

# FATBOYS' SUPPORT NETWORK

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Cycling offered a group of middle-aged men a way to get fit but, 20 years on, its benefits – and friendships – continue to grow

**T**WENTY years ago, three primary school dads dressed in T-shirts and footy shorts went out for a 10km ride to Waterfall Gully and back seeking some fun and fitness on their deadly treadlies. It was pre-Tour Down Under and Adelaide was not yet awash with Lycra.

Jim Turner, Richard Angove and Steve Curtis were fathers of children at Marryatville Primary School. They were all looking for a way to keep fit when Jim suggested a bike ride together.

Turner was no longer playing football and having hurt his back doing sit-ups in a desperate attempt to maintain fitness, he was no longer running either. He needed an alternative low-impact sport. “I did swim for a while and it’s fantastic fitness but gee, it’s boring,” he says. “And you don’t get that social element.”

Curtis had already taken up cycling some months before. “I was an extremely keen surfer, still am, but at that time of my life I was putting on weight freely and not able to stay as fit as I wanted to so I needed something else to burn the calories.”

As they say, from little things big things grow but none of these men could have predicted that that inaugural ride 20 years ago would be the birth of what is now a 100-member men’s cycling club known as Fatboys and still going strong. Having banned the wearing of Lycra as an unnecessary fashion item for their first few years, members now wear their bright yellow jerseys with pride.

The fact that the jersey sports the logo Fatboys with the ‘s’ struck out and a picture of a bright pink pig on a bicycle are all signs of what makes it work – it doesn’t take itself too seriously.

The Fatboys is one of the largest and longest-standing of the recreational cycling clubs that have sprung up in Adelaide since the TDU began. Cycling has become the new cool sport for middle-aged men.

It is easy on the joints, is not elitist, and, as anyone can do it, these recreational cycling clubs place the emphasis on

friendly rather than competitive – though that element exists for those that seek it. The emergence of many of these recreational clubs reflects an attempt by men in their middle years to not only regain fitness but to recapture friendships and a sense of belonging in their lives.

Although the pursuit of fitness was the driver behind the Fatboys’ creation, the effects of being part of this club have gone much deeper. The members share a strong sense of belonging and in many of these men’s lives, the Fatboys form their major support network outside family.

A report prepared on behalf of BeyondBlue in December 2014, *The Men’s Social Connectedness Report*, found that nearly one in four Australian men aged 30–65, have few or no social connections, often due to the increased demands of work and family. It found that a sense of belonging was as important as ever as a protective factor against depression but men, in particular, find it difficult to maintain their social networks during those years.

At the time this report was released, BeyondBlue Chairman Jeff Kennett described the findings as “terribly sad and show that, while it is perfectly natural for men’s priorities to change once they turn 30, they must continue to invest time in their friendships before they slip away.”

The Fatboys (or Fatties, as they also like to call themselves) are evidence of the importance of friendships and that sense of belonging to a person’s state of mind, aside from the obvious physical benefits.

The friendships stay strong whether the members are well, or ill. Andrew Gratton, one of the early members of the club, was diagnosed 12 months ago with Grade 4 bowel cancer. He died from the disease in October last year.

But Gratton made it clear before he died just how grateful he was for the relationships he’d forged through the club over the past 20 years.

Before riding with the Fatties, Gratton had not been involved with any sporting club for many years. “I think it’s the same



THE FATBOYS “When the spirits are low, when the day appears dark, when work becomes monotonous, when hope hardly seems worth having, just mount a bicycle and go out for a spin down the road, without thought on anything but the ride you are taking” *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of Sherlock Holmes.*

for a lot of guys,” he recalled in an interview with *SAWeekend*. They concentrate on their career and their family and they lose sight of their own lives.

“We’ve all had a few issues over the years, you know, marriages and financial stuff and these guys are the first to come and support you. To get out on the bike has been therapy. Instead of seeing a doctor, you feel a whole lot better.”

After his cancer diagnosis, the support poured in. There were phone calls, texts, emails, food parcels and visits in hospital – and not just from close friends within the

club. At the celebration of the Fatboys’ 20th anniversary last August, Gratton received the ultimate accolade – induction into the club’s Hall of Fame, otherwise known as the Pork Barrel.

“In many respects Andrew epitomised the reason the Fatboys exist,” says Rob Bramley, a Fatboy and the emcee for the evening. “He was frankly a fairly unathletic character but he just liked to join in because he could spend Sunday morning with his mates. The fact that he had to be on a bicycle for a couple of hours to do it was somewhat incidental.”





**1** Jim Turner, James, Michael and Harry Gratton, Rob Bramley, Karen Schell and Michael Schell with Fatboys cycling club members. The Grattons, sons of former member Andrew Gratton who died last year, have been made honorary Fatboys and will ride in the Tour Down Under in his memory **2** Andrew Gratton loved cycling **3** Leading the Fatboys peloton



PICTURE mark brake

There are club members who take their cycling more seriously – some even race – but they race as individuals, not as Fatboys. This is primarily a social club.

