

Mark Palmer - Go-Ride Coach

I have been riding bikes for most of my life but my first real taste of competition came at the age of 14 when I took part in a BMX race at Buckmore Park in Kent. I continued racing my BMX at Buckmore Park and actually won a regional race there at the age of 15!

Road riding has always been an interest of mine. I used to go out for long rides into the Kent countryside with other Woolwich Club members and I also took part in several Kent League road races.

However, my real love is mountain biking which I guess is a combination of the skill & excitement of BMX with the endurance & stamina required for road racing; I've been riding and racing mountain bikes for about twenty years. I used to travel to races all over Britain with Bob Younger (who you would've met at Go-Ride in Danson Park and also on our trips to Joydens Wood and Fooks Cray Meadows). For several years we raced in the National Points Series as well as National Championship races with some S.A.M.S. and other events between the major national race dates. 'Beastway', at the cycle circuit in East London, was a good opportunity for a second weekly off-road race. The terrain always suited me quite well being more of a 'hard core' technical circuit! It's a real shame that 2006 was the last summer evening mountain bike event series there and I'm proud to have taken part in most of them - let's hope that the new venue is as popular and as easily accessible from south east London.



In my racing 'prime' (over ten years ago) I used to employ the services of a cycle coach who gave me specific training plans and guided me through all my tough turbo trainer sessions, which I must say gave me a good turn of speed in races and helped develop a level of stamina which I have retained (albeit at a lower level) to the present day.

I have now completed six London Marathons, with the last one in 2006, in fancy dress. The costume has been cleaned and is available to anyone who wishes to borrow it to run in or to simply look stylish on a Saturday morning in Danson Park! I doubt Eddie would've achieved such a fantastic marathon time of 2:44.43 in this!

Although I competed in several of the final 'Beastway' series in the summer of 2006, my racing days are certainly not as prolific or as frequent as they were when I was in my twenties. I normally only compete once a year in the Gemini cyclo-cross race, which is usually on the 27th December and several Go-Ride Bexley riders also now take part.

Injuries have played a major part in my racing history; I tore the cruciate ligaments in my right knee after a bad landing from a major bowl jump on my BMX in 1983, then again whilst playing rugby for the Dartfordians in 1989. My most serious crash however, was in September 1997 whilst I was riding the Tour de Mont Blanc. This is an organised five day off-road mountain biking trip starting in France, then going through Switzerland and Italy before returning to Chamonix which climbs nearly 10,000 metres in all! Unfortunately on that trip I fell about a thousand feet down the side of the Col de Feret and ended up quite badly injured. I subsequently spent 3 months in hospitals both in Switzerland and London followed by a year's rehabilitation in Ely, Cambs.

I mention this accident because one of the main reasons for my survival from such a serious fall was the fact that I was wearing a good quality, well-fitted crash helmet. I have kept the

helmet as a memento even though it is too badly damaged & smashed up to wear. I did exactly what it was designed to do - it took most of the impact and limited the damage to my head. Without it, I would undoubtedly have died. Not everyone rides in the Alps but if you were riding and hit a tree, a rock, some hard ground, or worse still a road vehicle, you could incur a much greater impact than I suffered. A good, well-fitted cycle crash helmet will give you the best level of protection against damage to your head. Please, *please* take heed of my advice and *always* wear a crash helmet on your bike and insist that anyone you ride with wears one as well! You'll be pleased to learn that I rode the entire Mont Blanc trip in 2001 without incident!

I haven't been racing so much over the past few years but I have been taking part in more 'endurance' type riding events, for example riding the South Downs Way from Winchester to Eastbourne, which I've ridden quite a few times. A couple of times I have ridden the entire route in one day and other times in an organised event staying overnight at a youth hostel. It is a ride of about a hundred miles off-road with nearly ten thousand feet of climbing but the 'sting' is in the tail as some of the steepest climbs are towards the end of the route when you hit the hills called the 'Seven Sisters'!

I rode the Colorado Trail all the way from Denver to Durango in September 2004. It was an organised two week tour, which was literally breathtaking due to the altitude. It was really tough, especially when it snowed in Breckenridge as we spent the first 3 days of the trip riding in fresh powder snow (see the picture to the right). Only 2 of us out of the original 10 starters completed all sections of the tour which overall climbed over 30,000 ft.



I have also ridden in the Alps several times since my big crash in 1997 and still consider it one of the best places that I've ever ridden.

Here is a photo of me just about to start on the downhill course at Chatel in the Alps in 2006; this had been the World Cup downhill course a few years previously - hence the body armour!

I first got involved with Go-Ride Bexley when it was just at an 'embryonic' stage and before it even had a name let alone any form of club structure (or members for that matter!) Eddie Land and Ray Harrod (Gemini and Team Darenth) came along to a Woolwich Club night in 2004 and mentioned the idea of trying to create a club in the Bexley area in a similar vein to Team Darenth; both Ray and Eddy have been heavily involved with both the creation and running of that club. I thought that it sounded an excellent proposition as traditional cycle clubs in the area (like the Woolwich, founded in 1884 and the Gemini which is over 30 years old) just don't seem to attract the same level of new rider membership that they used to

enjoy and here was a prime opportunity to get involved with grassroots cycling in the Borough of Bexley. Here was the potential to encourage riders in their development from safely learning to ride a bike with basic skills into more advanced riding and also some organised, structured racing. The plan was to also show riders how to make sure their bike was safe to ride, as well as knowing a little bit of essential trailside maintenance. I instantly put up my hand as a volunteer, along with several other Woolwich members, to be part of the creation of what we now know to be Go-Ride Bexley.

We had several meetings with council officials in their offices as well as a trip in the council Land Rover to look at some potential sites in the Borough and some were simply unsuitable to train a sizable group of cyclists on as they were either, too wooded, too sloping or lacked adequate parking/toilet facilities. We also potentially faced a bit of a struggle as some local groups were worried about damage and soil erosion to the areas that we were interested in using; hopefully these groups are now happy with the controlled areas that we use in Danson Park as well as in the other areas. We had several further meetings and it was agreed that in early 2005 we would start coaching in the area that we still use near to the old 'Lido' site in the park close to the A2.

I completed my Activity Coach Award with the British Cycling Federation and a first aid course with the St John Ambulance and we began coaching in Danson Park in May 2005.

One of my proudest moments was when several riders from Go-Ride Bexley raced in an event at Team Darenth within a year of that date. I was aware that many of those riders hadn't ridden much before they came along to Go-Ride Bexley and here they were elbows out vying for position against other riders in a competitive environment! Go-Ride Bexley riders certainly held their own in those races and we even had a couple of 'podium' places!

Towards the end of 2006, I became the Chairman of the Woolwich Cycle Club, which I've been an active member of for over fifteen years. Through this and Go-Ride Bexley, I hope to continue to encourage riding and racing in the Borough. As I've mentioned previously, my racing days are now pretty much over but I hope that through my work with the other people involved with the Woolwich, Gemini and Go-Ride Bexley together with my coaching techniques and cycling experience I am able to assist others to reach whatever potential they chose to aspire to. If a rider has the drive and motivation to push themselves into the higher echelons of competitive cycle racing wouldn't it be great to see him or her lining up to represent our nation in 2012?