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RIDING FOR RICK

From pro racing to live music, Gears & Guitars returns with a celebration of the man who made it happen

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Rick Rauck and his grandson Luke at the Winston-Salem Cycling Classic. Rauck's death has raised questions about w
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C OMMENTARY

Despite vague fears that this weekend's iteration of the Winston-Salem Cycling Classic and Gears & Guitars could be the last following the death of founder Rick Rauck, one thing is certain.

The community Fondo — road rides of various distances open to anyone with a bike and a helmet — will be renamed Rick's Rides to honor the immense contributions Rauck made in pulling off what's been dubbed "the biggest party on two wheels."

"Zero doubt on that front," said Don Flow, a close friend of Rauck's and a longtime sponsor. "This is Rick's baby. He imagined it, and he made it happen. He actually did what he dreamed about doing. Not many of us are able to say that."

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Annual event means massive work

By this point, most of us are more than familiar with the Classic and its music festival.

It began in 2013, a complex enterprise that required the cooperation and checkbooks of a dedicated cadre of supporters to mesh a lot of moving parts.

The centerpiece bike race required the blessing of USA Cycling, the governing body of the sport, and a spot on its crowded race calendar.

An early version involved sprawling, miles-long national championship road races winding through city neighborhoods. That gave way to shorter criterium races that whip around a more viewer-friendly course designed around Bailey Park.

And every one of them, whether held over Labor Day or Memorial Day weekend, included concerts featuring familiar acts such as the Goo Goo Dolls, Soul Asylum, the Fray and Better than Ezra.

Putting all that together is no easy task. It turned into a yearround endeavor.

And at the center of it all stood Rauck, a physician and the founder of the world-renowned Carolinas Pain Institute. This cutting-edge pain-management clinic offers (and researches) ketamine therapy for migraines, treatment for diabetic neuropathy and the use of magnetic impulses to treat chronic neuropathic pain. That last one is a welcome alternative to opioids.

But to most weekend warrior cyclists, he was just Rick, an unassuming guy who'd turn up for group rides with his bike tucked into the back of a wellworn, well-loved pickup.

"That was him," said Flow, a fellow enthusiast. "He was a world-famous pain doctor, but you'd never know it because he never sought the spotlight. He never sought credit, and he was very generous with his time and his resources.

"Status didn't mean a thing to him."

And so it was with the Classic and Gears & Guitars. As the event grew in popularity, more often than not, Rauck faded into the background, enjoying the fact that hundreds of people were having fun.

Can the event go on?

The cycling community, a sprawling, loosely knit group including everyone from casual Salem Lake cruisers to triathletes and hardcore pseudo racers who roll out of Lewisville, Kernersville, Greensboro and Rural Hall for regular group rides, embraced the Winston-Salem Cycling Classic from the moment it was announced.

"We've had it for what, 13 years now?" said Andrew Mason, the president of the Piedmont Flyers cycling club. "It has pro racing and music downtown, showcasing all the wonderful revitalization. We all look forward to it every year, watching our friends do some of the amateur races and participating in the Fondo.

"It's been a great event. Rick put his heart and soul into this thing. I really would love to see it keep going into the future."

And that's where uncertainty creeps in.

Rauck died in October, and once the immediate shock of losing a friend faded, a lot of those who eagerly anticipated the Classic naturally began to wonder about its future.

"Everyone knew he was one of the initiators of the event and that he was a driving force behind it as well as a financial supporter," said Michael Berry, retired Wake Forest professor and a close friend. "He wanted very much to bring cycling to Winston-Salem on a large scale. .. It's impossible not to wonder. Cycling is not a sport that makes a lot of money."

The event's not cheap. The 2024 Form 990 tax return for the National Cycling Center, a local nonprofit organization established to support the Winston-Salem Cycling Classic, community access to inexpensive transportation and youth participation, reported \$512,810 in revenue through grants and donations and \$521,996 in expenses.

"It's a great question," said Flow, the most recognizable name among backers, regarding the future of the event. "I'll answer this way. I really want to celebrate this year for Rick and Katie (Rauck's wife) and everything that they've done."

"I would only hope that the cycling community will come together to keep this going."

Schedule of events

Friday

Streets of Fire, this year being presented as a criterium race winding through downtown on Fourth and Third Streets around Merschel Plaza, begins at 6:30 p.m. The Friday concerts begin at 6 p.m. with Black Light Idols at Merschel Plaza, followed by River Shook at 7:30 p.m., and Ruston Kelly at 9 p.m., both at Kaleideum.

Saturday

Multiple Fondo bike courses departing from downtown Winston-Salem's Bailey Park, and a free seven-mile Greenway bike ride. The 69-mile Fondo departs at 8 a.m., followed by the 42-mile Fondo departure at 8:30 a.m. The Greenway ride departs at 10 a.m.

Amateur criterium races will be run on the course around Bailey Park in the afternoon, followed by men's and women's professional races starting at 5:15 p.m.

Concerts featuring Ears to the Ground, High School Reunion and Gods of Grunge start at noon. Headliner Saint Motel starts at 9 p.m.

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