

The Joe Dolan Interview

Michael Shelton

August 05, 2009 - Joe Dolan, 51, is a Milford resident and an outdoor enthusiast who has been an active cyclist since 1998, when he bought his first bike since high school. His passion for the sport of cycling then grew into a desire to start a cycling club, which would eventually join forces with other area groups to form the Milford Athletic Club. Now Dolan will be at the helm as race director for the first ever Milford Criterium, a series of bicycle races for men, women and children that will take place on Saturday, Aug. 22 on a closed road course stretching 0.93 miles through downtown Milford. Dolan, who works as a new model and engineering change coordinator for Automotive Components, lives in Milford with his wife and two children.



SCN: Tell us how you first became involved with the Milford Athletic Club?

JD: The Milford Athletic Club is actually a union of three different clubs. One is the Huron Valley Running Club, one is a cycling club that I was in the process of forming, and there's also a group of triathletes and swimmers and their group was called the Milford Athletic Club.

What we decided about a year or so ago was to put all three groups together and hopefully be better able to promote outdoor athletics and healthy living in our community.

I personally got involved with cycling back in '98, when I bought my first bike since high school almost, and that spurred me to either join a club or form one. Trying to find a club wasn't practical, so we decided to form a club with me and a few buddies and that's how it all happened.

I was coerced (into the sport of cycling) by a couple of co-workers. They told me I'd have a lot of fun with it. I spent \$600, which I thought was a lot of money for a bike, and I thought I was out of my mind.

The first time I rode it, I practically died, and then after a few weeks I fell in love with it. It made me feel like a kid again almost, and it all made sense and it was a lot of fun.

SCN: How did the idea for the Milford Criterium come about? For those unfamiliar with such events, please describe what Milford residents and spectators can expect to see during the race. What non-racing attractions will be offered, and when?

JD: Back when I first got back into biking in '98, I was riding from downtown Milford and riding the roads and eventually making my way to the mountain bike trail — the bike I bought was a mountain bike. On one of my trips, I happened to come across the Tour of Kensington Valley, which is a road race that happens in the Kensington Metropark every year. I was actually pretty impressed by it and I thought that it would be a great thing to have in the community. So then I learned more about road racing and about criterium races and I thought it would be a great thing to have in downtown Milford where people can see it.

The problem I had with the race in the park was that a lot of folks weren't aware that it was actually happening, so I thought by bringing a criterium race, we'd bring the race to the people and hopefully they would have the same reaction to it that I did and that would inspire them to get on a bicycle and basically get out of the house and do more things with their friends and family outdoors.

The idea propped up about four or five years ago. Personally, I have no real experience with racing, but I tried to find a promoter or another club that would do it, but they were tapped as far as their resources went, so we decided to take it on ourselves.

I know quite a number of people in Milford that cycle and there's quite a diverse talent pool, so I thought we could pull it off. We decided to go for it and started planning and making our visits with the local businesses and residents and eventually the Village Council and proposed the idea to them. Overall, it was almost overwhelming support for the idea.

Probably the best way to describe a criterium, or crit race, is that it's like NASCAR for bicycles. What I mean by that is, most folks are familiar with the Tour De France, where riders go from Point A to Point B and that distance covers as many as a hundred miles. When the riders pass, they'll pass any given point just once and that's it. What's good about a criterium race

and the way it's set up is, it's a closed loop course, usually less than a mile, and the racers will go over that course for a set period of time, usually an hour, plus a set number of laps, usually two laps. If you post yourself on any given spot along the course, you'll see the racers go by a number of times.

In addition, we've got Frankie Andreau, a former U.S. Postal Service racer who's actually a retired professional racer — he's ridden in all the great classics in Europe — and he's going to be our announcer. He's a Michigan resident — he actually lives in Dearborn, Michigan.

We've also got former Fox 2 reporter Lila Lazarus, who's going to be racing in her first quid race.

We're going to have a Healthy Lifestyle expo area, and that's going to involve various local bike shops that will be there to demonstrate and display their products and services and answer questions to the general public on biking and what kind of bike they might be interested in buying.

We'll also have other organizations, non-profits and also our sponsors that are related in the health and fitness industry.

Also there's going to be a kids race, which is free, and that will allow children of various ages to ride part of the course and experience for themselves what it's like to be on a race course. We're hoping to bring in a large, enthusiastic crowd that will cheer these young kids on and hopefully inspire them to continue riding their bikes.

