

## Morini 'pedals' cycling in schools

**Wytheville Enterprise Staff**

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By NATE HUBBARD/Staff

Why not?

That's Italian native Fred Morini's adage whether he's trying to recover from a horrific bicycle accident or to convince kids in Bland and Wythe counties to take up what he calls the "beautiful sport of cycling." Morini, a former professional cyclist and now a global ambassador for the sport, is visiting area schools this week to promote safe, healthy and – most importantly – fun bike rides.

"Cycling is a good way to make your life healthier," Morini said during a presentation to students at George Wythe High School on Wednesday morning. "Cycling is also a good sport to have fun with friends."

Morini, who still lives in Italy, is making his second visit to the area after he met Dr. Lee Willis, a Wytheville chiropractor, last year when Willis rode with him during a "cycling vacation" in Europe.

During Morini's first trip to the area in October 2007, he also met with Andy Kegley, executive director of HOPE (Helping Overcome Poverty's Existence) Inc., about helping to set up bicycle clubs through area schools.

"We think it's not just poverty of the finance, but it's poverty of the body, heart, mind and soul," Kegley said in explaining HOPE's involvement with the initiative. Working with Willis, Kegley and other area cyclists, and funded by HOPE, Morini then planned this month's trip as a way to build interest in cycling among children prior to the hoped for development of the clubs.

Kegley said a grant was submitted on Feb. 1 to the Wythe-Bland Community Foundation for funds to purchase bikes, helmets, jerseys and other equipment to help start the planned after-school cycling clubs. He said he expects to hear if the grant was approved by April 1 and get the clubs started soon after if the proposal is accepted.

Adult sponsors for the clubs also are being sought, with Kegley mentioning physical education teachers, college students and retired residents as types of people that might fit well with the program and have the time to volunteer.

Morini, 31, also is seeking to promote cycling among adults in the area and will return to Wytheville again this summer prior to the Big Walker Century Ride to help train cyclists for the event. Morini will also take part in the charity ride, serving as a pace-setter for some of the competitors.



Fred Morini signs an autograph for Scott Memorial Middle School sixth-graders Maria Stoker and Makaila Heath Tuesday afternoon. Photo by Jean Farley

If there is enough interest, Kegley and Morini also mentioned trying to develop a shorter evening ride for youth on July 4, the day before the main Big Walker event.

"Now the goal is that: to promote cycling among kids, improve the cyclists you already have on the road here and why not to do something bigger in the future?" Morini said during an interview Tuesday following his afternoon presentation at Scott Memorial Middle School. "I never put limits on my dreams."

In his presentation, Morini gave a brief summary of his career in cycling.

After beginning to compete in amateur events at age seven, Morini signed a professional contract with the German cycling team Gerolsteiner in 2000.

"To be a cyclist, you need to do many sacrifices, but I never thought about sacrifices," he said. "That was a pleasure...I didn't think about 'oh my God, I cannot go dance tonight, I cannot go out to drink a beer, because I have to race tomorrow.' That was what I needed."

During his career, he raced in prominent cycling events around the world such as the Giro d'Italia and won a stage in the Tour de Austria. Morini even told the George Wythe students that he once placed ahead of famous American cyclist Lance Armstrong, although he admitted that Armstrong was just using the race as a training opportunity and not necessarily trying to win.

But on Dec. 10, 2001, Morini suffered a terrible accident as he hit a hole in the road as he sped downhill on his bike. His helmet broke in five places and he suffered severe back injuries that left him temporarily paralyzed.

Eventually, Morini learned to walk again and even tried to get back into competitive cycling. His injuries, though, proved to be too damaging.

"When you are a professional cyclist, it's like every professional sport," he said. "You are like a car, like a Formula One car. You need to be 100 percent – sometimes that's not enough. You need to be more than 100 percent."

Although his professional career came to end, Morini retained his passion for cycling. In addition to his promotion of cycling in Europe, Australia, California, Boston and now Wytheville, he also continues to do public relations work for his old team and provides television and radio commentary on cycling races for Italian networks.

"I try to use the same mind I had when I was professional," he said about his post-racing career. "The same dedication and the same determination, motivation and at the same time, the same lifestyle. The goal is there and me to go there."

As a result of his accident, Morini said he's also dedicated to making cycling a safe activity.

He told the students the importance of checking parts on the bike before going for a ride and, of course, of wearing a helmet.

"Helmet saved my life, first of all," he said. "We try to explain a lot about the helmet use."

Morini said he understands why helmets are sometimes unpopular, but he said that makes it even more important to get kids in the habit of wearing one early in life.

Growing up in Italy, Morini said he didn't wear a helmet until it was mandated by his contract with the German team.

"At the time I was too young to understand why the helmet is so important," he said. "Of course everybody knows the helmet is important if you fell down, but sometime you just look for the design, for the look, and you don't think about safe cycling."

Kegley said he hopes the increased interest in cycling brought by Morini's appearances and the planned after-school clubs will lead to a variety of features in the area that will make cycling safer and more enjoyable, such as road signs and bike lanes.

"One of the things we hope to see is bike signage all over the two counties, routes, maps, descriptions, safe places to ride, kiosks that have descriptions and information," Kegley said.

As cycling in the area becomes more popular, Kegley said he hopes it becomes a type of "eco-tourism," attracting people looking for new places to ride.

Morini said Big Walker Mountain and the surrounding area is perfect for both road cycling and mountain biking. In fact, he was so enamored with the area during his visit last October that he and his wife decided that Virginia would be the name of their first child due to be born next month.

"This is an investment," Morini said. "Like every investment we need time, but I think we can get time...and have cyclists in short time because this is not something boring. It's a sport."

"We have one goal," he added. "To make a better world, to make people healthy and at the same time to pass them all the right cycling information to do much better and to have more cyclists in the future."

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