

# ALLEY CATS STRIKE

Soup cans and other nonperishable food items are commonly collected at Midwestern Alley Cat races.

**Bike riding and philanthropy come together in races all across the Midwest.**

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## YOU SOAR DOWN A CITY STREET ON

your bicycle, wind slapping your face, legs pedaling furiously as the feeling of weightlessness steals over your lungs. Adrenaline takes over. Your body has turned into a pedaling machine, propelled closer and closer to the next stop by that driving force inside your chest.

But you're not Lance Armstrong, and this isn't the Tour de France. You don't even care who crosses the finish line first. Instead, you race toward your next checkpoint to snatch up another piece of the puzzle—that elusive piece you can never seem to find. But this is bigger than a simple puzzle. You have a chance to give someone his or her next meal—because you are an Alley Cat.

"An Alley Cat race is a sort of scavenger hunt against other racers, delivering goods and accomplishing tasks," says Joel Gillespie, an organizer with The Bike Project of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. "Picture guys riding through alleys, kind of darting in and out of them on a bike."

### Hipster or Hercules?

Most likely, one of two mental images comes to mind when you think of a biker: a spandex-clad helmet-enthusiast with the calves of Hercules or a hipster kid sipping free-trade coffee while telling anyone who will listen the advantages of fixed-gear bikes. But that's the beauty of Alley Cat racing—stereotypical bike enthusiasts and novices compete side by side.

"All sorts of people participate in these races," says Brad Quartuccio, editor of Urban Velo, a bimonthly bicycle magazine based out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "Many people do them for fun, some

people do them to see just how fast they can safely get around town, and others do them to win. Alley Cats are more social events than races for many participants."

Believe it or not, Alley Cat races have been in style for some time. Started by bike messengers in major cities who raced for the title of the fastest messenger in town, these informal races have spread across the country and even to parts of Europe and Asia. The modern races are informal, inexpensive and often done in jest—with participants choosing bragging rights over prizes. Alley Cat races typically reflect the organizations that host them with intensity levels ranging from ultra-competitive to laid-back. Whether about getting from point A to point B or gathering goods for charity, the perfect race exists for just about any urban biker.

### Cranking for a Cause

While Pittsburgh has become the unofficial sanctum for bike messenger racing, the Alley Cat races found in the Midwest take on a distinctly more community-oriented, "do-gooder" approach than the more hardcore competitions found out East.

"Somewhere along the line, certain Alley Cats took on a philanthropic side. One of the more prominent and widely used formats is that of collecting canned goods at each stop for donation to the local food bank," Brad says. "Others use funds to donate to local projects, injured riders, non-profits or the Bicycle Messenger Emergency Fund."

The Bike Project of Urbana-Champaign hosts its own Alley Cat race called Cranksgiving each November. In the spirit of Thanksgiving, all nonperishable items

collected throughout the race go to the Eastern Illinois Foodbank to make sure the holiday spirit reaches everyone it can.

"You get families sharing the load for picking up stuff and older people not going extra fast, but hauling more food. It branches out from your typical Alley Cat," Joel says. Pedal-shy philanthropists can get involved, too. If you aren't up for racing but still want to do your part, there are all sorts of ways to get involved.

"Organizers are always looking for volunteers to work checkpoints or help with the after-party or other events around the Alley Cat," Brad says.

### A Bicycle Community

On top of the feel-good effects, these philanthropic Alley Cat races also make participants think hard about how they get where they're going. Whether racing in an Alley Cat or streaking down the street in summertime, the bicycle lifestyle promotes health, accessibility and the green movement.

"We at the Bike Project of Urbana-Champaign are trying to make bicycling accessible and affordable, get bikes into people's hands—in addition to making sure people get fed. It's part of our mission about giving back to the community in more ways than fixing their bike. We are building a community around the bicycle," Joel says. UP

If you're looking for more information or if you want to get involved with Alley Cat races in your area, **CLICK HERE.**