

Colorado Cycling's "Field of Dreams"

Doug Emerson runs one of the most successful independent bike stores in the United States. Located in the downtown area of cycling-mad Boulder, Colorado, University Bikes has been a mainstay of the Boulder commercial scene since the mid 1980s. And even in a town of 100,000 where there are more than twenty bike shops, "U Bikes" regularly polls as one of the most customer-friendly and popular stores in town.

Emerson grew up in the suburban Philadelphia area and migrated west to attend the University of Colorado in the late 1970s. "For me growing up, it was all Bruce Springsteen and muscle cars," he says. "I don't know why, maybe call it the hand of God, but I had wanted to own a bike store since I was ten years old." This was before the cycling craze really got started in the U.S., before Greg LeMond brought international racing to the attention of everyday Americans, long before Lance Armstrong. After initially working in a small local store, Emerson says he got tired of always answering the same three questions. "Do you rent bikes? No. Do you sell used bikes? No. Do you know anybody who does? No."

He capitalized on the niche and opened his own business in the early 1980s, working out of his house, with fifteen used bikes and a toolbox. The business grew steadily and at times rapidly over the years as American interest in cycling expanded through the LeMond and Armstrong eras, and University Bikes began to build a kind of legend along the way as the bike shop "where the pros go." A story which Emerson can confirm is when long-time resident and Giro d'Italia champion Andy Hampsten brought five-time Tour de France champion Miguel Indurain and his Spanish teammates to Boulder in 1995.

"They wanted to train at altitude before racing in the World Championships in Colombia. Andy asked me if I could meet them at the airport to help haul their equipment to Boulder, so I showed up with my pickup and a trailer. We dropped all the Banesto-emblazoned bike bags at the shop, and the next morning, my wide-eyed crew asked, 'What's all this stuff?' I hadn't told anyone about Banesto's visit, because I myself hardly believed it was going to happen. It was like owning a record store, and having the Rolling Stones hang around for a week."

Today, University Bikes employs more than fifty people. Says Emerson, "I borrowed \$10,000 from my dad to open this store back in 1985; today I sell bikes that cost more than that!" As an exclamation point on his success, University Bikes was voted the best bike shop in the country at the Interbike Awards ceremony in 2014.

As the success of his store grew Emerson had the luxury to look at other cycling business opportunities, and he began to look at other ways to contribute and give back to the Boulder cycling community. The area had great participation in road racing; Boulder had hosted stages of the early Red Zinger and Coors Classic races in the 1970s and 1980s, and, more recently, several stages of the USA Pro Challenge and Colorado Classic races – events which featured the top cycling teams in the world. It had become a mecca of mountain biking. Boulder's new Valmont terrain park hosted the national cyclocross championships in 2014, only two years after its original construction. Boulder also has a strong BMX community and the city heavily promotes bike commuting.

"But we looked around, and said 'Where is the track racing?' Without it, Boulder felt like a Hawaiian Island without any surfing spots. Why don't we have a velodrome?"

Emerson saw an opportunity to complete the circle of Boulder's cycling culture. "Track riding is cycling at it's purest. No gears, no brakes, no car traffic to worry about. It is an exhilarating and almost Zen-like experience to peel off 60 laps in a well-coordinated paceline. It clears your mind. Everyone who tries it finds it exciting; the experience sells itself every time," says Emerson. And experience and expertise on the track is often an important prerequisite or training step for success in other disciplines – particularly road racing. "You're much more likely to do interval training on a track," says Emerson, "and if you want

to learn how to finish a sprint in a criterium, you should practice it on a velodrome.”

Yet, because of costs, siting and permitting challenges and other logistical difficulties, there are fewer than 25 velodromes in the entire United States. Boulder had seen at least a half a dozen semi-serious efforts to build a velodrome since the 1970s, but those usually consisted of “getting together once a week, drinking beer, getting the newspaper to write an article, and then fading away,” says Emerson. “We felt that the community was really ready for a velodrome,” Emerson continues, and so he and a partner, Frank Banta, simply took the “Field of Dreams” approach – they just decided to do it, and started looking for a suitable piece of land. That initial commitment has turned into a fifteen-year long saga – at times more of a nightmare – but one which ultimately resulted in one of the country’s very few brand new velodromes.

