



#MoreKidsOnMTBs!

By Cris Cadiz

It's Jersey Day at Washington Middle School. The halls buzz as kids race down hallways, teachers gently herding them into classrooms. Sports shirts are everywhere: baseball, soccer, football, hockey, cross country. Bold flashy colors, big logos, and team names stretched across shoulders and chests catch the eye at every turn.



Billy can barely contain himself. The tech fabric of his new CCAP jersey—his first team shirt—feels smooth beneath his fingers...so smooth, his backpack nearly slips off his shoulder.

"Let me see!" says his friend Kyle, tugging at his sleeve. "What's it for?"

"My mountain bike team," Billy says shyly.

"You're on a mountain bike team?" Sheila from math class leans in, eyes wide.

"Yeah! We ride in the woods, over rocks, roots. Down really steep hills. I crashed the other day!" Billy lifts his arm to reveal a fading bruise on his elbow. "But it doesn't hurt. It was so fun!"

"Wow, that's cool," Sheila says.
"I wanna try that."

Billy's smile lasts all day.

(Fictionalized scene inspired by a parent who told CCAP Coach Matt Trullo how excited their child was to wear their team jersey to school.)

While cities lament the decline of kids on bikes, New England's trails are teeming with young riders. On everything from strider bikes to full-suspension 29ers, kids of all ages are training with teams, riding with parents, and joining NEMBA group rides. Organizations including Little Bellas, the CT Cycling Advancement Program (CCAP), New England Youth Cycling (NEYC), and Hale Education report surging demand for youth mountain biking.

Why Now?

So how did we go from worrying about kids ditching bikes to watching trail networks burst with young riders? The answer lies in a mix of cultural shifts, a global pandemic, and a sport that's more adaptable than most.

COVID sparked a nationwide shift outdoors. "It created a massive migration outside for mental and physical health, and that extended to a newfound interest in mountain biking," says Sabra Connell, Executive Director of Little Bellas. As adults embraced the sport, they

Little Bellas: Empowering Girls to Ride—and Lead

Little Bellas is showing how a girl-focused, mentorship-based approach can open even more doors to the sport. Founded in Vermont in 2007, Little Bellas has grown nationwide with one goal: help girls build confidence by learning from mentors, conquering obstacles, and mastering a skill.

"We want girls to be strong, confident, and



comfortable outside," says Connell. "To feel capable of doing this for life. There are so many reasons girls drop out of sports, including body image and peer pressure. We provide a sense of belonging for everyone."

Little Bellas proves that when girls ride with other girls and women leaders in a non-competitive setting, they gain more than skills—they gain belief in themselves.



Fun Comes First at NEYC

NEYC stands out for proving that competition and camaraderie can ride side-by-side. At this race league with teams throughout New England, fun drives everything. Even younger riders can join NEYC development teams, where they build skills in a fun, structured environment.

“We don’t care if kids win races. We care that they grow,” says Catale. Racing is optional, but attendance is required—whether to compete, cheer on teammates, or pass water bottles in the feed zone.

Most hesitant riders end up racing anyway. NEYC sprinkles in fun with themes, food trucks, and post-race ice cream. The focus is on friendship, memories, and belonging. “Our programs offer a space where kids feel physically, socially, and emotionally safe, something you don’t always get just riding in the woods,” says Catale.

Twenty years ago, programs like Little Bellas never had participants who couldn’t ride a bike. Today every age group includes a few first-timers. “Parents are saying, ‘I’m not the expert,’” says Connell of Little Bellas. “They’re trusting programs to teach their kids to ride.”

Little Bellas also sees greater recognition for the sport. “More racing leagues and teams are plugging us into the larger mountain bike community,” says Connell. While Little

Bellas is intentionally non-competitive, she acknowledges that some girls are competitive. “In the past, that opportunity wasn’t available to girls in some locations. It is now.”

Regional nonprofits like CCAP and NEYC create structured, team-based environments for kids to ride safely, have fun, and compete if they choose. Both of these team- and league-based programs run race-focused seasons, but participation is never forced. Showing up, supporting teammates, and having fun come first. No tryouts. No pressure.

