Sports performance program aids athletes of all levels
UC Davis Medical Center Sports Performance Program a growing resource for area athletes, those just looking to get in shape

By Jeff Forward
Citizen Sports Writer - With a daunting hundred-mile bicycle tour on his calendar, Elk Grove resident Stephen Cimperman decided he needed a new road bicycle.

A long-time mountain biker, Cimperman searched online for a road bicycle, and based on his height, bought a Trek similar to the one ridden by Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong.

"I thought I was ready to go, and I get about 100 miles into the ride, and go 'whooaa," Cimperman said, describing the growing pain in his knee as he continued the ride.

Not sure what was causing his knee pain, Cimperman took his bike to the UC Davis Sports Performance Program's lab on J Street in Sacramento to have his bike properly fitted.

"Everybody knows about this place," Cimperman said. "I got a card from some biking guys I know."

The visit and subsequent fitting revealed that the geometry of his bike wasn't correct for his body. The end verdict was that Cimperman needed to buy a new bicycle.

While Cimperman said he is merely seeking to lose a little weight and have some fun, he is one of a growing number of amateur, competitive and professional athletes utilizing the services offered at the Sports Performance lab.

And, it's not only athletes who seek out help from the multi-faceted staff. Even some Elk Grove firefighters have looked to the lab for help with their fitness.

The lab is unique in that it offers a wide range of athletic services and testing for athletes competing in running, cycling, triathlons, and many other sports.

Not only traditional athletes seek the aid of the specialists at the center, though.

The Elk Grove Fire Department has many firefighters who have utilized the program, said Kristyn Staby. In fact, several years ago, the department developed a wellness program to help keep firefighters healthy. Staby added.

"It's a way for the department to proactively keep our workforce fit and to avoid injuries," she said.

One of the benefits has been a workout routine now implemented at all the stations around Elk Grove, which
many firefights said has helped them immensely.

Steve Horning said he's definitely benefited from the Wellness program.

"It's outstanding. We can stay fit for work and it gives us a higher quality of life," Horning said. "Also the program teaches us about proper nutrition."

**The Program**

Among the services offered at the Sports Performance Program are VO2 Max testing and lactate threshold testing, nutritional analysis and consultation, detailed and individualized training programs, sports psychology, and bicycle fitting.

Dr. Gretchen Casazza, supervisor of the lab and director of research, said that one of the program's goals is to help people understand their athletic ability and then develop training plans tailored to individual goals - whether it be to lose weight and be fitter, or to strive for an Olympic medal.

"People sometimes think we only help top-end athletes, but we even help people who've never exercised," Casazza said. "The best time to come in is when you're not in shape so you can learn the right way."

She said that ideally the program uses "applied research" to help not only improve performance, but to also avoid injuries.

"The goal is to avoid over-training and to focus on quality training," she said.

Those sentiments are echoed by Dr. Massimo Testa, one of the founders of the program, who said that often times more results can be obtained by beginning athletes who may be making mistakes in their training routines.

Testa, a native of Italy and former professional soccer player, came to Sacramento after developing a friendship with five-time Olympic Gold Medallist Eric Heiden.

Heiden, who won his medals in speed skating and later became a professional cyclist, is an orthopedic surgeon at UC Davis Medical Center. Often times, his patients will seek rehabilitation help from the sports performance program.

"We had this idea going for a long time," Testa said. "I talked about a lab for champions. About putting together a performance lab covering both the biomechanical and physiological, with emphasis on assessing fitness levels and prescribing training."

After arriving in 2001, Testa said the program has grown in leaps and bounds - moving from one floor of the J Street building to a multi-level facility with high-tech equipment used to monitor all aspects of a patient's fitness and cardiovascular health.

"The university was very supportive," Testa added, "They have given us a nice lab, we have nice equipment and we're still improving."

He estimated that the lab staff performs 150-180 assessments per month, but many of those tests are the same athlete being tested multiple times. The most common athletes to utilize the program to date have been cyclists - making up about 65-70 percent of patients - but runners, triathletes, swimmers, soccer players, tennis players, and even basketball players have been patients, Testa said.

"Basically we want to put together a program that offers a 360 degree approach so the athlete can, like, one stop shop," Testa said. "They come here, they find a nutritionist, a psychologist, everything related to sport. It's kind
of a unique program in the country.

"They (also) come as individuals, they want some guidance in training, how to get better," he added. "Or, sometimes we have people who come who want to know how to implement training to avoid injuries."

In addition to the fitness assessment and training plan development and coaching, other services often utilized include the bicycle fitting and nutritional analysis and advising. Many athletes also take advantage of the psychological counseling with Dr. Kim Cusimano - whether it is for the purpose of developing race strategies, or to analyze personal issues, which may be affecting athletic performance.

**Personalized Advice**

The center draws many levels of athletes, and is evidenced by the numerous cycling jerseys tacked to the wall with personal notes of thanks written on them.

