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## BMX stars and fans travel road through San Diego

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By Laura Bly, USA TODAY

CHULA VISTA, Calif. — To a casual weekend pedaler, one word describes the view from the top of a three-story-high ramp that marks the start of an Olympic training course devoted to the Summer Games' newest sport.

*Terrifying.*

But not to pro athlete Mike Day, 23, perched at the pinnacle on a lightweight, 20-inch bike and wedged handlebar to handlebar with seven other riders. To Day, this wickedly steep launchpad — more like a roller coaster than a bicycle track — helps explain the adrenaline-laced, rough-and-tumble appeal of BMX racing.

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Born in the late 1960s when Southern California kids mimicked their motorcycle heroes by tearing through vacant lots on Schwinn Sting-Rays, BMX (short for bicycle motocross) is poised to become a sensation of the Beijing Games that kick off Aug. 8.

Sports fans who want a piece of the action without spending the time or money to travel to China can head to the BMX trials at the Olympic Training Center in the San Diego County community of Chula Vista next month, when Day and other top-ranked competitors race for one of three spots on the heavily favored U.S. men's team. (The two-slot U.S. women's team will be chosen based on previous competition rankings and a coach's pick.)

As the countdown to the Games clicks into high gear, U.S. Olympic team trials are being held across the country. And for biking aficionados, a summer vacation in San Diego — birthplace of the triathlon and tagged one of cycling's top U.S. cities by *Bicycling* magazine — can supply everything from Olympic thrills and heart-pounding mountain trails to laid-back beach pedaling.

"You've got the whole spectrum here," says recent Southern California transplant Shawn Rohrbach, author of the upcoming guidebook *Bicycling San Diego* and a local cycling blog, [snowleopard.blogspot.com](http://snowleopard.blogspot.com).

"The kids can watch BMX, Dad can take in a free race at the Balboa Park velodrome (an outdoor arena for track cycling), and Mom can ride down the Silver Strand," a narrow, bike-friendly isthmus that connects San Diego to Coronado.

One of the area's most popular biking excursions: a guided downhill cruise that winds from the top of 822-foot Mount Soledad through La Jolla's manicured, multimillion-dollar neighborhoods to Mission Bay and the Mission Beach boardwalk.

Of course, adds Rohrbach as he observes a clutch of Spandex-sheathed riders zoom past during the velodrome's weekly Tuesday night races, BMX is to other forms of cycling as snowboarding is to downhill skiing: "It's a clash of

cultures," he says. "BMX racing is a very aggressive sport, and it's suited to the young."

Indeed, most of the sport's top-ranked, twentysomething athletes have been bombing down dirt tracks since early grade school — enduring the occasional broken wrist, battered collarbone or torn cartilage along the way.

Many cut their teeth at San Diego's popular Kearny Moto Park, where spectators line the bleachers two nights a week to cheer on the color-coordinated riders — some barely out of diapers — as they careen over six-packs (six rolling jumps in a row) and barrel down the straightaways of a standard, 1,000-foot-long track.

Beijing, it's not.

But Olympian hopeful Day is optimistic that after next month's trials and the Games in August, more participants and fans will be drawn to BMX parks like Kearny — and that gnarly starting ramp in Chula Vista.


In contrast to freestyle BMX with its splashy jumps, spins and other maneuvers, BMX racing on professional supercross tracks like the one in Chula Vista "separates the men from the boys," says Justin Kosman, a San Diego-area photographer who covers BMX for the extreme sports website BNQT.com. The trials will feature eight riders hurtling around the track in one-lap sprints that are over in less than 40 seconds, and "you don't have time to think. ... It's straight into the deep end, going full throttle the whole time."

"We'll be hitting 40 miles an hour and clearing jumps of 40 feet, and you're going to see some crashes," adds Day, taking a break from a practice session on a course studded with steep bumps and imposing curves that mirror those in Beijing. "Hopefully, we'll put on a pretty good show."

*E-mail Laura Bly at [lbly@usatoday.com](mailto:lbly@usatoday.com)*

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