“Programs like ours are the reason kids’ riding has skyrocketed,” says Brian Wolfe, Executive Director of CCAP, which offers road, cyclocross



and mountain bike opportunities. “Mountain biking is usually the first step. It’s the type of bike most kids own, and parents often feel better with them riding off-road.”

Over the past decade, he’s seen families shift from casual shop or group rides to organized programs where kids learn skills, practice together, and have fun. Thanks to expanded trail access, most families can now find rideable terrain within 30 minutes of home.

Trail etiquette is an important part of the curriculum. “Organized practices help kids learn to respect the community of hikers, runners, and equestrians on Connecticut’s trails,” says Wolfe. “They also learn how to take care of trails—when to ride and when not to ride.”

Youth programs do more than teach bike handling. They instill confidence, teamwork, respect—for nature, others, and themselves—and a love of outdoor activity. And in a world increasingly shaped by screens and stress, mountain biking offers kids a chance to move, breathe, and connect. That’s good for them... and for all of us.

The personal growth is just as valuable.

“Riding teaches how to push yourself, accept defeat, and overcome obstacles,” Wolfe adds. “Mountain biking delivers life lessons, on and off the trail.”

How Kids (and Adults) Are Learning Faster Than Ever

These organizations are just part of a bigger trend: structured learning. Across New England, thanks to a boom in structured programs, more riders of all ages and levels are picking up skills through clinics, workshops, and weekend events faster—and safer—than ever before. Whether you’re brand-new or leveling up, there’s something for everyone.

Chris Nichols, now Hale Education Center’s Mountain Bike Program Coordinator and Camp Director, remembers the old days: learning by trial and error.



brought their kids along. Working from home also gave parents more time to ride with their families, creating a shared, healthy outlet.

Kelly Catale, Executive Director of NEYC, notes another important culture shift: “There’s more openness around our differences: neurodivergence, introversion, extroversion. There’s been a huge push toward inclusion.” The versatility of mountain biking has something to offer everyone. It’s a solo pursuit and a team sport. Riders can be solitary or social, competitive or recreational.

“Mountain biking has filtered to the top as a sport that’s welcoming and inclusive, yet still fun and competitive,” says Catale. “You pedal alone, but NEYC creates community. It gives kids a safe place, especially if they haven’t clicked with traditional athletic activities or team sports.”

Who’s Teaching the Next Generation?

Of course, getting kids excited about mountain biking is one thing. Helping them learn the skills to ride safely and confidently is another. That’s where youth programs and passionate coaches step in.



“It was like, ride the power lines and hope not to hit something solid,” he jokes. “Back then, you just showed up, rode with friends, and figured it out.”

He remembers the sting of being turned away by a Rhode Island mountain bike group with the words, “Come back when you learn how to ride.” So he did, earning certification through the Bike Instructor Certification Program (BICP), teaching his friends, and launching his own camp, Ovah the Bars, to teach others the skills he had to learn the hard way.

Now at Hale Education, just outside Boston, Nichols is seeing a surge of interest, especially from kids and women. Hale’s “mountain biking for all” mission includes intentional outreach to build a more diverse ridership.

While Nichols supports racing leagues for their role in increasing trail access and providing skills-based instruction, he’s quick to add: “Not everyone wants to race.”

At Hale, young riders progress quickly because they’re learning the right way from the start.

“Kids learn super-fast,” says Nichols. “They can learn correctly super-fast.” He and his staff embrace a “challenge by choice” philosophy: no pressure, no forced risk-taking.

“We encourage kids to say ‘no’—to decide for themselves when they’re ready. We tell them, ‘Come back and try again tomorrow.’ Because

we want them making those decisions on their own when they’re out riding with friends.”

Tomorrow’s Riders, Today’s Stewards

But teaching balance and braking isn’t the only goal. The real measure of success is how these young riders carry themselves—and care for the trails—long after the ride ends.

Even though mountain biking has moved from the fringe to the mainstream, some lingering stereotypes remain...like the image of reckless riders tearing up the trails. Seeing kids out riding with adults shifts that narrative. “It creates a warm, welcoming perspective,” says Wolfe. “When landowners and trail users see kids riding respectfully in groups, it signals that this is a healthy, positive activity for them and for families.”

