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Brandon Gritters of Interfresh pushing produce and pedals

At least one day a week, Brandon Gritters, a produce salesman at Interfresh in Fullerton, CA, takes the train to work specifically so he can ride his bike 25 miles back home.

When one is trying to combine 20 hours of bike riding a week with a full-time job of selling produce, creativity is key. "I ride pretty much every afternoon when I get home until the evening," he said. "I like it when the days start getting longer so I don't have to ride in the dark."

Such is the life of a Category 1 road bike racer who starts every morning in the dark selling produce to his accounts in Northern California. Though the 27-year-old Mr. Gritters works out of Interfresh's Southern California office, he reports to the South San Francisco office of the company and continues to service his accounts in that location.

Interfresh President Chris Puentes said that Mr. Gritters moved to Southern California when his wife, Amy, got a job there and they decided they wanted to be closer to their families. At the time, Mr. Gritters was working at a produce company in South San Francisco with Mr. Puentes' brother Cory. At about that same time, the Puentes brothers opened a Northern California location, and Mr. Gritters was a perfect addition to that branch, even with his new Southern California location.

While that might sound like a lot of logistical juggling, the bike riding enthusiast is used to being constantly on the move. His father worked in the oil exploration industry, so Mr. Gritters spent his youth traveling around the world. He spent junior high and the first two years of high school in the Philippines before moving to Texas to finish high school. But even as he was finishing high school, his parents were preparing to move to Bangladesh.

"At that point I decided to move to California to go to college," he said. I visited them in Bangladesh but I didn't want to move there." After two years at a Southern California junior college, he transferred to Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo where he majored in agricultural business with a specialization in international management.

"When I was in Texas, I started to get involved in agri-



culture by joining the FFA (Future Farmers in America). And then in college I took a couple of ag courses and they came easy to me so when it came time to choose a major it made sense to go with agriculture."

At Cal Poly, he did some research work in the poultry industry, which led to his first post-college job as a quality-control specialist at a California poultry farm. Six months later and engaged to be married, Mr. Gritters decided that the poultry side of farming wasn't for him. Working through the Cal Poly career counseling center, he found the opportunity that launched his produce career.

"I find it very interesting and I enjoy what I am doing," he said of his produce sales job. "Every day there are different problems and new opportunities."

He handles sales of many different items including avocados, asparagus, corn, chili peppers, green onions, cilantro, spinach and Interfresh's processed avocado pack.

Mr. Puentes said that Mr. Gritters has a good head for the job and a good produce ca-

have to learn how to motivate this new generation. They want a life outside of the business, which is a good thing."

For Mr. Gritters, that life outside the business is bike riding. He got into it only four years ago at the urging of his brother, of whom he said (somewhat reluctantly but also proudly) "is younger and faster. That's his job; that's what he does full time. In fact he is riding in the Tour of California right now."

The Tour of California, like the better known Tour de France, is an elite race held over many days with significant prize money.

But Category 1 racers also compete for money, although no one at that level can make a living at it. Like all racers, when Mr. Gritters first started competing in road bike racing, he was a Category 5 racer competing specifically against those in the same category. Where one finishes in the various races, he or she earns points and moves up the scale. Mr. Gritters jumped to Category 3 within about a year. At the time he was in Northern California and he recalled that

one of his favorite races was a "criterium" held in Los Gatos. "I won it my first year as a Category 4 racer and then came back the next year and won the Category 3 race."

Soon thereafter, he moved up to Category 2 and also moved down to Southern California. He has since become a Category 1 racer and joined a fairly elite team in Southern California.

"I am competitive locally," he

said, stating that he was ranked No. 12 in Southern California as a Category 1 racer last year. His team of 11 riders has four who were ranked in the top 15 last year.

In the course of the road race season, which runs from February to September, Mr. Gritters will participate in about 45 races. Some are road races, which can be 100 miles or more, and some are criteriums, which are short circuit races in which the riders ride

the same course for multiple laps. Mr. Gritters likes the criteriums, especially those with difficult courses that are hilly but not mountainous.

In analyzing his own talents, he considers himself a well-rounded rider rather than a specialist in hill climbs or a sprinter like some other members of his team.

In the races, the team members participating in that particular race work together strategically to garner as many top positions as possible. "All the team members participating on a particular day split whatever prize money any of us win," he said.

As a member of a team with sponsors, Mr. Gritters said that most entry fees are now covered and "hopefully we win a little money each time." But he said road bike racing is an expensive sport, especially when one is first getting started and has to make the initial investment and enter many different races. "One bike can cost from \$1,500 to \$8,000."

While there is obviously talent involved in this sport, Mr. Gritters said that it also has a lot to do with the amount of pain and suffering one can withstand. He said that the pain and suffering during training is what produces the results. Some people have a higher capacity. "My brother loves the suffering," he quipped.

For a Category 1 racer to be competitive, Mr. Gritters said that he has to average at least 20 hours a week on the bike. "The professionals are riding 30 to 40 hours a week."

Mr. Gritters has a four-week workout schedule that has him varying his riding regimen between 12 and 24 hours each week. He usually rides three to four hours per day each day of the week and then competes on the weekends. Almost all his races are one-day races because he has a full-time job. The professional circuit has multiple-day races.

Typically, Category 1 and 2 riders race together, but the professionals also will come in and ride in those races, especially when the prize money is significant. He said that typically there might be \$1,500 in prize money split among the top 20 finishers. "But we have one race with \$30,000 in prize money that will bring out a lot of the pros."

Personally, Mr. Gritters is gearing toward the national criterium championship for

Category 1 racers, which will be held in Illinois in August. "I'm shooting for that race this year," he said, "and hope to do well."

Mr. Gritters said that when he began his cycling hobby, he thought he would be content to reach the Category 3 level, but he got to that fairly quickly so he knew he had to set his sights higher.

During the course of his interview with *The Produce News*, he expressed a desire for a full-time career in cycling. But



Brandon Gritters hoists a first-place award at the conclusion of a race in Merced, CA.



Brandon Gritters looks to break away from the pack during a recent bicycle race. The Category 1 racer works for Interfresh.

reer ahead of him if that is what he wants. Speaking generally of Mr. Gritters' generation, Mr. Puentes said that its members are different than "old-school" produce guys like him. "They want to work a 40-hour week, which you can do now. Of course, we are a service industry so there are always the after-hours calls to check on a truck's location or whatever, but the industry is evolving. You can work 40 hours and get your job done. We all

then, just as quickly, he admitted that it is a very difficult goal to achieve because very few road racers actually make a decent full-time living riding bikes — and those that do have a short career that typically ends by one's early 30s.

Mr. Gritters credited his wife, Amy, for joining in with him on this hobby as it has commanded more and more of his time, and with being enthusiastically supportive as he moved up through the ranks, which necessitated extra time on the bike. "She's a trouper," he said.

In both riding bikes and selling fruits and vegetables, Mr. Gritters has come across other bike enthusiasts in the produce industry. He has competed against the riders on the Cal Giant strawberry cycling team, and he said that he talks cycling with a number of customers and suppliers that he deals with on a daily basis.

"Just yesterday I was talking to someone in Coachella who was following the Tour of California on the Internet and told me my brother was involved in a breakaway. It's fun. This is a relationship business, and it gives you something else to talk about."

— Tim Linden