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## Butler makes rapid ascent on road to cycling career

**EARLY ON AS A COLLEGE STUDENT**, Chris Butler found the ultimate stress reliever from the academic grind at Furman: climbing on his bike and sweating away his worries on the road up the back side of Paris Mountain.

But Butler is no ordinary cyclist. Those who know him won't be surprised to see all those trips up Paris Mountain pay off big time for the economics and accounting major — in another Paris.

That's the Paris where the Tour de France ends each year, with the world's toughest cyclists tooling down the Champs Elysées after three grueling weeks of racing.

Butler, who is from Hilton Head Island, S.C., is among the nation's top young cyclists. He turned pro this spring as he finished his work for his Furman degree. He has signed to ride for BMC Racing.

"They were looking to add more climbers," Butler says. "For me, the Tour de France is hopefully a few years in the future. I'm excited to get the chance to prove myself and prepare for the longer races."

BMC Racing happens to be the team of Butler's mentor, Greenville's George Hincapie. Hincapie, the reigning national road race champion, five-time Olympian and 14-time competitor in the Tour de France, calls Butler "a natural."

Butler got to know Hincapie as the Furman student's training rides got longer and his range lengthened, with five and six hours in the saddle on mountain climbs up Caesars Head and deep into the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Before long, Hincapie was inviting Butler to accompany him on training rides.

Butler joined a local development team sponsored by Hincapie Sportswear and snagged a spot as a U-23 (under age 23) developmental rider with BMC Racing. In February he spent two weeks in California training with the BMC

pros, including current world champion Cadel Evans of Australia. By May he had been offered a pro contract with BMC.

In a recent interview with Hincapie, Neil Browne of on-line cycling magazine *VeloNation* asked about Butler, who was "riding like a man possessed at training camp."

Hincapie said, "We knew right away that he could go uphill really well. I trained a lot with him this winter, and he has progressed tremendously. He has a tremendous work ethic, and he never backed down on training. As far as being a climber, he's a natural."

Butler also realized at the BMC camp that he could get used to the world-class treatment lavished on the pros, from the best bikes and mechanics to incredible meals and deep tissue massages after long days of training.

"It was definitely the best experience I've ever had on a bike and personally some of the most fun I've had in my life, being around superstars of cycling," he says.

It's been a dream ride for Butler, who didn't start racing until his freshman year of college — a late start for a cyclist. He ran cross country in junior high but stress fractures drove him to take up cycling as he tried cross training.

"I got a great scholarship to Furman, and I knew Greenville's reputation for cycling. Then with the cycling club team at Furman, everything fell into place. If I'd chosen any other school, maybe I wouldn't be as serious about cycling," he says.

"It's my greatest disadvantage, but it's also my biggest advantage. If I'm already neck-and-neck with these guys after only three or four years, I've improved rapidly. It's probably the thing that impresses people the most about me. I've gotten to a high level pretty quick."

He helped Furman's cycling team bring home national time-trial titles in the USA Cycling Collegiate Championships in 2008



CASEY B. GIBSON

*Chris Butler celebrates winning the 2008 Collegiate Division 2 individual road race.*

and 2009 and won an individual road race title in 2008.

This spring, Butler planned to race in Italy before returning to Furman for final exams. Depending on his pro team schedule, he also hoped to compete in the collegiate nationals in May and to return to Greenville in September for the USA Cycling Pro Championships.

For serious Greenville area cyclists, the benchmark is how fast they can climb Paris Mountain. Butler's done it in eight minutes, 57 seconds.

"I'd heard all the top pros could do under nine minutes and that George's time was 8:45 or maybe a little faster," he says.

Butler doesn't take an iPod on his training rides with Hincapie because he doesn't want to miss what the veteran is teaching him. "It's probably the best advice I can get," he says.

As for his solo training rides, no iPod is needed. "I'm pretty motivated," Butler says. "I can go out by myself for five hours in the mountains. It's kind of a Zen-like experience, a spiritual experience, a cleansing. It's just you and the pain of the bike. I enjoy it."

— ANN GREEN

*The author, a 1975 graduate, is a freelance writer in Greenville.*