The kids riding mountain bikes today are the future of the sport—and of our trails. They’re growing into the next generation of trail builders, open space advocates, and environmental stewards.

Pass the Torch by Making Mountain Biking Accessible

That’s why so many programs are focused on growing not just riders, but a community. And that community thrives when more people pitch in to make mountain biking accessible for every kid.

Organizations like CCAP, NEYC, and Little Bellas are working to make it more accessible. While CCAP and NEYC offer financial assistance, Little Bellas does that while also providing gear and running targeted programs in underserved communities to ensure every kid who wants to ride gets a chance.

You don’t need to be a parent to help get more kids on bikes. Whether you’ve got time, gear, skills, or just a passion for the sport, there’s a way to pitch in.

- Donate to a youth-focused mountain bike organization.
- Build a beginner trail or skills park.
- Coach a team, mentor a rider, or lend a hand at an event.
- Join your local chapter’s family-friendly rides—or help launch one.
- Ride with the neighborhood kids.
- Give a gently used bike or gear to a family in need.

“Kids learn super-fast”



Resources: Get Involved, Get Riding

CCAP (CT Cycling Advancement Program)

CCAP’s mission is to get every child in Connecticut on a bike. The nonprofit offers youth teams, practices, races and events, as well as financial assistance to make riding accessible for all. ctcyclingadvancement.org

Hale Education, Inc.

Just outside Boston, Hale is a 1,200-acre outdoor center offering mountain bike camps, after-school clubs, clinics, and programs. Its new She Senders series is a seasonal program for girls ages 8–14, led by female riders and mentors. hale.education/visit/mountain-biking

Little Bellas

Little Bellas creates opportunities for girls ages 7–18 to experience success using mountain biking as the platform and pathway to personal growth, building community, and competency. This national nonprofit, founded in Vermont in 2007, offers non-competitive summer and event camps, weekly sessions, and financial aid to ensure access for all. littlebellas.org

NEYC (New England Youth Cycling)

NEYC works to get more kids across New England on bikes. The nonprofit supports both competitive and non-competitive youth programs for grades 5–12, plus an early development program for grades K–5. neyouthcycling.com

National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA)

NICA develops and supports youth mountain biking leagues across the U.S., helping student-athletes to become the best versions of themselves on and off the bike. nationalmtb.org

Highland Mountain Bike Park Northfield, NH

A destination for skill building, Highland offers lessons, kids’ camps, summer programs, clinics, and rider workshops for all levels. highlandmountain.com



Wolfe and Catale encourage NEMBA members to get involved, whether that means coaching, starting a team, or pitching in behind the scenes. Both CCAP and NEYC offer multiple levels of coaching, training, and safety certification, and welcome support in non-riding roles such as help organizing or promoting events. “It’s more than drop-off-the-kid-and-go like other sports,” says Wolfe. “You ride together, talk about the ride after, and build real connections. You learn from the kids as much as they learn from you.”

Before becoming NEYC’s director, Catale and her husband coached despite not having kids. Why? Because more certified adults means more kids can participate safely. In 2025, NEYC supported 963 kids thanks to 506 coaches. “It’s incredibly rewarding and fun to ride with the next generation,” says Catale. “The impact you make is immediate and visible on every ride.”

“You learn from the kids as much as they learn from you.”

PARENTS’ VIEW

For families already involved, the benefits are crystal clear. Just ask the parents who’ve watched their kids grow on—and off—the bike.

Matt & Mary Trullo, Head Coaches CCAP’s Waldo’s Warriors, Greater Southbury, CT

Matt’s been mountain biking since 1998. He’s served on the Housatonic Valley NEMBA board for 7 years and coached with CCAP for 5. His daughter Cora started CCAP at age 9 and is now a high school senior. Daughter Paige began at 12 and now helps coach Waldo’s Warriors while also riding for the UConn MTB club team.

Why Structured MTB Programs Matter

Safety first: Kids ride in a controlled environment with trained coaches.

Better habits, faster progress: Learning core skills early builds confidence and prevents bad form.

