

Daniel had no idea just how profoundly bicycles would change his life. How could he? He was only 11 years old.

The group home where Daniel was living (at that time) brought kids down to a local bike co-op to do community service hours. Daniel noticed that there was a build-a-bike class and asked how he could join. Without hesitation, the instructors made it possible for Daniel, with his warm smile and eager eyes, to take the 8-week course, and thereby changed the course of his life. But they didn't know that at the time, either.

One whole year after taking the course, and not only holding tools for the first time but also learning how to use them, Daniel called the instructors.

"This is Danielson. Remember me? You said I had to be 12 years old to join the bike riding team, and I just turned 12."

The instructors – Ignacio and Daniela – were also co-founders of El Grupo Youth Cycling – a non-profit with a mission to empower youth through bicycles.

It all began in 2004 through teaching a class on riding bicycles at a local charter high school. The group consisted of eight non-athletic teenagers and recycled bikes. It took 8 months to prepare for and accomplish a 27-mile event. The ride took almost 3 hours, but for every kid that was the greatest physical achievement of his/her life. Shortly thereafter, youth asked if they could ride more often and work towards a bigger goal. There were no fancy equipment, shorts, or cycling shoes, but they grew stronger with every mile. From there, per youth riders' desires, El Grupo blossomed and continues to grow.



The team went from 5 to 15 to 25 youth on the team in those first years. What began as a rag tag group of teenagers had grown when they met Danielson to become its own entity accepting youth aged 12-20 from all walks of life and looking for something to believe in.



It wasn't easy at first. Nothing in Daniel's life had been thus far, anyway. Ignacio had to pick up Daniel at the group home and sign him out before and after each practice. Five times each week. Permission was harder to get than forgiveness, but it was a thin line to walk.

And it wasn't natural talent or grace on a bike that was bringing Daniel back each day. El Grupo has experienced teenagers that possess those qualities, but most young people that try out and join are much like Daniel was: a novice willing to try harder than he ever thought possible and to learn to expect things of himself.

Less than a year into Daniel riding with El Grupo, one of the families of other riders used their foster family status to take him in. El Grupo became his village.



El Grupo aims to instill young people with life-long healthy habits and build character and camaraderie through bicycle riding, racing and outreach. Through its programs, it is getting youth on bikes, and they in turn are teaching, inspiring and empowering other youth to ride, enjoy and love bikes. Today, El Grupo reaches over 1,000 youth annually that are underserved or simply uninspired and

gives them something positive to be excited about, as well as confidence in themselves.

Youth members of Team El Grupo practice up to five times each week – all starting and ending their rides from their downtown clubhouse. The team is broken down into A-B-C groups for some training purposes, but also benefits from all youth– from the newbies to the nationally ranked riders – interacting, riding and learning from one another.

Some youth on the team see out their newfound skills and strength in races. El Grupo participates in road and mountain bike races (and has dozens of State Championships in both to boot). On the other hand, some participants do not choose to race and see out their talents via self-supported bike tours. El Grupo regards both as exceptional ways to prove to one self that limits are only self-imposed.

The purpose is to empower every rider with the confidence and courage to set and achieve goals that are dreams at the start of their El Grupo tenure. Expectations of every rider are the same: come to practice ready to work hard, with positive attitudes, and trust and kindness for their fellow teammates.

It is also expected that each rider participate in community outreach activities and events (on average 4 hours/month), and put family and school first. All of this requires and teaches enhanced time management skills. El Grupo is about much more than just riding bikes.

What El Grupo is not about: giving kids workouts to do on their own, deaf to the world with their self-focused headphones, and then reading their power files.

Over the years, through much gained knowledge, experience and donated equipment, El Grupo Head Coach Ignacio has developed a model for junior development that is like no other. Teenagers learn to be social and utilize positive peer pressure to inspire their teammates and themselves to work harder and strive

for more. Group riding, skills in the park, and intervals in pairs help youth develop at a faster rate than anyone can do on their own.

