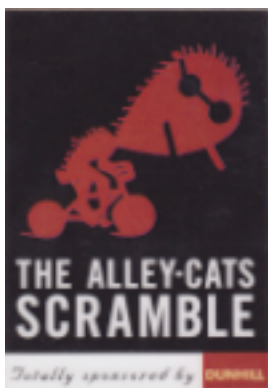




It's called the Human-Powered Roller Coaster. With a name like that, you might expect a wild ride powered by someone pedaling furiously on a bicycle hooked up to a generator. Nix the generator and you've got the idea. The 'roller coaster' is a large, wooden figure-8 racing track; the 'human-powered' part is the bike couriers who race on it. It's the main feature of the Alley-Cat's Scramble, a bike courier competition held over three days this past October at Cinespace Studios, a large warehouse space on Toronto's waterfront.

Alley-cat races began as illegal street races between couriers in Toronto in the mid-1980s. The idea soon spread to the USA and Europe. In its fifth appearance in three years as a sponsored event, the latest Alley-Cat's Scramble attracted 180 of the fastest bike couriers from both sides of the border. The top scrambler wins a free trip to the Cycle Messenger World Championships in Zurich, Switzerland later this year.



And there's more to the event than just bike races. Live bands (including Fishbone, Vibrolux and the Mahones) play between heats, while an art exhibit and psychic readings also compete for our attention. Next to the makeshift bar, a DJ spins industrial music that kicks into high gear whenever a race gets underway. Above the music, track-side announcers call the races. The aromatic lure of strong coffee mingles in the air with vestiges of fresh sawdust, bestowing a transient ambiance. The two-rimmed circus is in town.

"It brings people from all over the world together, and it sort of creates a nucleus for the celebration of the bicycle," says Toronto courier Jim Kooz. "I think it's helping to create a lot of awareness, too. Being a bike courier, I'm in traffic a lot and I deal with people who, when they see someone on a bike, they see a kid on a toy—and I'm 34 years old."

Like the profession, these races are hardly kids' stuff, and definitely not for the faint of heart. Richie Ditta knows that very well. "I've put more skin on this track this weekend than I have all my previous three times here," exclaims the 25-year-old in his Brooklyn accent. Ditta is the defending fixed-gear champion. As the name suggests, these bikes have no gears, just a direct drive. Which means there's no coasting, no back-pedaling.

The inadvertent skin peel occurred after Ditta was ridden into the rails while trying to overtake courier Sean Noonan. Ditta went down hard; his front tire got badly mangled. But instead of coasting to an easy win, Noonan turned back to check on Ditta. After a chat and a pat on the back from Noonan, Ditta hoisted his crippled bike over his head like it was the Stanley Cup and jogged the remaining distance to the finish line for the win.

"He let me get back up and run the rest of my race, which is really cool sportsmanship," Ditta tells me afterwards. "That's what it's really about."

The move was applauded and cheered by spectators and couriers, Lisa Ramsey among them. "That kind of stuff is really cool. It was a good gesture."

Ramsey, the defending Fixed-Gear Queen, is a New York City-based courier originally from San Francisco. Soft-spoken and friendly with red hair twisted into pig tails, her freckled face holds a quiet confidence. "There is a sense of camaraderie," she explains. "A lot of us are friends. We get out there and we race, and we try really hard, but, at least for me, I'm here to have fun."



She's been eliminated from the competition but doesn't look very upset. Her muscular legs garbed in leather pants, she's ready to party, and she heads off to find her friends.

And they're everywhere. Some are in sleek lycra cycling shorts and others in khakis. Some are pierced and tattooed, some not. There are long-hairs, dreads, a few shaved heads, and everything in between.

The individuality on parade among the couriers finds a parallel during Friday night's performance by Celtic punk kings the Mahones. There's really no prescribed way to dance to the Mahones' brand of full-on Celtic rock—free-style, kick line, pogo, whatever. With couriers and spectators kicking up their heels, it dawns on me that there is a common thread here with these people, this lifestyle, this party: Freedom.

And there goes Lisa Ramsey, the dethroned Fixed-Gear Queen, doing aerial cartwheels across the dance floor, red pig-tails giving gravity the finger.