Smart risk-taking: Riders learn limits gradually, reducing crashes and fear.

MATT

“Waldo’s Warriors—and CCAP overall—are about building a community around biking. Racing and training are encouraged, but they’re secondary to just having fun together on bikes.”

Other benefits:

- Developing an active lifestyle without the pressure to win
- Boosting confidence on and off the bike
- Helping kids stand out in a positive way in a lesser-known sport
- Encouraging resilience, proving to themselves they can do hard things

MARY

“I can’t overstate how much joy biking with the team brings our girls—it’s palpable and fills our home. They come back buzzing with stories about teammates trying new things and lifting each other up, even sharing their frustrations with so much passion, it makes me smile.

We’ve mountain biked as a family for years, but I don’t think they’d still be riding without the team. Positive interactions with coaches and peers has made all the difference. Their confidence on the bike—especially as girls in a male-dominated sport—has spilled over into academics, learning to drive, other sports, new jobs, and social settings. They know that if they can tackle a mountain bike trail, they can handle anything with dedication and patience.”

KIDS’ VIEW

And if you want to hear the unfiltered truth about why youth mountain biking is booming, just listen to the riders themselves.

Daniel O’Sullivan III, Age 14 – NEYC, Hillsborough Hawks

“I love being on a bike team. With the Hillsborough Hawks, the community is so close it feels like family. Everyone races with huge

smiles and supports each other. Our cheering squad is often the loudest and biggest. Right after a race, our riders go straight to cheering on others, even the sweepers!

We’ve got each other’s backs, always ready to lend a tool, a tire... even a bike if needed.

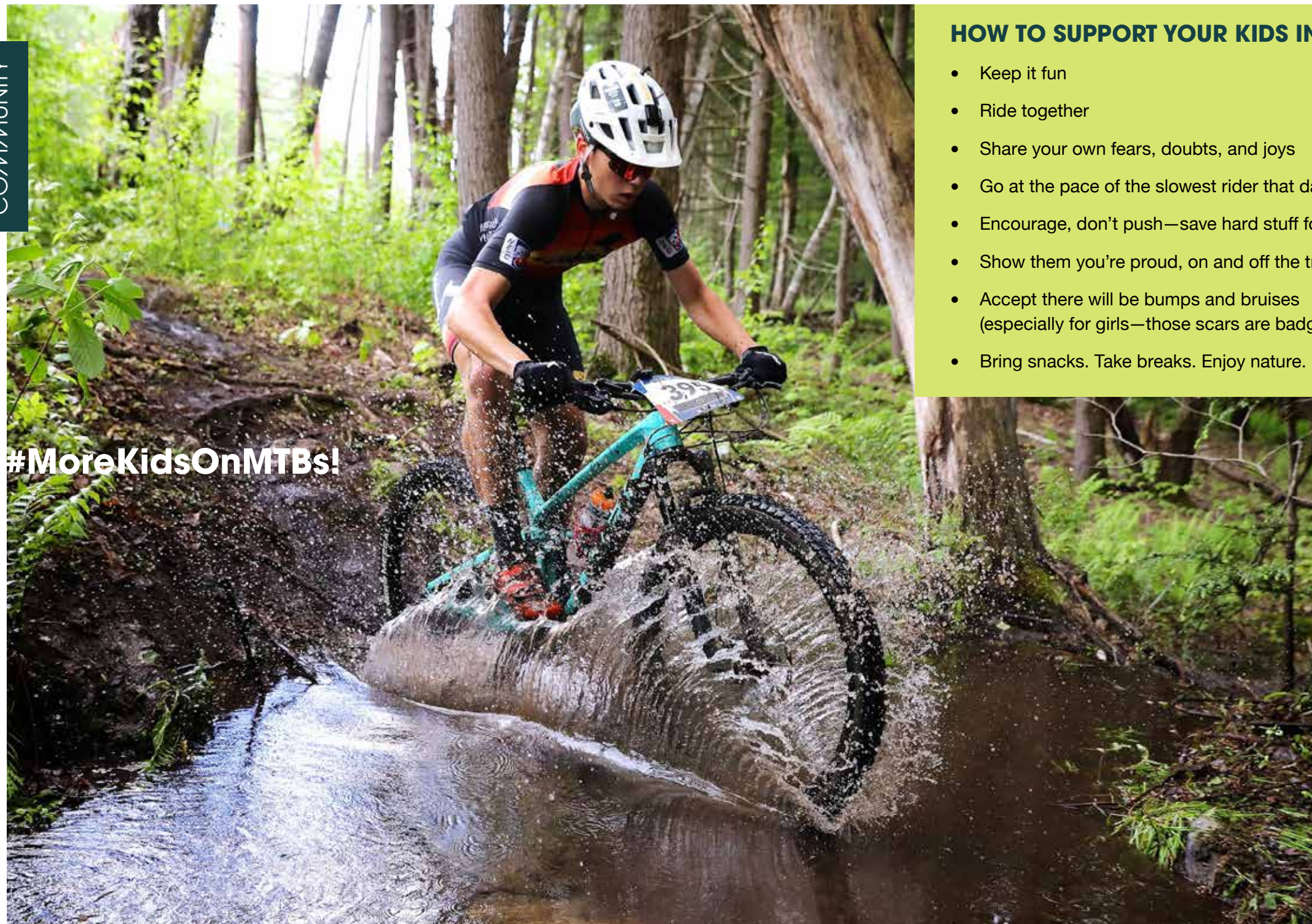
I chose mountain biking over other sports because it blends individual skill with team spirit. You have to be fearless and coordinated. Even riding a simple trail takes focus, but maneuvering at high speeds under different conditions takes real experience. In other sports, three or four plays might stand out in a game. But mountain biking is nonstop action: shifting, pedaling hard, braking, fueling, handling the unexpected flat tire, broken frame, or crash. That constant excitement makes it exhilarating and lured me into the sport.”

