

photos by Master Sgt. Keith Reed



A member of a local Italian biking team, the Cicli Perna/Country Store, Matt Belmonte (third from left) and his Italian bike team buds often take a ride through Naples.

Major races through Naples assignment

NAPLES, Italy — **Matt Belmonte** is racing through his tour at Naples — literally. When not at work as the operations officer at Allied Forces Southern Europe, the Air Force major can be found on weekends racing with a local Italian cycling club.

Although it's unusual to find many Americans on Italian clubs, he said he and the fellow Air Force and Navy riders on the team blend right in with their host nation counterparts.

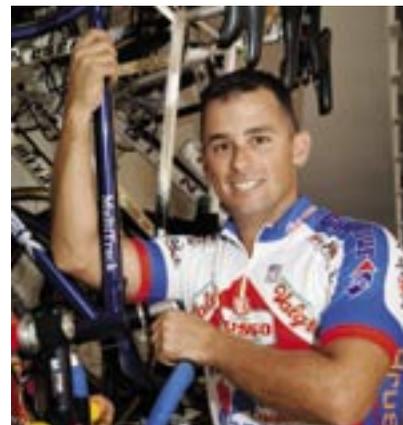
"You have that universal bond of suffering out there on the highway together," the cyclist said, laughing in reference to amateur weekend races they ride that range in distance from about 70 to 115 miles.

After the terrorist attacks, Major Belmonte said his wife worried about him standing out as an American

during his weekend jaunts, not to mention the worry about exposure to Italian traffic on narrow, winding roads. But he assured her his cycling gear provided the proper "urban camouflage" and that "if you look like a serious cyclist, drivers respect you and give you the leeway."

If not a love affair, he's shared at least a serious relationship with the two-wheeler since he was a child when biking provided "an easy way of escaping." By age 13, he had a job at a bike shop, and he began road racing in high school and into college. The Air Force was his first non-bike related job, he joked.

Although he races competitively, the focus is mostly on having fun and experiencing the Italian culture. After completing a race, bikers gather at the



With his 30 miles a day commute to work and weekend rides of 60 to 90 miles, wear and tear on body and bikes is intense. Keeping these custom built racing machines in peak condition is a constant job in Naples' hot and humid weather.

town that held it, "tell lies about the race" and share wine, pasta and local specialties from the region.

"It's a wonderful way to see the countryside and immerse yourself into the culture," he said.

— Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts