good helmet



a road bike — the one with curvy handlebars