Miles Raycroft, Age 10 – NEYC, Afterschool Suspension

“This was my first year racing with Afterschool Suspension, but I’ve been riding with NEYC’s



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HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR KIDS IN MOUNTAIN BIKING

- Keep it fun
- Ride together
- Share your own fears, doubts, and joys
- Go at the pace of the slowest rider that day
- Encourage, don't push—save hard stuff for another day
- Show them you're proud, on and off the trail.
- Accept there will be bumps and bruises (especially for girls—those scars are badges of honor!)
- Bring snacks. Take breaks. Enjoy nature. Make memories—not training logs.



me the confidence to try other sports. I ended up playing high school lacrosse, tennis, and soccer, and even rose to soccer team captain. Mountain biking helped me grow as both an athlete and a person.”

Hannah Leslie-Marshall, Age 12 – NEYC, Afterschool Suspension

“I started riding to connect with my mom, who’s also a rider and coach. But over time, it became a truly enjoyable experience. Riding gives me strength and confidence that carry over into other sports and areas of life.

I love that riding gets me out in nature, and that it’s both a team sport and solo activity—something I don’t get with other sports. When I race, I wear my team jersey and get cheered on by my teammates. But the joy of mountain bikes is that you are also racing and riding for yourself. That’s what makes mountain biking special. You can ride with your team, your friends, your family—or just go off on your own.”



Ghost Riders since it started three seasons ago.

I never get bored mountain biking. There’s always a new skill to pick up or get better at. I was nervous about racing at first, but now I love it—being with my teammates and coaches and the crazy feelings. I’m always a bit nervous before races, but once they start, I forget everything else and just ride.

I also rock climb and play soccer, but biking feels different—it’s exciting and freeing.”

Eva Cohen, Age 17 – CCAP, Petal Power

“I started with Petal Power at age 8 and now I’m a junior coach. I love the team energy and supportive environment. We push each other to try new things and, even when the ride gets tough, always have each other’s backs.

Mountain biking is both a physical and mental challenge. Every ride feels like an adventure, whether it’s navigating technical sections, powering through steep climbs, or just having a blast on downhills. Each ride is different and I feel a huge sense of accomplishment at the end of every one.

I first chose mountain biking because I was scared of team sports. But being on a mountain biking team inspired me and gave