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**HEADLINE:** Enjoying the Cycle of Life; 'Old Folks on Spokes' Sets a Leisurely Pace

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**BODY:**

Eight women clad in baggy shorts and sensible shoes and with mud-splattered legs rolled in to a rest stop along the C&O Canal Tuesday morning, huffing, puffing and laughing. The women--of varying shapes, sizes and athletic abilities--had two things in common: None would see 50 again, and all would just as soon ride into the sunset at something less than breakneck speed. The golden girls had just completed the first quarter of their 12-mile beginners tour, led by Pat Blackmon, 61, a retired Loudoun Heights house painter who still laughs when she remembers what inspired her to start Senior Cycling Inc.--otherwise known as "Old Folks on Spokes."

Blackmon was on a cross-country trip two years ago with her friend Donna Packard, now 66, of Vienna. After a long day's journey, they stopped at an ice cream parlor in Louisiana, clutching water bottles and wiping sweat from under their helmets.

"The woman serving us ice cream stops and says, 'Folks inside are wondering how old you are.' We were wearing all our bike gear and leaning against the outside wall of the shop. We told her," Blackmon said. "The teenaged waitress looks at us and says, 'And you're still riding bicycles?' "

Blackmon's biking tours for men and women older than 50 offer adventure relatively risk-free, with a van driving alongside riders for those who want to take a break and still keep up with the

pack. A trailer full of gourmet foodstuffs, first-aid supplies, water and bug spray is never far away.

Nonetheless, the 10 women who had mounted their bikes at White's Ferry that morning faced the trip with a little trepidation. Several hadn't been on a bike in years, but their fears were allayed as they set off down the shaded canal path at a leisurely 8 miles per hour.

After a break for chilled melon and lemonade, they put another few miles behind them on the wet towpath and then camped again for a three-course lunch of salad, sandwiches and cakes. During the rest, Blackmon lectured on the fundamentals of cycling and offered advice on choosing the right equipment, laughing as the women complained of sore tailbones. "Just do it a few more times, and you'll be hard as rock," she said.

For riders of all ages, the idea is to build endurance. Blackmon gives older riders the chance to do it at slower speeds, taking time to enjoy the journey. For those who want more than a day trip, there is a longer, intermediate journey--more miles and even more food. A two-day, 50-mile "Gourmet Biking" trip along the Lost River Valley paths of West Virginia includes an overnight stop at a bed-and-breakfast, with hot tubs for aching muscles. For more accomplished riders, Senior Cycling offers a seven-day, 380-mile Erie Canal trip from Buffalo to Albany, N.Y., in early October and more than a dozen other trips of varying intensity throughout the year. Although women make up most of the pack on beginner rides, Blackmon said men are more likely to join the longer treks.

"Seniors want to ride, to enjoy, to see what they see," Blackmon said. "And at the same time, you get exercise. Isn't that nice?" Packard, a regular on Senior Cycling trips, said she is the usually oldest rider. On Tuesday, she brought along two underage riders--her daughter, Jackie Prevenas, 42, and her granddaughter, Erin Kelly, 16--and still outrode them. "I think I'm just going to die," Prevenas said as she finished the trip 10 minutes behind her mother. "Mom's an amazing woman."

For Ellyn Mulrenin, 51, a government auditor from Falls Church, Tuesday's trip was her first. After a visit to her doctor, she said she decided to lose some inches to improve her health, and though she isn't quite ready to think of herself as a "senior," she signed up for a trip. Although she spent as much time riding in

the support van as she did on the trail, she declared her first attempt a success.

"We don't want to be in the Tour de France," Mulrenin said, after polishing off a slice of chocolate pound cake at the lunch break.

"We want to have fun, and this moderate exercise is great for us."

Blackmon may preach moderation, but she hasn't practiced it religiously. Eleven years ago, she helped found the Vienna-based Golden Girls senior women's softball team, now ranked number one in the country. As both coach and player, she will be the first woman to be inducted into the National Senior Softball Hall of Fame later this month at a ceremony at Prince William Stadium. She said she retired from house painting several years ago after climbing ladders became more challenging. Climbing onto a road bike is fun, she said, and keeps her with active, like-minded people.

"Biking is a love, and I really enjoy turning seniors on to new, healthy activities," she said.

With a \$ 42,000 initial investment in a van, trailer and rental bikes, Blackmon enlisted her family's help to create a Web site and come up with a slogan for the group. "Old Folks on Spokes" was the invention of her daughter-in-law, Sue Milan Blackmon. From the beginning, Blackmon has also had help from her friends Marie Phipps, 64, and Vera Mitchell, 63. Both women are cyclists, and they also take charge of driving the van, preparing the lunch and mothering new riders. Mitchell, who has lived in Loudoun County for 30 years, said the Washington area has much to offer bikers. She chimed in as Blackmon led the battle cry for more respect and facilities for cyclers.

"It's absurd that the C&O Canal path and the Washington & Old Dominion path don't connect with a trail," Blackmon said. "We've been complaining about this for years."

Martha Irish, 53, said she joined Tuesday's tour after being left in the dust by Potomac Pedalers, a Washington recreational biking club geared toward younger, more experienced riders. "I didn't become an athlete until 40," Irish said. "This is more my speed."

To join a Senior Cycling trip, call 540-668-6307 or visit

[www.seniorcycling.com](http://www.seniorcycling.com).