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One Rhim to Rule Them All

Ron Wagner '93

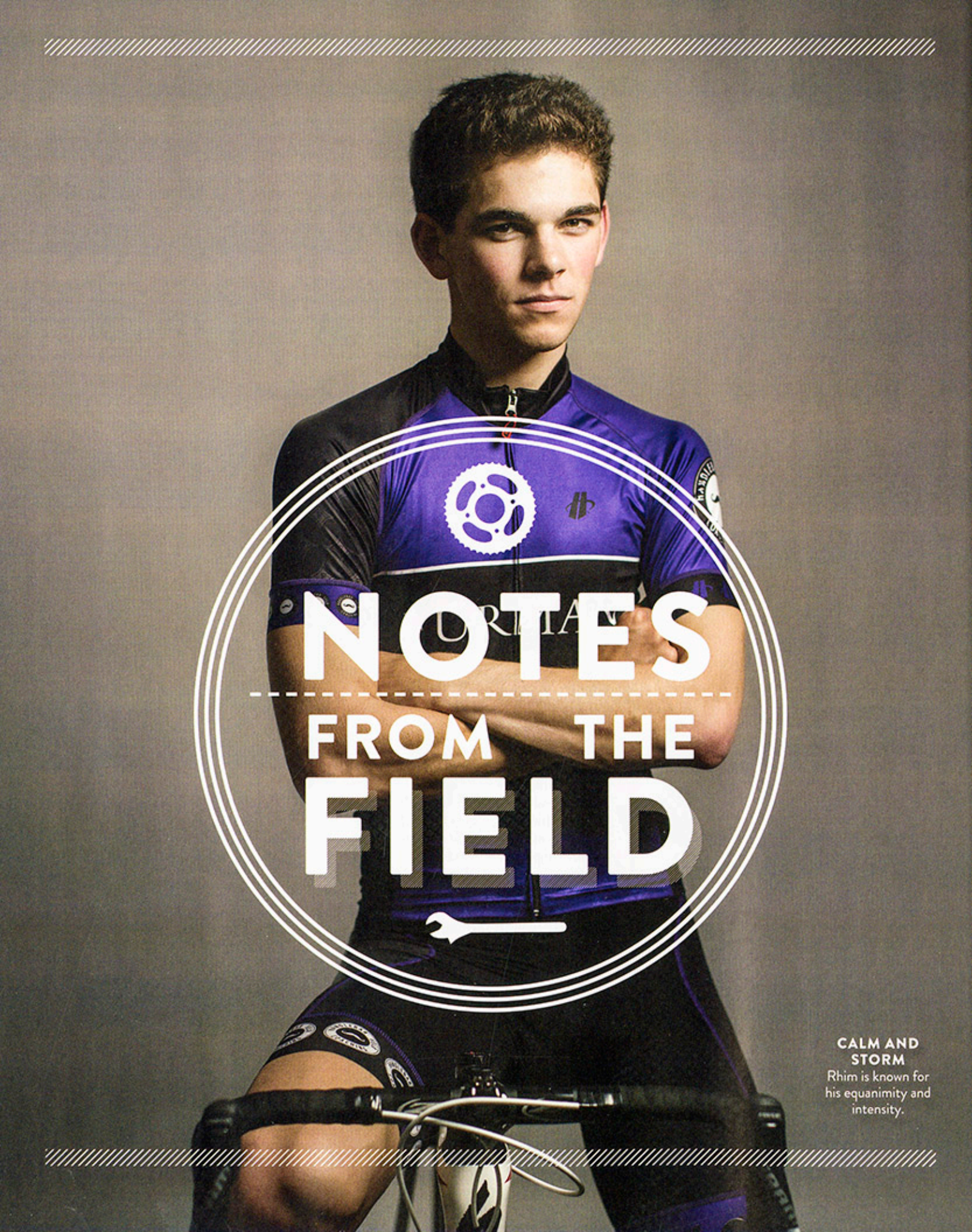
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NOTES
FROM THE
FIELD

**CALM AND
STORM**

Rhim is known for
his equanimity and
intensity.

One Rhim to Rule Them All

How far this sophomore cyclist could go is starting to become everybody's guess.

BY RON WAGNER '93

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JEREMY FLEMING '09

B

Brendan Rhim '18 doesn't snarl about victory, detail an unquenchable thirst for competition, or earnestly articulate his lifelong dream to make the big leagues when asked about the sport in which he has already made a considerable name for himself.

