

Mankato's loss of Grand Prix is Wisconsin's gain

Main Street hill's going to be disappointed this Saturday afternoon.

The high, steep road won't get its annual opportunity to stand tall and challenge bicyclists to conquer it. It won't get the chance to deaden legs and squash spirits under a hot June sun. It won't get the chance to thank the long straightaway roads of Blue Earth County and the whipping winds of southern Minnesota for wearing down the pack before it hits Main Street's grave grade.

No, this Saturday, the hill will gaze across downtown Mankato and out to the bend in the river and breath a lonely sigh. Sure, there will be a few cars motoring up and down its blacktop, and an occasional ambulance will race to the top lickety-split en route to the hospital at its top.

But the bicycle racers are no more.

The Nature Valley Grand Prix pro bike race begins on Wednesday in St. Paul. It will move on to Cannon Falls on Thursday and then make stops in Minneapolis and Menomonie, Wis., before ending in Stillwater on Sunday.

The Menomonie stop isn't just the first time the Grand Prix will pedal through Wisconsin; it makes the first time in six years that the race won't take place in Mankato.

After getting a lukewarm reception from city officials and even cooler feelings from the chamber and business community on the last go-round, race directors announced shortly afterward that they were leaving southern Minnesota and taking the stage event's long road race across the border.

The Grand Prix is considered the top-ranked women's pro race and No.

2-ranked men's race in the country.

Each year, it brought to town some of the finest and best-conditioned athletes Mankato has ever seen — and that's considering the fact that the Minnesota Vikings train here and that Minnesota State has a Division I hockey program.

Both cyclists and non-riders were in awe of Kristin Armstrong (no relation to Lance) as she broke away from the pack while on a circuit of four laps around town that included four trips up Main Street hill.

They practically felt the burning in their own legs as they watched riders attack and counter attack on the climb, and they certainly felt the breeze of the 50 mph speeds the bikes would reach coasting down the back side of the hill on Division Street.

"This is my favorite (race) because of the people," Armstrong said a year ago. "It's not the best terrain for me, but the community here is special."

The Nature Valley Grand Prix may not have brought in the extra business that local officials thought it would in the five years it stopped over here.

But it did leave an impression on riders and writers alike, and it will be missed.

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