SCN: What were some of the challenges in putting this criterium race together, and how did you overcome them?

JD: You will find in a lot of road races you really should have a closed road (course). That's a pretty difficult thing to overcome.

What we're going to be doing in Milford is we're going to be shutting down downtown Milford and the roads that the course occupy for a good eight to nine hours. That's a major undertaking.

Fortunately, we got the Village Council and the businesses of Milford to realize that this is going to be an inconvenience, but what we're trying to do is a couple different things. We're trying to promote Milford as a hub for outdoor athletics and also eco-tourism, and also to promote our downtown. Of course, we're also trying to promote cycling in general and any outdoor activity.

In that respect, I think that our community is unique because I don't think you'll find that in every town, where they're willing to shut down traffic for that period of time. It's not very often where you'll see that.

The economy, obviously, was very bad for Michigan this year and trying to find sponsors was very difficult. Normally for this type of event, you'll have your sponsors in place early in the year, by February. In this case, we're still pushing for more sponsors so we can present the type of event we'd like to see happen. So far we've done very well with that. It's been a lot of hard work.

Next I guess was trying to find the right group of people to pull this off. Our organization is a non-profit and we're all doing this part-time, and the people that are part of my team that's putting this together come from a diverse talent pool.

Our members who happen to also be cyclists are also graphic artists, professionals in the marketing and engineering fields and logistics. The way everything came together was fantastic. I think we're going to provide a very professional looking event.

SCN: Who is invited to participate in the race, and how can participants sign up?

JD: The race is a USA Cycling-sanctioned event. What that means is in order to participate in the event, you must be a licensed racer.

Now, to be a licensed racer, you can either buy a day license, or a lot of racers who regularly come to these races will buy an annual license.

Anybody can race, but you'll have to race in the entry-level category.

Categories are divided into skill levels with Category 5 being the lowest and Category 1 being the highest.

Basically, you move up in the rankings by participating in more and more races.

This is open to juniors, which are racers 14 and up, all the way up to Elite Men and Women, and that age can go up to as old as you are able to participate.

The race is sanctioned by USA Cycling and also by the Michigan Bicycle Racing Association, and that's how our event was brought onto the schedule was through the MBRA and we're listed on their calendar.

To get a license, they would visit the USA Cycling Federation web site (www.usacycling.org). They can also buy it on the day of the event. To register, they can go to advanced registration by visiting our web site (www.milfordcrit.org) or they can do it the day of the event.

SCN: Tell us about how you were able to land former pro cyclist Frankie Andreau to call the race.

JD: My marketing director is Vikki Rohre, and she's done a heck of a job doing this. What happened was we visited a race in Ann Arbor last year and Vikki and I were there with a bunch of other folks because we wanted to see the race and see what kind of event we needed to present. I wasn't there when this happened, but she happened to recognize Frankie along the sidewalk and he was there with his child and his wife and she was chatting with him and talking about cycling and our event. Later on she was able to talk to him again and referred to that incident and Frankie immediately remembered who she was and Vikki approached him about doing the race and he said sure. He was very enthusiastic about it and he is very much into promoting cycling, especially in Michigan.

SCN: If the first run of this criterium is successful, what is your ultimate vision for the future of this event?

JD: Absolutely it's to make it an annual event, and we'd like to expand it possibly to a two-day event.

I was part of the Milford Trail Committee and I played a small part in helping get that trail put through. The other folks that are in the community played a large part in getting this trail put through. It's been a long fight that's been going on for years, long before I even joined.

What they have here is a rail now connecting downtown Milford with Kensington Metropark — it's about a four-mile trail — and what that has done, I think, is become a catalyst for cycling, running and hiking for Milford. If you walk through Milford now, you can't sit on a street corner without seeing bikes go by every minute or so. There's a lot of activity going on, and the folks in town really are appreciating it. I think this area is very ripe for this kind of activity.

SCN: Does the Milford Athletic Club have any other new events in mind for the near future?

JD: Right now, we also do the Labor Day 30K. That was an event that's been established before the Milford Athletic Club actually formed. Back then, it was started by the Huron Valley Running Club, which would eventually become the Milford Athletic Club. It's part of the Detroit Marathon Race Series and that's held every Labor Day — it's an 18-mile race. That's a running event and is one of the few 30K races in the country and is a well-established race.

We're also looking at, next year, promoting some triathlon events and to promote them as a series for our sponsors to promote.

Pages [1](#) [2](#) [3](#)

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