"It's very peaceful, and there's something about being all alone in the middle of nowhere on your bike I really enjoy," he says instead. "It's just not something you can really do with any other sport. I think the closest that's relatable is running, but the one thing I hate about running is you don't go very far for how much effort you put in."

In Rhim's even tone, you can

almost feel the breeze on your face as you gently pedal toward mountains lounging in the distance. The voice doesn't sound like a person former Furman cycling coach **Rusty Miller '98** contends will "rip off your head and stomp on your skull" during a race, but it perhaps does explain why Rhim spends so much time ahead of the pack.

"Off the bike, he is gentle and calm and kind. When he is in a bike race, he will beat you no matter what," Miller says. "A lot of type-A winners in sports are also jerks because a lot of people conflate winning with selfishness. Brendan, by contrast, makes winning an art in his expression of himself."

Maybe the most touted junior cyclist in the United States while in high school in Norwich, VT, Rhim has become the centerpiece of a burgeoning dynasty at Furman since he enrolled as a Paladin. Although Miller and others knew they were looking at something special when they watched Rhim win the U.S.

junior nationals criterium in Augusta, GA, three years ago, no one could have predicted the transcendence of Rhim's talent and how quickly it would push Furman cycling to places it had never been.

ROAD MAP TO SUCCESS

When Rhim won the road race and criterium at May's USA Cycling Collegiate Road Nationals in Asheville, NC—before leading the Paladins to a victory in the team time trial—it marked the first time any school had ever won those three races in the same year. Only a second-place finish in the individual time trial prevented Rhim from the mind-boggling feat of sweeping all four national championship events, and he did it carrying the weight of being the pre-race favorite, with every team from every school working to take him down. That Rhim felt the heat, however, would probably come

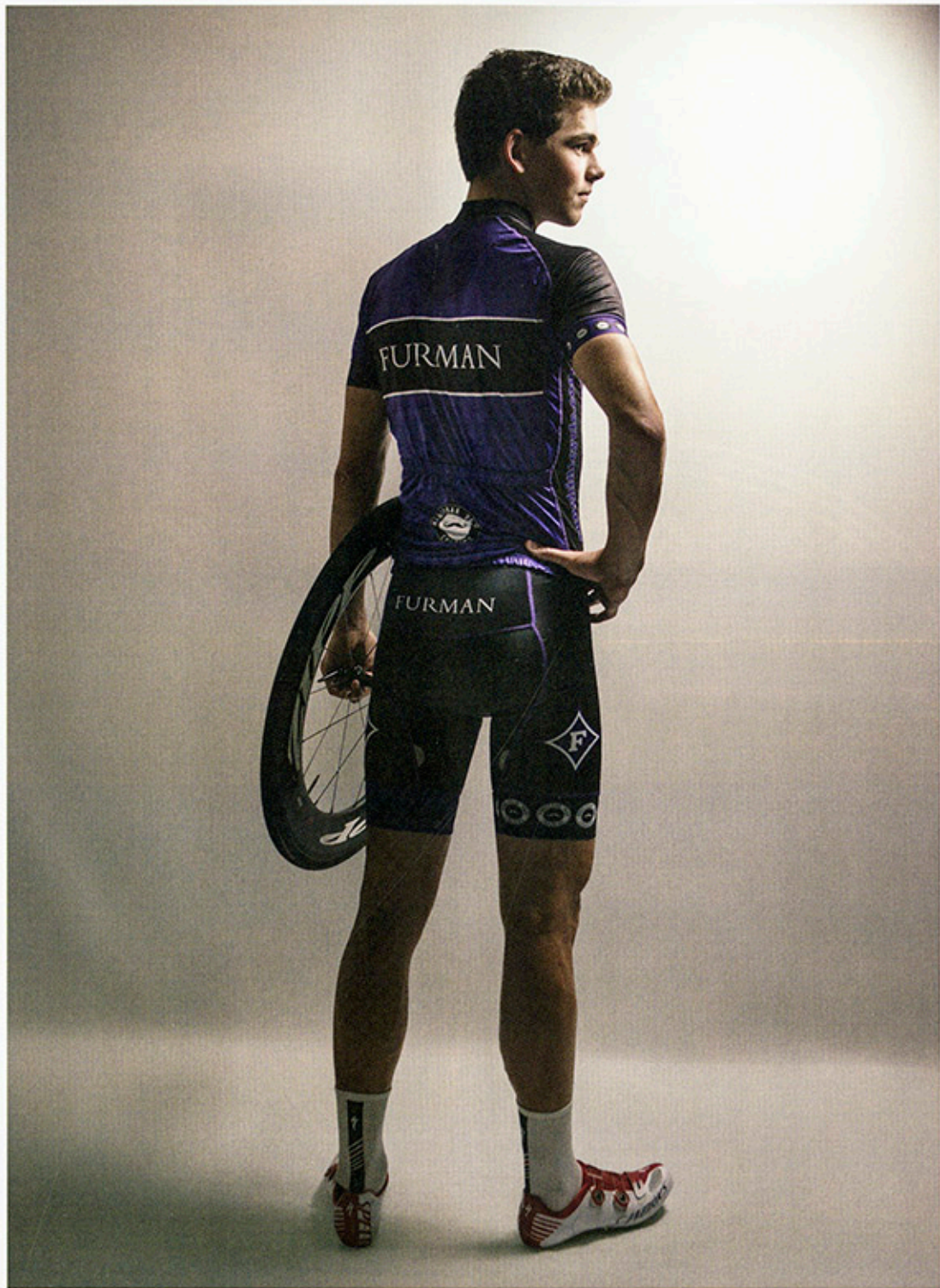
as news to his competitors.

