

# FreeWheel: A trip, a tradition, a great ride

NICOLE DORN World Staff Writer

06/12/2005

Tulsa World (Final Home Edition), Page A19 of News

## Bicycle riders gather in Paris, Texas, for the beginning of this year's Oklahoma FreeWheel.

PARIS, Texas -- A tradition among many bicycle riders, fitness buffs and nature lovers since 1979, the annual Oklahoma FreeWheel cross-state ride begins Sunday.

"People say, 'Oh, I couldn't ride that long,' " said Sandy Hutchings, a 15-year participant.

"But when we're out there, you have the whole day to do (each leg). You can stop and take a nap and then go back to riding."

The purpose of FreeWheel is to promote fitness through bicycling and to promote Oklahoma, said Libby Stalter, executive director of FreeWheel Inc.

The event itself was the brainchild of Enrico "Rick" Mattioni, who was the cofounder of the Tulsa Wheelman bicycle club. Mattioni participated in a ride in Iowa and brought the idea back home. He went to the Tulsa World seeking a sponsor for a similar ride in Oklahoma, and the paper agreed. Mattioni died in December 2004.

Stalter organizes the ride with the help of a volunteer committee. She said organizers begin by looking at potential host towns and then look for a bike route between them. The committee volunteers are mostly from different bicycle clubs.

"I can't do it without my volunteers," Stalter said. "They help with anything that needs to be done."

Riders are responsible for meals, but some food is available along the route. Free fruit stops will be available in areas where no town or store exists.

Stalter, who has been with FreeWheel since 1989, said many of the faces are the same, but the bicycles have changed.

"We kind of changed with the times. Now you don't have to be a terrific rider because the equipment is so good."

More than just an average 10- or 12-speed will be seen on this year's route.

"Any kind of bike you can imagine will be out there," Stalter said.

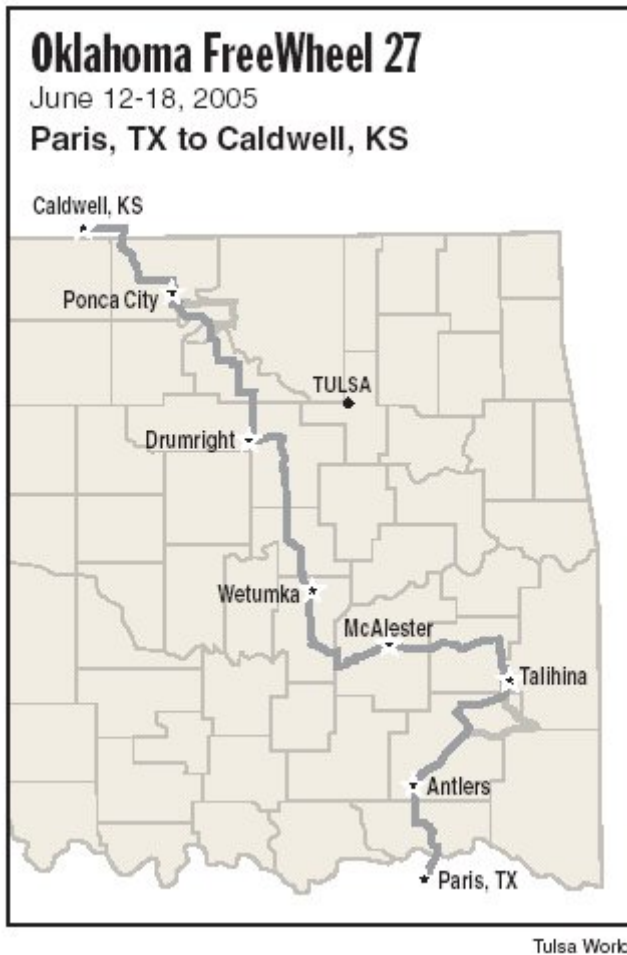


*Connie Hower of Broken Arrow heads away from a replica of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Texas, after stopping to take a picture with friends Saturday as riders began gathering for this year's FreeWheel bicycle tour across Oklahoma.*

*STEPHEN HOLMAN / Tulsa World*

Riders are advised to wear a helmet at all times and not to ride on the sidewalks or the left side of the road. Riders are told not to ride against the flow of traffic and to make sure they're alert to road hazards such as potholes, gravel, drainage grates, cattle guards and wooden bridges.

In the ride's first year, fewer than 100 people participated. This year, 800-900 participants are expected.



"The majority are people who have done it at least once, but we have first-timers," Stalter said.

For some, FreeWheel is like a family reunion, while others use it as a time to train and even to relax.

"It's a relaxing vacation," Hutchings said. "It's a different group of people who are ready to have fun. It's a great ride."

Hutchings said that while on the route, participants come to appreciate scenic views and the beauty of nature.

"You get to see things you'll never get to see if you're driving," she said.

Riders on Saturday gathered in Paris, Texas, the starting point of this year's ride. Many spent the day setting up camp and riding around the area. FreeWheel 2005 begins with a ceremony at 6:30 a.m. Sunday in Paris.

From Paris, the riders will continue biking daily through Saturday, making stops in Antlers, Talihina, McAlester, Wetumka, Drumright and Ponca City. FreeWheel will end in Caldwell, Kan., for a total of about 423 miles.

The distance of each leg varies between 48 and 78 miles.

Riders who choose to camp outdoors sleep in tents.

Those who'd rather be indoors can stay in designated gymnasiums and other buildings in towns along the route, using air mattresses, sleeping pads and sleeping bags. The overnight buildings also have showers and toilets. Additional portable toilets will be set up at each campsite.

Every ride brings a new memory, Hutchings said.

She said her most memorable year was 1990, her first.

"I think it was the hottest year. It had got up to 95 (degrees), and I don't deal with heat well. Some of the girls I was around found a car wash and then we went through and got soaked and then went back to our bikes."

Along with a chance of scorching heat, riders may face rain, hail and high winds. They are advised to seek out whatever shelter is available in case of severe weather.

A camp for each overnight stop along the route also has a designated emergency shelter area, Stalter said.

Hutchings said she enjoys the event for several reasons.

"The people, the getting out, getting away from everyday life. Plus, it's good exercise," she said.

Oklahoma FreeWheel is sponsored by Central Tech Truck Driver Training, The Tulsa World, MAPCO Plaza Building, Bartlesville Pedalers bicycle club, the Oklahoma Bicycle Society, Stillwater Red Dirt Pedalers and the Tulsa Bicycle Club.

---

**Nicole Dorn 581-8300**  
[nicole.dorn@tulsaworld.com](mailto:nicole.dorn@tulsaworld.com)

Copyright © 2005, World Publishing Co. All rights reserved.