Inside Testa's office, the walls are lined with photos of different athletes, including Davis triathlete Beth Zinkand, and cycling luminaries Andy Hampsten, and six-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong. Testa was a team doctor for Motorola when Armstrong was riding for the team early in his career, and a photo of Armstrong winning his first race ever is prominently displayed on the wall.

But not all who come to the center are world-class athletes.

Cimperman, who had come to the center to figure out his biking woes, said he knows many other cyclists and triathletes who utilize the services to "hone a fine edge," but for him there's a different goal.

"I just need to lose a few pounds and have fun," he said. "Hopefully getting this fitted properly will help prevent some injuries. When you get to be 52, you need to baby things a bit.

"I'm not going to be Lance," he added. "As I tell everyone in the office, the only thing I have in common with Lance is we both eat 7,000 calories a day."

Ken Marti of Roseville learned about the program through an article in the Sacramento Bee. The former cross country runner and track athlete at UC Davis - now in his 50s - is planning to climb an 18,000-foot volcanic peak in Mexico and wanted to see how fit he was. Marti said he did the assessment to compare his fitness today with what it was 30 years ago.

"Basically, he (Testa) affirmed I was in good shape," Marti said. "He said I was almost at the 'athlete' level. His suggestion was to lose about 5 pounds to get into that 'athlete' designation."

Marti said he's already lost the 5 pounds since his assessment in early July and is now aiming for another 5 pounds before his climbing expedition in January, 2005.

Many patients end up at the program due to an injury.

Rancho Cordova resident Neil MacMullan came to the center after a shoulder injury, and then decided to take advantage of the athletic assessment program on the recommendation of his orthopedic surgeon.

"He said, let's walk down and see Dr. Testa. I expected him to be there for the usual eight minutes, but he stayed and showed me some equipment and explained things," MacMullan said.

After that visit, MacMullan decided to do the fitness assessment package - which included the VO2 max testing, a bicycle fit, nutritional analysis, and psychological consult. He added that he'd had several friends die of
unexpected heart attacks and he partially wanted to make sure "everything was OK."

"I've never had a coach tell me what my strengths and weaknesses were, or how to improve," he said. "I wanted to find out where I stood.

"I've never been a runner and (Testa) pointed out that it's really a convenient way to get in shape. All you need are shoes," MacMullan added. "Hopefully this will make me more efficient."

One aspect of the program which MacMullan took advantage of was the nutritional consultation with Dr. Marlia Braun.

Braun, who has a vastly diverse competitive athletic background, said her experiences only help her to aid other athletes in achieving their goals.

"My experience with training and competition as an athlete helps me understand situations athletes find themselves in, such as training around a work schedule or multiple workouts during the day," Braun said. "Since I have dealt with similar situations, I can assist athletes in reaching their goals."

Dealing with patients ranging from professional athletes to beginners looking to get in shape offers many challenges, she said.

"Some clients need help with weight loss or guidance to lower their risk for chronic disease. While others need a little fine tuning with food before, during and after training and competition to maximize their performance," Braun noted. "I also assist with research studies involving athletes and the effect of different nutritional components on athletic performance."

MacMullan said after his nutritional analysis he had a better idea of how to improve his diet to not only become healthier, but also to maximize his workouts. It was also somewhat of a shock, he added.

"It's a pretty frightening exercise to write down everything you eat for three days," MacMullan said. "Man, is that eye opening!"

A few members of the Elk Grove Fire Department have participated in the program, and offered their advice and support to their fellow firefighters in their quest to stay fit.

Braun also conducted classes for members of the department on healthy eating, and how to find a nutritionally sound alternative to fast food at the local grocery store.

Firefighter Bill Herbert said the recommendations have helped him. "I feel better and it has added to my confidence both on the job and in my personal life," Herbert said.

**End Results**

The final outcome for anyone who takes advantage of the program lies within himself or herself, Testa said. No matter how much help or advice is given, it is up to the athlete or patient to implement the changes and work hard toward their goals, he said.

"First, we want to have some numbers about their condition that we're going to use to help design the best way for them to train. It's nice to have a picture and go from there," Testa said. "Second, when people go home, they bring home information they can apply right away.

"And, it can really have an impact on their performance," he added. "We also want to be with them for any
problem they may have when they get injured."
He also stressed that the program is not just for high-level athletes.

"(With) beginners, normally you can get more results," he said. "Sometimes they make big mistakes in the way they're training."

And, the staff has aspirations to help as many people as possible. \\

"The idea is to pretty much be the experts of exercise," Testa said. "And, having a staff that includes physician, to physiologist, to nutritionist, we can pretty much cover everything. We want to become the experts of sports medicine.

"I know that's a big vision, and it won't happen overnight," he said. "But, we want to become the primary center for sports medicine in the nation."

_Citizen Photograher Laura Bemis contributed to this article._