

Hi Jake

I received this article
about Jay Abbott from
my sister who lives
on Bainbridge Is.
where Jay lived.

If you feel it pertinent,
you're welcome to add
it to his obit, if
not, then I understand.

Thanks

Dave Poppers
DAVE POPPERS

STILL GRINDIN'

■ After a few tough knocks, Gear Grinders keep going

By John Becerra Jr.
Special to the Kitsap Sun

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND — It's been a long ride for the Gear Grinders of Bainbridge Island over the years.

From the beginning, when they had to struggle to get bikers, to finding success at state and suffering the tragic loss of a beloved coach in **Jay Abbott** last year, the team has persevered.

They wrapped up their fourth year of competition in the Washington Student Cycling League at the state championship Sunday at Riverside State Park in Spokane.

The two teams — high school and middle school — are made up of students from the island.

The team started in 2011 when Gordon Black, a longtime cycling advocate and the founder of Squeaky Wheels, and Herman Vroom, who has been the only coach of the high school team, founded the Gear Grinders to help promote mountain biking

on the island, especially among kids. Herman's daughter, Anika, was interested in racing competitively.

"We thought it was pretty cool, and it was something for us to do as a family," Herman said.

Though they didn't have many students interested at first, things changed once the Washington High School Mountain Bike League was started in 2012 by the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance.

The league is described as a 'holistic youth empowerment program' through mountain biking for students across the state. The season starts in January and ending in May, with a preseason held in the fall. Those who are interested must pay a fee, but there are scholarships available, and teams are encouraged to fundraise.

All that is needed is a bike and helmet to race, but they also use safety glasses and gloves, among other equipment. Vroom



Gear Grinders coach Herman Vroom goes over a pre-practice bike check with Erik Hammer, 13, near the Grand Forest last week.

See GRINDERS, 4B

GRINDERS

from 1B



LARRY STEAGALL/KITSAP SUN

Gear Grinders coach Herman Vroom rides to the Grand Forest during practice last week.

said a solid bike is fine, without having to spend thousands of dollars on one.

There are four races every season around the state. Depending on the skill level and fitness level of the racer, they can do anywhere from one to four laps.

"We don't have any varsity riders," he said. "We just don't have any that are that strong," noting that they have talented riders but their strength has been in their youth, with a lot of middle school riders. It's also tough to keep riders, as many have other interests and sports.

Sebastian Belkin, who trained with the Gear Grinders last year and won a gold medal at the Northwest Cup, the top mountain bike racing event in the region, moved on from the team to focus on other racing styles.

They try to keep the teams manageable because of logistics and other variables, such as keeping the use of the trails at a minimum. The team, made up of 34 riders this season, trains twice a week and also take part in spin classes at Island Fitness. They also go off island to ride on other trails in the county.

The Gear Grinders also require that riders do six hours of community service each season as part of trail building parties that they hold for maintenance and upkeep of the trails.

They now have a solid

core of students who enjoy riding.

"With middle schoolers, it's really easy to draw them in," Vroom said. "We just try to keep it as fun as we can, but challenging at the same time. The main success is that all the racers are participating. In the past, that percentage, especially for middle schoolers, was much, much smaller."

Connor Lacroix, a freshman at Bainbridge High School who has ridden with the Gear Grinders since seventh grade and captains this year's team, likes the camaraderie within the Gear Grinders.

"There's a lot of nice people on the team, which is nice compared to the other sports, where you have some of the meaner people on that team," he said. "It's kind of a casual thing where it's not super competitive, but you do get pushed to do your best if

you want to."

The Gear Grinders have done their part to continue their team in the memory of **Abbott**, the head coach of the middle school team who suffered fatal injuries during a fall on a training run at Grand Forest East Park.

Three-year rider Max Hale, a freshman at Bainbridge who was behind Abbott, recalls he saw Abbott's pedal hit a log that was sticking out on the trail.

"I remember him going over the handlebars and I think he just landed in the perfect spot, just fractured his vertebrae," he said. "There's probably a crash every ride and we just get up and keep going."

Despite the loss, the team decided to continue on racing. They also got encouragement from Abbott's widow, Darlene Kordonow, to keep on going.

"It was nonstop on our

minds (after it happened)," Vroom said. "Those students didn't want to go through that trail. But now, I think that they've experienced that life does go on and we've moved on. ... When that first race came around (this season) we did talk a bit about his values and that the kids should be competing at their best but that they should also be good sports and be polite.

"That's what Jay would have wanted us to do. That he would have been proud of seeing the team competing."

To honor his memory, the team founded the **Jay Abbott Memorial Fund** through Bainbridge Island Parks and Recreation to help students with costs who want to ski, sail and mountain bike — three activities he loved. They also made sweatshirts for the team that say 'Always riding with you, J.' Vroom likes how it has a double meaning of how they are riding with Abbott in spirit and he is likewise riding with them.

They also plan to name a **pump track** after him that was recently approved by the Bainbridge Island Parks and Rec Board. It will be built by the riding community at Battle Point Park.

They also have a small memorial for Abbott at the spot where he fell on the trail.

Vroom likes to pay his own personal tribute to it when he goes by.

"Me, when I ride past it, I always like to think to myself 'Hey Jay. We're still going,'" he said.