

The A-SIG is Born . . . and it is Truly a Labor of, um, Love

by Christy Guzzetta, NYCC Lifetime Member

Once upon a time, “A” rides were fast and furious. Guys (few – if any – women came out for A rides back then) with shaved legs, tight wool shorts, 10-speeds and shoes with cleats nailed to their soles would blast off from Central Park, only a small percentage of whom would ever return. What happened to the rest was anyone’s guess.

The A ride philosophy was simple; people who showed up for A rides were adults. If they could keep up, fine. If not, oh well, not our concern. If someone didn’t have cleats nailed on just right, he was clearly a nerd. If his frame wasn’t Reynolds 531 or Columbus tubing, he was likewise a nerd. If his components weren’t Campy Nuovo Record or Campy Super Record, he must be from Nerdsville, U.S.A.

If you came out for an A ride, you had two options: keep up or get dropped – A riders didn’t care which you chose. A rides were fast and furious. Rarely could the uninitiated stay with the pack. There were probably eight A riders in all of New York City. And if you thought you could be number nine . . . good luck to you.

It was intimidating, scary, disheartening. The A riders took pride in the difficulty of their rides; long, fast, hard. They enjoyed counting the numbers of those who did not return. After all, you can’t just wake up one day and be an A rider. It takes practice, skill, conditioning, know how. Some people would try for a ride or two, get dropped (“Where am I?” “How do I get home?” “Is everyone laughing at me?”), then take up ballroom dancing. Others would become B riders and hold a grudge against the A’s for the rest of their natural-born lives. The A riders were mean, tough, indifferent.

But something happened that softened the heart of one of those hardcore A riders – something that would also change cycling for the A riders and NYCC forever.

Christy Guzzetta was that hardcore A rider and arguably the fastest bike in all of New York City! He was a bachelor back then and trying to score points with a very pretty girl he saw often riding a chromed Cuevas in Central Park. Jody Sayler was her name. The year before Christy spotted her, she had crashed and blown out her knee. She had been on crutches for most of the time since. They both wondered, “How would she ever be able to ride an A ride with that knee?”

Ever-resourceful Christy had an idea. “I’ll show you how to be an A rider, Jody. We can ride together.” he suggested. “We’ll start slow, do a short ride. Next week, we’ll add a couple of miles, pick up the speed by half a mile an hour. And we’ll do it again the week after that, and the week after that, and the week after that, and the . . .” Jodie agreed. What a fantastic plan!

So Christy laid out the whole schedule – 17 rides, starting the first weekend in March. “By July 4th Jody, it’ll be like you never had a knee problem in your life,” he assured her. “And you’ll be riding centuries, and you’ll be riding fast.” But he did not need to state the obvious, “And you’ll be riding with me, Jody.”

It is March 1, 1986. A riders are already hammering. Christy is planning to toodle 25 miles with Jody on her first ride since her big crash. But he wondered, "Will Jody be able to put up with my crazy mouse tricks for 17 weeks? My stupid teeth tricks? My dumb jokes?" "Uh, oh. I'd better get some people to come along," Christy thought, "I'll need to give the poor girl a break."

So Christy invited several strong B riders to join them, B riders who always wanted to be A riders but didn't know where to start. To make it official, he put a notice in the New York Cycle Club Bulletin. He called his cycling program the "SIG" (for Special Interest Group) – because "we were special." And, because "we have a special interest." The first SIG was born!

A group of 40 non-A riders showed up that first Saturday in March 1986. Seventeen weeks later, there were eight new paceline-riding, butt-kicking, hooting-and-hollering A riders. Eight great new friends. And . . . Jody and Christy had fallen in love. Cycling and life as they all knew it would never be the same.

Flash forward to March 1, 2011. Literally hundreds of new A riders have completed the A-SIG program since 1986. In the A-SIG, they learned that being an A rider took nothing more than practice, skill, conditioning, and know how. Additionally, thousands of cyclists have completed the other A-, B-, and C-SIG programs that have developed over time. Each SIG develops the "know how" to better enjoy that particular ride classification.

Christy and Jody married! A number of other marriages and many, many new and great friends have sprung from what started as a scheme to meet a gal back 25 years ago. The A-SIG series has been honed to 12 rides.

Since those long-gone hardcore A-rider days, lycra was invented, as was carbon fiber, titanium, 30-speeds. Lots of women now participate in the SIGs, Campy Nuovo Record is long gone, no Reynolds 531, and you couldn't get a nail in the bottom of a pair of cleats with an air hammer.

People have graduated from the SIGs, become spirited leaders of Club rides, and enthusiastic officers of the New York Cycle Club. Many uncovered a talent and bug for racing and have become champions at the local CRCA level, on the professional racing circuit and literally around the world. The A-SIG has indeed produced many great riders. Even more exciting than that, the SIGs have produced countless great friendships.