"It's pressure put on you to perform and validate the ranking, so I was not expecting to win by any means. But I was definitely expecting myself to do well and finish in the top five," he says. "Winning both was a surprise and obviously huge."

The 75-mile road race-course is brutally mountainous, but at the halfway point Rhim, who was being aided by his teammates, left the lead group and didn't look back, crossing the line in 3:03.37—25 seconds ahead of the nearest competitor. "[He] rode the last 40 miles of the race alone with varsity teams attempting to chase him," Miller says. "In the cycling world, this is almost unheard of."

The criterium the next day featured another difficult hilly course of about a mile, which the riders circled for 75 minutes. Again, all wilted in the face of Rhim's relentless assault.

"When Brendan came to



A STAND-UP GUY

Former coach Rusty Miller describes Rhim as gentle, calm, and kind. "A lot of type-A winners in sports are also jerks because a lot of people conflate winning with selfishness. Brendan, by contrast, makes winning an art in his expression of himself."

Furman, I described him as the number one cycling recruit in the country," Miller says. "And after he arrived at Furman it became apparent he was not just the number one freshman recruit but that he was also the number one collegiate cyclist in the United States of America."

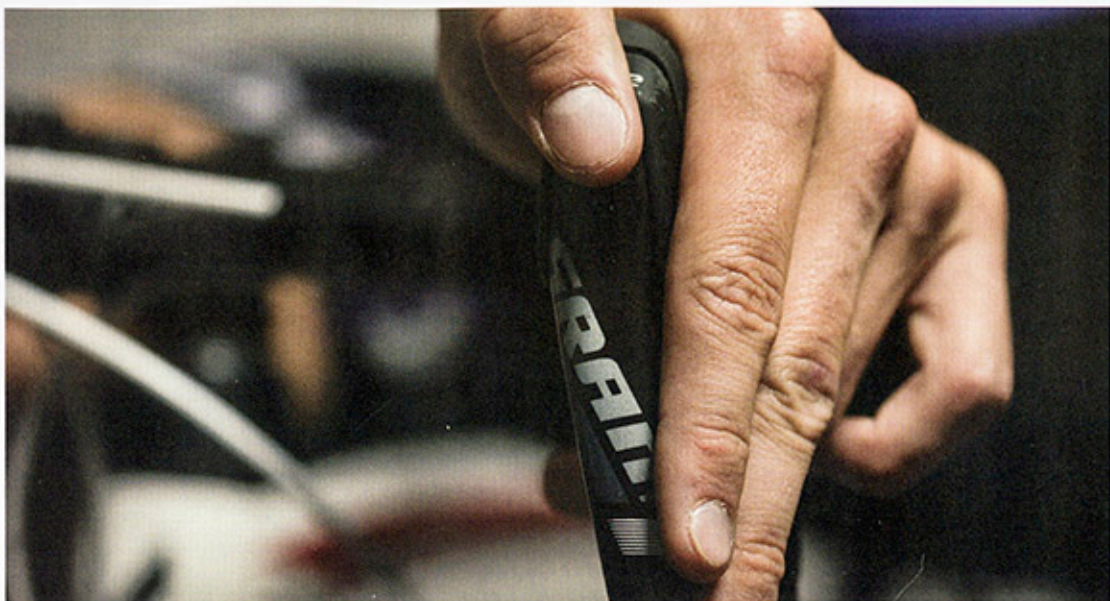
Rhim's first season also saw him capture Southeastern Collegiate Cycling Conference road races at Georgia and Chattanooga, and a criterium at Clemson. In the fall and winter, when competition shifts to the emerging event of cyclo-cross (short races where riders must frequently dismount and carry their bikes while navigating obstacles), he won two more events before finishing third at the USA Nationals in January despite competing "just for fun."

