

The Big Ride: Gran Fondo in Garrett County, Maryland

Scheduled to Return June 18, 2022

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In most summers, hundreds of cyclists gather at Garrett College in McHenry, Maryland, to take part in the Garrett County Gran Fondo, which translates to the “Big Ride.” The 2020 and 2021 Gran Fondo had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic, but organizers plan to resume this popular event on Saturday, June 18, 2022.

The Garrett County Gran Fondo is not a race; it is an organized opportunity to take part in an epic ride. This type of cycling event, which originated in Europe, primarily in Italy, has transplanted seamlessly to the mountains of Western Maryland. Garrett County’s Gran Fondo, known for both its spectacular terrain and range of challenge, has become one of the premier cycling events on the calendar.

The traditional Gran Fondo in Europe is completed by bicyclists on a closed course that is timed from start to finish. In the United States, many “gran fondo” events, including the one in Western Maryland, are modified; the courses are on open roads and only specific climbs are timed. Unlike European courses that typically feature

Riders preparing for the start of the 2019 Gran Fondo ride; its 10th Anniversary in Garrett County.

switch backs on climbs, Garrett County climbs are straight up the hill. Timing is done with special equipment—mats that read electronic chips to identify and record each rider’s start and finish on the climbs. Though the event is not a competition, many riders like to compare their climbing performance to that of other cyclists or to their own times on prior rides.

Gran Fondos are designed to appeal to both professional and recreational cyclists. Participants can choose from several routes at varying degrees of difficulty. Garrett County’s Gran Fondo, with seven timed King of the Mountain (KOM)



climbs totaling 14.8 miles and 5400 feet of elevation gain, identifies as one of the top climbing courses in the world.

Some events require high levels of skill and endurance. The “**Diabolical Double**,” a very demanding course to complete, requires riders to ride 203 kilometers (126.2 miles) with over 16,500 feet of climbing. The “**Savage Century**,” considered one of the most difficult century rides in North America, includes 105.8 miles and over 12,500 feet of climbing. The “**Masochistic Metric**” offers about half the distance and half the climbing of the Diabolical Double. The “**Fabulous 44**,” with a 42.6 mile course and 4500 feet of climbing is an excellent option for the rider who wants a shorter sample of the longer, more demanding courses.

Garrett County’s Gran Fondo has always included a “recreational” course. Today, those who want to enjoy a beautiful but less challenging ride, can opt for the “**Garrett’s Greatest 25**,” a 25 mile ride with scenic views of Deep Creek Lake and farmland, no major hills, and just one timed KOM climb.

Garrett County’s Gran Fondo was the brainchild of Kyle Yost, who also founded the SavageMan Triathlon. In the early 2000s, Kyle, who lives and works in Washington, D.C., was an active triathlete. On visits to friends who had a place at Deep Creek Lake, he realized the roads, hills, and unspoiled nature of the County would make it a perfect place to hold a triathlon. In 2006, at the first trial run

You’ll find beautiful scenery, lake views, farmland and wide open spaces in Garrett County’s Gran Fondo ride, no matter which skills level you choose.

of what became the SavageMan Triathlon, he met Greg Safko, the president of the Joanna M. Nicolay Melanoma Foundation. Thus began a team effort. The SavageMan raised awareness and funds in the fight against melanoma, a natural cause for people who spend so much time outdoors. The event also showcased the rugged beauty and tranquil nature of Garrett County.

The Gran Fondo was a natural offshoot of the SavageMan contest, focusing on the cycling part of the triathlon. Kyle heard that the Rapha Tour was looking for suggestions, and he submitted a course in Garrett County. They included this course in their 2009 schedule, solely because it fit into their travel from West Virginia to Pennsylvania. However, the riders were impressed, calling it one of the most stunning and demanding rides of the summer. This provided all the validation Kyle needed to organize a Gran Fondo in the area.

The first official Gran Fondo was held in 2010. It drew about 200 participants; by 2012 it had grown to a thousand athletes, purely by word of mouth.

Kyle’s goal was to put together the hardest ride that could be accomplished in the daylight hours of one summer



day on the most remote roads possible. A double metric (200 kilometers) course has always been included because this distance generally measures maximum one day effort. However, Garrett County's Gran Fondo was never seen as a race. Nothing was timed the first year, and from the beginning there has always been an easy ride option. Over the years timed climbs were added and the options expanded to five different courses. The whole idea was and is for riders to have a great experience at whatever challenge level they choose.

Kyle continued to work with Greg and the Melanoma Foundation for another year or so, and then he organized the events on his own for two years. With a family and a busy career, he decided he needed to turn these events over to others. A professional sports promotion organization took over the SavageMan Triathlon. Garrett Trails seemed the logical organization to manage the Gran Fondo, so Kyle coordinated with Steve Green of High Mountain Sports and others who were active with Garrett Trails to make the transition.

By 2015, the Gran Fondo had become a major fundraiser for Garrett Trails, a non-profit organization that oversees and advocates for hike and bike trail construction and maintenance in Garrett County and the surrounding area. (For more information about the mission of Garrett Trails,

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their current projects, or local trails to explore, check out the website: <http://www.garretttrails.org>.)

Other fundraising events benefiting Garrett Trails include Taste of Garrett County, an evening of culinary delight provided by Garrett County food and beverage vendors, and Race up the Face, a sprint up the face at Wisp Ski Resort that is billed as the steepest 400 meter run, walk, or crawl in the United States.

Garrett Trails' director (Josh Spiker has just taken on this role), board members, and representatives of local government and services plan carefully for months in advance of each year's Gran Fondo. It's a huge undertaking, involving the whole community.

The courses must be marked and supervised. This requires the input of State and County Road Departments, among others. Equipment and supplies must be moved in and out of donated storage in trucks lent by generous sponsors.

Volunteers do everything from driving the route in "sag wagons" to overseeing nutrition and hydration stops set up along the way, where riders will find peanut butter and

jelly sandwiches, baked potatoes with fixings, gel packs, electrolyte mix, and other necessary bio-fuel. Because the volunteers are so welcoming and the courses are not timed, riders tend to linger, wait for other riders, chat, and generally enjoy themselves. In fact, Mike Logsdon, Garrett Trails Board Vice President, describes the aid stations as having an atmosphere akin to a family reunion.

The Gran Fondo benefits Garrett Trails, and it also adds millions of dollars in revenue to local businesses while showcasing Mountain Maryland. In its decade of operation, the Gran Fondo has only had to be cancelled once before due to horrific weather: high velocity winds, threatening thunderstorms, and torrential rain. Usually, the hard work of everyone involved culminates in a wonderful opportunity for avid cyclists to take part in a “bucket list” event, to connect with nature in a beautiful place, and to experience the warmth and hospitality of local people. Riders consistently rank Garrett County’s Gran Fondo as one of the best organized events they have ever experienced, and they are delighted with the welcome they receive.

Those who try the Gran Fondo once are eager to return. Visitors, volunteers, and participants alike are looking forward to Mountain Maryland’s next big ride.

www.garrettcountrygranfondo.org

Interested in helping or riding?
Contact Garrett Trails.
They’d love to hear from you.
Phone: 301-387-3013
Email: director@garretttrails.org
<http://www.garretttrails.org>

Top: Bikers of all ages enjoy the Garrett County Gran Fondo event.

Middle: Garrett Composite Coyote’s team member volunteers at a bike washing station.

Below: Volunteer, Aaron Hordubay, one of Garrett Composite’s coaches, aides a Gran Fondo rider with a bicycle problem.