“As long as I’m president, our core business is recreational cycling, hanging out with your mates and keeping fit,” says founding member and long-time president, Jim Turner.

There are annual fun rides such as the pre-Christmas Hawaiian Shirt ride where everyone dons their most tasteless Hawaiian shirt and dresses their bike in antlers and tinsel. For those seeking a challenge, there are local, interstate and overseas rides where they can do significant distances, generally between 100-200km a day.

Not all of it is riding. There are breakfasts in support of charities, a monthly get-together for members and their partners at the Bath Hotel but the largest collection of Fatboys can be seen at around 10am every Sunday morning at Arnie’s kiosk in Rymill Park, ending their regular three-hour Sunday morning ride with a coffee and chat.

It’s inclusive. As fitness improves there must be a temptation for the stronger riders to challenge themselves to longer distances and faster rides but in Fatboys there is an expectation that no-one gets left behind. “You can still be competitive in that you

can be first to the top of the hill, but whoever is first has to come back down the hill and bring the last one up, so we wait. There’s no flat out racing to the end,” explains Matt Ferris, the club’s ride co-ordinator, and one of its strong riders.

Despite appearances to an outsider, cycling can be very much a team sport. Working well in unison when riding in the peloton can mean the difference between life and death or, at the very least, serious injury. They are totally reliant on each other to be smooth and steady.

It is easy to see how close bonds form very quickly between riders. Along with the risk, there is, of course, the shared exhilaration of a fast ride down a hill.

“You feel like you’re flying, working inches away from each other, all giving 100 per cent,” says rider Mike Schell. “We get to the bottom and there would be a group of men aged from 30 to 60 with smiles like 15-year-olds, all soaked in sweat, saying how fantastic that was and then the shout goes out: ‘let’s go for coffee.’”

Lisa McEwin, wife of Matt Ferris, enjoys the banter of the group on their return from a ride: “They smell really bad but they don’t notice. Every pedal stroke gets discussed, they are laughing and joking at each other’s expense in the nicest possible way. They’ll drink their body weight in Coca-Cola and they hoe into a bowl of

marshmallows. It’s like watching kids at play,” she says.

Karen Schell, wife of Mike, decided she wanted to see what the fuss was about. How did she get to the point where she felt comfortable enough to join them? “She got good!” says her husband.

Some other wives formed their own club, the Skinny Lattes. Belinda Bramley, wife of Rob, noticed that her husband, normally quite serene, was excited and happy. “We thought we need to do this for women...why aren’t we on our bikes?” she recalls. The Skinny Lattes club offers racing events to its female members and rides are led by professional coaches.

“In many respects, Belinda takes the whole cycling thing much more seriously than I do,” says Bramley.

In contrast to the Skinny Lattes, the Fatboys club runs on what he describes as “formal informality”. There is no lead rider for a ride and there is no need to let anyone know you will be turning up. However, there is the requirement of 10 rides before you have earned the right to wear the club jersey and the unwritten rule that if you go for a ride on a Sunday, that jersey is compulsory uniform.

“The Fatboys jersey is a mark of acceptance and inclusion, it brings you into the network,” says Schell. “It gives you a sense of belonging and is a marker to everyone else.”

It’s not unusual for a car window to be wound down and the cry go out “go the Fatties” from a fellow Fatboy or their partner. Of course, not all drivers are happy to see them, or anyone else in Lycra.

The new bike laws in South Australia try to address this long-standing tussle between road users, and few could argue against the idea that requiring greater

distance between a bike and a car is safer.

Colin Trengove, a Fatboy and father of AFL footballer Jack and marathon runner Jess, thinks that road users who have never ridden a bike will never understand what a cyclist must do to stay safe.

Although he admits that cyclists aren’t always faultless in keeping to their side of the road, Trengove explains that “sometimes a cyclist is hanging out from the edge of the road purely because it’s unsafe to be there where the potholes are and it only takes a twig to throw you off your bike”.

He has found that motorists tend not to misbehave when there is a group of cyclists but on his own or with one other can be a very different story. “They just about shave the pedals of your bike,” Trengove says. “They will speed past you just to give you a scare.”

The positives outweigh the negatives though. A good ride can help ease the pressures of the week.

“Riding along when the pace isn’t high, when you can breathe and talk, talking to guys about families, kids, jobs, things that have driven you mad during the week, the kids that have crashed the car, anything,” says Schell.

“It is that sharing that makes it so special because guys don’t have too many places where they can do that.”

Andrew Gratton would agree and so would his three boys, each of whom have inherited a Fatboys jersey as a reminder of what the club did for their dad.

“Dad loved belonging to a group where it didn’t matter what school you went to or what you did for a living,” says son James, 22. “It was just about getting on your bike, going for a ride together and having coffee with your mates afterwards.” ●