Even more fun—after riding alone for thousands of miles—was having teammates. In the time trial, four riders stay as tightly bunched as possible while rotating who cuts the wind in the lead. Often regarded as collegiate cycling's "marquee event," Furman was undefeated in the 2015 season.

"It's probably one of my favorite events because you go out and suffer with three of your friends, and you just go as fast as you can," says Rhim, who held the trophy in Asheville with **Charlie Hough '17**, **Brian Suto '18**, and **Richard Rainville '18**. "It takes a lot of practice to get everybody to work in sync and understand what everybody is capable of, how much we can push each other. The closer you ride together, the more beneficial the draft, so it comes down to being comfortable riding really, really close to one another, almost to the point you're rubbing elbows."

Miller notes that "you can

"AFTER HE ARRIVED AT FURMAN, IT BECAME APPARENT HE WAS NOT JUST THE NUMBER ONE FRESHMAN RECRUIT...HE WAS ALSO THE NUMBER ONE COLLEGIATE CYCLIST IN AMERICA."



HANDS-ON

Rhim's success stems not only from his natural abilities and physical attributes, but also from his approach to preparation and competition.

win the criterium or the road race like Furman did with one star athlete who is supported by his teammates. But if you have one rock star and three foot soldiers, you can't win the team time trial."

In other words, a team was exactly what the university was hoping for when it welcomed players like Rhim into its fold.

Club cycling has been at Furman since at least the 1980s, but the squad was wholly dependent on whether or not any students were serious enough about it to create one. Miller, who went on to ride professionally, was one of the sport's early champions, as were **Chris Butler '10** and **Andy Baker '13**, also future pros who managed to win DII road-race national championships in 2008 and 2011, respectively. The club also captured time trial national titles in 2008 and 2009, which was an unlikely achievement

to say the least.

"That team was by pure luck," says Owen McFadden, who oversees club sports as Furman's director of campus recreation. "We happened to get riders here that were good enough to win, but as soon as they graduated we went down to nothing where we didn't even have a team for a year or two. I didn't think it was ever going to come back."

Nate Morse '17 of Cohasset, MA, and **Hough** of Travelers Rest, SC, made up Miller's first recruiting class, and the results were instantaneous as Hough won the DII criterium national championship as a freshman in 2014.

Joining Rhim as freshmen a year later were Suto of Oxford, CT; **Nolan McQueen '18** of Louisville, KY; Rainville of Livonia, MI; and **Bruce Hall '18** of Nassau, The Bahamas—all of whom provided the depth necessary to propel Furman to a dominant time trial national

title. It also gave Hough, a recruiting coup in his own right, someone with whom to share the spotlight, if not first-place trophies. Such a rivalry could have been a problem, but thanks at least in part to Rhim's easygoing nature, it wasn't.

"In a way it makes it easier because it takes a little pressure off me to have another fast guy on the team," Hough says. "In general, it's always good to have fast guys on your team instead of racing against you. I was happy to see him take the title this year and keep it inside the Furman family."

Unlike the tempered expectations that can come with competing in NCAA Division I, there may be no reason to limit possibilities for Furman cycling. The sport is run by USA Cycling and usually exists outside of athletic departments, with schools broken into two simple categories: Division I, for those with enrollments of

more than 15,000; and Division II for those under.

"Furman has a chance to be the greatest collegiate cycling team in the country," Miller says matter-of-factly.

Furman's combination of scholastic rigor and fortunate geography puts it in a unique position to excel. Combine that with the rapid growth of collegiate cycling and Greenville's thriving cycling community, and you start to see the source of people's enthusiasm.

"I moved here just because of the weather, the road networks, the amount of climbs you can do," says George Hincapie, a native of New York City who won three national road-race championships and competed in the Tour de France 17 times. "In terms of trying to do proper training, there really isn't much better terrain in the world than what we have here in Greenville. A lot of people don't know that."

Rhim didn't. When he

Notes from the Field

**THE FACE OF
CYCLING'S
FUTURE**

Tour de France
veteran and
Greenville citizen
George Hincapie
has his eye
on Rhim.

found out, Furman had itself a new student.

GO SOUTH, YOUNG MAN

Rhim grew up in the picturesque Connecticut River Valley near the New Hampshire border, the sun rising over that state's White Mountains and setting behind the Green Mountains of Vermont. His family watched the Tour de France on television, and when Rhim was in his early teens his grandfather, once a competitive cyclist, convinced him to enter a race. "I fell in love with it, and the rest is history," Rhim says.

The brutal northeast winters undoubtedly made Rhim tough, but despite piling up victories in regional races, all that bad weather also hampered his opportunity to get better. He was already looking south for college to solve the problem when Miller introduced himself, and the more Rhim learned about Furman the more impressed he was. "There was a lot of improvement physically this year from previous years," Rhim says. "I'd say Furman's location geographically, the weather, and the college schedule have allowed me to choose my time a little more wisely."

In Hincapie's day, talented riders had to choose as teenagers between higher education and the pros. No more. Lack of NCAA involvement means kids are able to train with and compete against professional teams as amateurs while also racing in college, and Rhim can't envision a scenario where he would leave Furman before earning a degree.

"Brendan prizes his academics and his education as highly as he does his development as a cyclist," Miller says.

Another cycling tradition that has changed for the better is performance-enhancing drug use. The sport and doping have become synonymous in the minds of casual observers, but Rhim and Miller both say that stereotype no longer reflects reality.

"I have never been aware of a positive doping test in collegiate road cycling," Miller says. "I think that [the sport] operates in a completely different way than professional cycling did in the late 90s and early 2000s. It's simply not an issue."

"Cycling now has one of the best doping controls and is the most tested sport in the world," adds Rhim. "Biological passport, which I'm pretty sure only one or two other sports use, tracks individual athletes, and you can be tested any time of the day, any day of the year, wherever you are. And you constantly have to report where you are. The sport has definitely cleaned up."

And make no mistake: All signs point to Rhim competing at the sport's pro level. Before college, Rhim won the Tour de l'Abitibi in Canada, which Miller calls "the largest and most important bicycle race for all of North America for under-19 competitors." When not racing for Furman, Rhim rides for the California Giant Berry Farms under-23 development team, and in the cycling world his collegiate championships are not as impressive as his having won three long-route criteriums in the spring season.

The highlight was a victory Rhim calls "the biggest" of his young career at April's Redlands Bicycle Classic in Redlands, CA, when he held off a world-class field of 140. To many professional observers, the level of that race was higher than the national

RHIM AND HIS TEAMMATES ROUTINELY LEAVE CAMPUS AND HEAD NORTH, CLIMBING MORE THAN 2,000 FEET...A PERFECT 100-MILE LOOP FOR FEELING THE PAIN OF IMPROVEMENT.

collegiate championships. "It was a full-on professional race, the highest tier of professional racing in the United States," says Miller.

In June, Rhim took part in the USA Cycling Amateur Road Nationals in Lake Tahoe and finished 21st in the road race, 28th in the time trial, and 20th in the criterium.

"He's extremely talented... a very dynamic cyclist," says Hincapie, who is heavily involved in the development of young cyclists. "I'm looking forward to seeing him grow. I hope that once he comes out of the university, we can get him in our program and help him get there."

Like all elite athletes, cyclists practice. A lot.

Rhim and his teammates routinely leave campus and head north, climbing more than 2,000 feet to Caesar's Head. The southern North Carolina mountains don't quite reach the 4,000 feet of elevation required for altitude training, but that's about the only thing missing from what is otherwise a perfect 100-mile loop for feeling the pain of improvement.

"Once you get that far you're pretty toasted," Rhim says. "There's so much suffering that goes on, and it's not just racing. I actually think

racing is fun...but when you go for a training ride, you say, oh, I have to kill myself for three hours.... It just kind of sucks."

There's no romantic idealism when Rhim describes the torment he endures for the reward of the life he wants to live, just acceptance.

"I love being outdoors. I love traveling. If cycling didn't have those two things I do not think I would be able to do it because it is such a brutally tough sport. Cycling has allowed me to travel the world and see a lot of things that I never would have seen."

To Miller, this sort of refreshing honesty reflects the other side of Rhim's personality—the half that doesn't involve removing and stepping on craniums.

"The boy has a Buddha nature in the kind of warrior that he is in that you can almost tell he cares about his competitors as people.... He has a broader view perhaps of life on this planet than your average athlete," Miller says. "It's really not about me winning and you losing; it's more about me expressing myself, showing the world who I am, and it happens to be on a bicycle. And in the process of all this it happens that you're going to lose, because when Brendan expresses himself through his bicycle, he wins." **F**