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AFRL officer wheels to cyclocross national

by Brett Turner, Skywrighter Staff

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Ohio — What can you say about a sport where you can bike, run and maybe even play in the mud? Second Lt. T.J. Turner offers a simple description of cyclocross.

"It's pretty much the most pain you can have on a bike in an hour," he said. "While you're in the middle of it, you question yourself 'why am I doing this?'"

For guys like Turner, it hurts so good. That's why he'll be racing twice in three different categories at the Cyclocross National Championships Dec. 13-14 in Portland, Ore.

Turner, a materials process research engineer at the Air Force Research Laboratory, called cyclocross 'the fastest growing cycling discipline in the country.' He describes it as sort of like steeplechase on a bike.

The bike used is not quite a mountain bike and not quite a road bike, but a modified hybrid of the two. The brakes used are more common to a mountain bike, but the tires are thicker than those on a road bike, but not quite as thick as those on a mountain bike.

Cyclocross has a military connection. It emerged out of the northern European battlefields of World War I. Cyclists would take messages from command posts to the front lines at the time. In doing so, they would sometimes have to peddle through rough, sloppy terrain and often carry their bikes over hazards.

Following the war, cyclists began using these principles to maintain off-season fitness and improve their riding skills. And a sport was born.

Cyclocross competitions are done on a field, which could combine grassy sod and some pavement. Courses, which normally range from 100-200 meters often include wooded areas with steep run-ups and hazards requiring competitors to carry their bikes on their shoulders.

The typical course takes somebody of Turner's caliber 7-10 minutes to complete. The trick is to complete the most laps around it in an hour for time.

The leader at the one-hour mark is then required to do one more lap, and the winner is determined from there.

Turner began his biking career as a road racer, and then moved into mountain biking. His first encounter with cyclocross was in 1997.

Some of his friends were using it as a fitness tool after their road and mountain season ended. Cyclocross season is in the fall and winter months, which makes it a good crosstraining tool.

After his first taste of cyclocross competition, Turner confessed he hated it. By his second competition, he placed higher and found his new calling. And his competitive edge increased. Before long, he was competing at the national level in the collegiate division.

Since then, Turner has put together a strong career. Turner said his toughest competition comes from professional cyclists. He once thought of trying to turn pro or trying for the American Olympic cyclocross team.

But that would have meant giving up other goals. He preferred to do other things and still remain a competitive cyclist instead of having just a few good pro years.

Turner trains in the area with a member of his team. They ride two to three hours a day six times a week.

The rides can start the road and often end up on mountain bike trails at night.

With modified lights on the bike, Turner said the nighttime rides are often easier than the daylight ones.

In the off-seasons, he lifts weights for the next season and gets in a lot of running.

Turner's recent cyclocross placings have given him high hopes for the nationals. He'll first race in the age 30-over division on Dec. 13. That will be a warm-up race. The following day, he'll compete in two divisions.

First he will represent the Air Force in the first-ever all-military championship and he will also be racing as part of a local racing team.

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Representing the Air Force, Turner said his competitive focus will be in the military division.

"I'd really like to make it the podium in the top three on the military side," he said. "I'd like to get in the top 15 (in the 30-over race)."

As far as doing races on back-to-back days, it's part of his plan. Get the pain out of the way the first day and the rest will take care of itself.

"I prefer a double on weekends of two races," he said.

"I usually do better the second day after doing one the day before as a warm-up."

And if not, dealing with all the mud and other muck on a course may qualify Turner for a career as a postman.

"True cyclocrossers love the mud," he said. "We've run whole sections of a course like that carrying our bikes." @