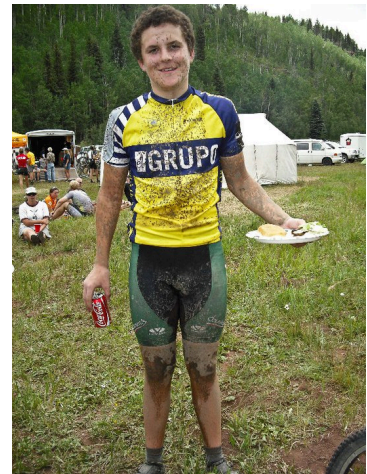
In years past, as with any sport, progression takes time. As Ignacio likes to put it: “First, I beat them pedaling with one leg. Then, it takes two. Then, I have to outsmart them. And finally, I cheer them on from behind.” The progression varies from one rider to the next, but it happens. It is astounding what hidden strength we all have, especially young people, once we learn how to tap into it.

El Grupo has taught youth how to uncover and develop strength since the beginning. However, since the team has acquired PowerTap technology over the past two years, the rate at which youth are learning how their bodies (and minds) work and are able to develop strength has greatly accelerated.

Numbers are real. You can’t hide behind them. Youth on El Grupo who are now using PowerTap for their training understand why Coach Ignacio would often encourage them to give that little bit more. He knows it is there. And now they do too because they see it for themselves.

But even more than seeing it for themselves, the use of PowerTap technology has translated into youth from Team El Grupo being better role models and youth leaders in all the outreach that El Grupo does. They know that they can expect a little more from the over 100 youth aged 7-14 who participate in their weeklong Summer Bike Camp programs. And they know how good it feels for someone to believe in their inherent and latent potential. Adults forget that, all too often.

A few years ago, a donor learned of Daniel from a caseworker and wanted to make an anonymous direct donation on his behalf. He happened to be at the clubhouse one day when practice was to begin and kids were gathering after school. He asked Daniel why he does it – why he likes riding a bike so much? Daniel paused. He was a 15 year old with a whole lot of attitude for a whole lot of reasons. He replied simply, “Freedom.” The seventy-something year old smiled deeply. He rode his bike for the same reason.



At the end of the day, El Grupo (and maybe riding a bike, for that matter) is all about self-discovery.

In essence, what El Grupo does is empower youth (and the adults that gravitate towards something they wish they would have had in their adolescence) to find out what they are made of, and to re-shape that into what and who they truly want to be.

The level of understanding of self and one's own capacity only begins to come into focus in those teenage years. Being able to utilize tools like PowerTap has greatly enhanced that understanding and self-discovery.

The physiological changes and muscle development that happen from the age of 12 up to the age of 20 are vast – and El Grupo gets to not only guide that, but also to help youth understand it through the use of PowerTap tools.

El Grupo had its first rider earn his way to race internationally at the Tour de l'Abitibi in Quebec in 2012. A different rider earned his way the following year. With the addition of PowerTap technology, El Grupo had six youth earn their spots in that same race in Canada in 2014. Daniel was one of them. Out of over 150 juniors from around the world, he won the award for the most courageous.

Now that Daniel is 18 years old, a senior in high school, and living on his own, his power is immense (both figuratively and literally with his solid Russian 180 lb build). He has been able to grow up through El Grupo – the one true rock in his life.

And the best part is that what he has gained through the program will help him be one of El Grupo's greatest assets in the future. Daniel recently said, "El Grupo is not a team. It is a way of life." He is right. And through that way of life, he has gained strength, knowledge, and skills that will help him be a leader within El Grupo for years to come. As he graduates and moves onto El Grupo's U23 Team, he will move into a Team Mechanic role (with full capability to work on PowerTap hubs among everything else), and assist with coaching El Grupito – a seasonal program for youth aged 8-12. He will also have a full-ride as a student at the University of Arizona.

Daniel has the mechanical, technological, and leadership skills to help younger generations through El Grupo - maybe kids who are much like he was, with those same eager eyes - to learn about, ride and love bicycles as much as he does.

