



Eagle Resident Heather Albert with Tour of Eagle Promoter, Gary Casella.



# Tour of Eagle

by Ernest Woods

Vito Perucci was an Italian immigrant from Long Island NY, with character written for the big screen. However, Vito was for real. He owned a barber shop that was also a bike shop. If he wasn't promoting a bike race, he was cutting hair. Young men and women who met Vito became hooked on cycling. He was the essence of professional bike racing, and his influence spread to many during the 1970's and early 80's. One young man was Gary Casella.

Gary has been serious about sports for as long as he can remember. "When I was about 10," says Gary, "I was pretty serious about little league baseball. I ended up quitting because the other guys on the team were only there to play around and didn't really care how competitive they were with other teams. I, however, wanted to compete."

On the way home from practice Gary and his dad drove by a bike race that was under way.

"I became very interested in this sport and looked into it. I discovered in bike racing that winning and losing depended on me, not eight other guys. I realized, that's me! Vito Perucci became a major influence, a friend and mentor."

In October 1995, life's journey brought Gary out West to Idaho to be closer to family. Naturally, his love for bike racing came too.

In 2001, Gary was asked by Pioneer Federal Credit Union to help them organize a bike race to promote the company's involvement in the community.

"It was no easy task," says Gary. "It was new to the community and support

was scarce. It seemed like the only one who supported us back then was Terri Bath at the Eagle Chamber of Commerce. Regardless, our first 'Tour of Eagle 2001' race brought in 60 racers."

"The event was nothing short of a disaster," recalls Casella. "It was two and a half hours late because of the parade. We had people warming up for two hours longer than needed. The rodeo procession spilled over onto the bike track and tempers flared from participants of both events; we had terrible miscommunication. Additionally, my volunteer officials didn't show up, some were upset, and some went home - it was truly a disaster. I am very surprised anyone bothered to come back [for 2002], but I am grateful that we have had community and business support that has supported the race since day one."

Gary picked Friday night of the "Fun Days" to hold the race. "I went downtown at 8 p.m. and it was very quiet. That's when I got the idea that the bike race needed to be on Friday night, to get people downtown. We have held the race on Friday night since; however, this year some people got trapped in certain areas when they closed off the streets. We are already working to take care of that and similar problems for next year."

This year the Tour of Eagle race drew over 100 competitors. In time it could grow to 400 to 500 racers. "When people begin to see how much business an event like this can generate I think we will get a lot more support for the event," said Casella. And that is his goal for 2006: to involve more of the community, have

more kids and family events and competitors for a fun atmosphere. "For me, it is something to give back to the sport and the community. This event, tied in with Eagle Fun Days, is a true gem. It allows racers to race in front of their families and friends."

Gary encourages people of all ages to get involved with riding a bike and even racing if they like. "Cycling is a sport where you can be any age to enjoy it. Riding the green belt or even the Tour de France, a bike gives you an amazing pace to take in a lot of beauty, not too fast and not too slow. And for anyone who is afraid to compete, I have finished several races in last place. It is never easy to feel like you failed in front of many people, like the Tour de France or the Olympics, but that's what life is. My relationship with my father and my grandfather benefited tremendously because they were on the sidelines cheering for me, whether I won or not. Anyone thinking about racing should not let any excuse stand in their way. The sport is very rewarding."

Sometimes, people ask Gary why he does this, Gary answers, "Years ago an Italian immigrant shared his love for cycling with others in the community. His efforts back then are now affecting people in the Eagle community. Every year, if one person is influenced to ride a bike more, or possibly get involved in racing, when that happens, I've done my job."

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