

## **TOUR de GEORGIA IN GWINNETT: A blur of excitement**

From Buford to Stone Mountain, cycling fans turned out for some fast-paced thrills

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Buford resident Mary Pace spoke for many who crowded Main Street on Saturday as the Tour de Georgia sped by.

"I saw 'em, but I didn't, that's how fast it was," she said, adding that she often sees cyclists pass her house. "But this was really exciting, it sure was."

On a sunny Saturday, Stage 6 of the Tour de Georgia started at Lake Lanier Island at noon and reached the Bona Allen mansion a few minutes later. Vendors had set up tents and spectators had positioned their chairs at an amphitheater and park near the mansion.

The cyclists blew by in a blur of colored jerseys and helmets, their legs pumping like pistons. From Gwinnett, they would breeze through Barrow, Walton, Newton and Rockdale counties, circle back to Gwinnett and end in DeKalb at Stone Mountain, a total of nearly 114 miles. The race concludes today in downtown Atlanta.

"It was so exciting to see everything, it surely was," said Inez Harris, who came to the Buford leg of the race with her twin sister, Buff Ramsey, Buff's husband, John, and the twins' mother, Pat Dozier. The group planned to spend the afternoon in Buford.

"First there were the cars, then the motorcycles and finally the bicycles," John Ramsey said. "We've seen other races, but the cyclists have been spread out. Not all together like this one."

Before the race, people wandered around, visiting various vendor tents and listening to the Buford High jazz band. There were people dressed in spandex and bike shoes, others in bright yellow volunteer shirts and some with Tour de Georgia shirts.

The Lemmings, a group of cycling friends, pedaled to Buford from their Flowery Branch homes. All except Jerry Cheek, who broke his hip a few weeks ago when his bike and he took a tumble. He rode in a pickup.

"I love that a little town like Buford is supporting bike racing," said Lemming Richard Waggoner, 54. "A few years ago, people in this North Georgia area were almost hostile to cyclists, so I'm glad things are changing."

Buford resident Debbi Reese arrived at 10 a.m. with her daughter Meaghan, 17, to direct drivers to parking at the United Methodist Church. By 11, Debbi Reese was sitting on the ground, holding her plastic sign, "and working tremendously hard," she said with a laugh. "When they close the road, I'm going to watch the race."

Ken Shick, 64, of Hoschton, is a bona fide Tour de France addict, but he had never seen a professional bike race until Saturday. He usually has 120 channels on his television but upgrades to 180 just to watch the cyclists in France.

"That's kind of sad, isn't it?" he said with a laugh.

John Palocski, 39, found a sunny spot in the grass where he could eat a sandwich with his 6-year-old son, Tyler. A biology teacher at Collins Hill, John is a triathlete who routinely rides through Buford. He wanted his son to see the race, he said, so they sped away after Tyler's soccer game.

Sitting nearby was Allison Foil, 29, of Alpharetta, who writes software for McKesson on Windward Parkway and rides her bike as much as possible. She wondered why more people didn't come to the race but then decided it was good they didn't.

"If we were in France, we wouldn't be able to find a place to sit," Foil said. She had ridden 38 miles early Saturday morning in a fundraiser for the Georgia Cancer Coalition. "This is just so convenient. It practically comes through our backyard."

Less than a hour after the Tour de Georgia riders whirled out of Buford, they reached Carl-Bethlehem Road in adjacent Barrow County. About 50 people watched them turn off Ga. 8 and fly past Carl City Hall toward Bethlehem.

Ed and Alana Munday of Flowery Branch joined their friends Steve and Emily Webb of Dacula to watch the race from the Carl First Baptist Church parking lot. Avid cyclists and racing fans, they've seen various stages of the Tour de Georgia over the years.

They said the riders hear people cheering for them, even though they can't acknowledge it. "They're focused," said Ed Munday, 45. "This is their job."

Emily Webb, 35, has multiple sclerosis. The four friends will ride and volunteer in the Cox MS 150 Atlanta Challenge in September. The race raises research money for MS.

Sisters Kay Lennard of Braselton and Dena Pruitt of Winder pedaled their tandem bicycle from Winder to Carl to watch the race. The two ride together when they can. They plan to do the Bicycle Ride Across Georgia, with Dena as captain in front and Kay as navigator.

Two-and-a-half hours after the riders left Carl, they passed along Rockbridge Road at North Deshong Road in DeKalb County, pressing toward the end of Stage 6 in Stone Mountain Park.

Among the throng lining Rockbridge Road were Celeste Hawthorne, 44, and her daughter Sydney, 12. After cheering the riders, Celeste Hawthorne said, "It was like a blink, but it was exciting."

Nearby, Vince Dyer, 56, also of Stone Mountain, watched with his family.

"They've got to have a whole lot of stamina," he said of the bicyclists. "It might encourage a lot of young folks on the sidelines to get into cycling."