After an exhaustive search beginning in 2004, Emerson and Banta acquired 4.2 acres of land in nearby Erie, Colorado in 2008 and spent more than two years just trying to get the requisite municipal and country permissions and permits. True to Boulder’s cycling roots, they tapped into the network of top pros and ex-pros to drum up interest and investment – Andy Hampsten, Taylor Phinney, Colby Pearce, Cari Higgins, and Thomas Prehn all became founding Members of the project. After getting all the approvals, breaking ground and finally beginning construction in 2011, the velodrome project ran into a series of one-in-a-million obstacles that delayed its progress and formal opening another three years.

The Colorado Front Range area doesn’t typically get tornadoes, but in August 2013, the partially constructed velodrome was hit by a surprise twister that destroyed 70 meters of the track. They were only about a week away from finishing the oval track. “Did we have insurance for tornados?” asks Emerson. “No. Erie doesn’t get twisters, why would we?” After a month spent cleaning up and fixing the damages, lightning struck again in the exact same place. The facility was slammed in September by the massive Boulder flood – the worst in the city’s history – which decimated the city and surrounding areas, ultimately resulting in over \$4 billion worth of property and infrastructural damages, and ten deaths.

“When you see someone on the news who has lost their home to a natural disaster, you feel bad, but it’s hard to relate,” says Emerson. “That really changed for us. Every piece of our equipment was under mud and water.” Again, the facility had made plans to install a flood-gate at the tunnel into the track, but it was still a few weeks away from construction. “Woulda, coulda, shoulda,” says Emerson. “It’s easy to look back.”

But Emerson and Banta persevered, and finally opened the Boulder Valley Velodrome (BVV) in 2014 – and it has been a good regional success story since that time. Says Emerson, “Architecturally, the facility is stunning – it looks like something that just landed from outer space. It is a fun and inspiring place to be.” Besides a regular schedule of racing and training events, the velodrome has hosted marriages, concerts, various types of parties and fund-raising events.

From a financial perspective, the main revenue sources for a velodrome are memberships, advertising/sponsorships, cycling classes and other special events. The BVV has active programs in all these areas, though it has not yet identified a primary or naming sponsor – preferring to leave that for a future owner. On the expense side, the BVV has full-time paid positions for a track director, a communications director, and an advertising/sponsorship salesperson. Most of the rest of the maintenance and administration is taken care of by dedicated volunteers. “It appears that we have a bunch of old cycling guys whose wives don’t allow them to be home between 10 am and 4 pm,” says Emerson. “Thank God for them; their dedication has been critical to our success.”

When asked about the rewards of the project, now looking back, Emerson says, “Unfortunately, Mother Nature basically removed the potential for any financial rewards. But to me, that’s not the most critical thing. The satisfaction of completing a project of pure passion has been very emotionally rewarding. Building an Olympic-sized velodrome is a tough bucket list item. Jumping out of an airplane will seem

pretty easy now.”

The facility is now becoming one of the top go-to locations in world cycling, and is already playing a role in helping to develop young riders who may one day qualify for the Olympics. As one of the few easily accessible high-altitude tracks, the facility hosted the Dutch Olympic team prior to the Rio Olympics, and many other national and international teams have trained here for top-level competitive events. “Theo Bos was here for a while, and when he went full gas,” says Emerson of the Dutch Olympian and world champion sprinter, “the track actually made a different sound.” But just as significant, says Emerson, is that “we are introducing many non-racers to the track, and we believe we have created the most inclusive, welcoming atmosphere of any velodrome on earth.”

Emerson and Banta are both now at or nearing a retirement age, and still have numerous other business interests. They have decided that it is time for the facility to take the next step – and hence they are seeking a new owner who can take the velodrome to the next level. BVV is a successful operation and is close to breakeven financial status. It was a long and difficult process to build the track, and often a difficult juggling act to manage, but its presence has brought new benefits and opportunities to Boulder’s cycling community. “The heavy lifting is done,” says Emerson, “Almost every metropolitan area in the country has looked at trying to build a velodrome – ours is done, we’re riding it every day. We followed our passion, we persevered through some pretty epic setbacks, but we got the ball across the goal line.” Emerson and Banta now hope that they can find the right and committed new owner who can help them do an end zone dance – and who can provide Colorado’s growing cycling community with a world-class velodrome to enjoy into the long-term future.

Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, August 8, 2018