

Wheels and Deals in Silicon Valley



The Webcor/Alto Velos on the road.

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RANDY KOMISAR, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist, used to consider his cycling habits extreme even by the standards of the fanatically fit Bay Area.

An energetic 51, Mr. Komisar says he rides 70 miles a day on the weekends and more than 10,000 miles a year on his custom-built titanium Serotta road bike. In Silicon Valley even sweat is quantifiable, so each week he is careful to log at least 10,000 vertical feet, climbing the golden hills of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

But lately, Mr. Komisar says, he does not feel quite so unusual in his devotion. Now he will often stroll into a Monday morning partners' meeting at his firm - Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield & Byers in Menlo Park, Calif., - only to hear five other top executives proudly recounting their own weekend bike odysseys. Among Silicon Valley elites, he said, it has become almost de rigeur to cap off a week of hard work with a weekend of even harder play.

But the sweat and strain are not just about fitness or blowing off steam, Mr. Komisar said. Cycling, he explained, plays the same role in his professional circle today as squash did when he started out in business as a lawyer in Boston in the early 1980's: as both a social outlet and a business opportunity for professionals to make contacts, get face time with the boss and even sign off on deals. Networking in a crash helmet, in other words.

"You'll see some of the most influential people in the valley out there on bikes on the weekends," Mr. Komisar said. "There's lots of playful competition, lots of joshing."

"Cycling," he added, "is the new golf."

And so is snowboarding, for that matter, and open-sea distance swimming and kite surfing and even abalone diving. This is not the Silicon Valley of the popular imagination: a cubicled warren of skinny-armed computer geeks. Today high-tech executives in the valley are taking up adventure sports in droves and in groups, finding that a mountain road or a cresting wave can be an exhilarating place to integrate one's business, social and recreational lives.

The passion for adventure sports has even changed mating rituals in the region. "It's hard to go on a date in San Francisco and not go on a date with a girl who has not been in five triathlons," said Auren Hoffman, 31, the chairman of Stonebrick, a high-tech consulting company. "That means that people go to bed early because they wake up at 7 a.m. to go on their run or their ride. The whole social scene changes because of sports."

That sort of endorphin-charged enthusiasm for outdoor sports makes sense in a region blessed with temperate weather, nearby mountains and miles of beaches. But it also seems to suit the corporate culture of Silicon Valley, a suburban

hothouse of youth-obsessed, risk-addicted entrepreneurs with plenty of disposable income to spend on toys, multiple hours of job stress to work off and unfettered ambitions to pursue.

Scott Milener, a founder of Browster, an Internet company in San Francisco, recalled holding many business discussions with venture capitalists and board members along rocky mountain biking trails in places like Skeggs Point, a trendy spot near Woodside.

"If you're sitting around the boardroom, around the table, it's all stiff," Mr. Milener, 38, said. "As soon as you're out mountain biking together, you're bonding in a way that you just can't do otherwise. You're sharing a skill. You're sharing pain."

As Paul Saffo, the research director at the Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, put it, "If you're not part of the peloton" - a cycling term for a cluster of riders - "you're not part of the deal."

As recently as the early 90's, said Mr. Saffo, an avid mountain biker, "my programmer friends thought it was odd that I was an outdoors person."

"For them it was laser tag and flight simulator places," he said. "What has really happened with nerd culture these days is that the number of programmers who are serious bikers is much, much higher. It's part of the social network."

The growing popularity of rigorous cycling can be measured by the membership rolls of the Webcor/Alto Velo Bicycle Racing Club, which meets in Mountain View, Calif. Its ranks have swelled by more than 20 percent in recent years, to nearly 400 members, according to its secretary, Craig Boyle. He was one of two dozen cyclists to brave a deep November chill early last Sunday morning as they embarked on a more than 50-mile ride from Los Altos to Pescadero on the Northern California coast. "Almost everyone works in tech," he said. "There are lots of overachievers in this club."

Open-water distance swimming seems to be attracting the same personality type. Brian Boeggeman, a product management specialist at Cisco Systems in San Jose, estimates that the number of local professionals who have taken up the sport has quadrupled in the last five years. A burly former college water polo player, Mr. Boeggeman, 35, goes on at least a dozen grueling swims a year with a band of mostly high-tech workers.

An expedition might take them across 11 miles of icy water in Lake Tahoe or through the perilous currents of San Francisco Bay from Alcatraz Island to the shore.

Mr. Boeggeman traces the growing interest in endurance sports in part to a growing desire among professionals to find balance in a life that for many already tilts perilously close to workaholicism. "It's a grounding sense," he said, his hair still damp from a 4,500-yard training session at a swim center in Santa Clara last Sunday morning. "You're getting back into nature, you're slowing down, you're feeling your body, you're burning."

And then there is the networking opportunity in, say, a cross-bay swim. "It gets you engaged with people you would have never met," Mr. Boeggeman said. "In the business world a warm introduction is like a slam dunk."

So is a warmly shared adventure among old friends, to judge by the experience of Zachary A. Nelson, the chief executive of NetSuite, a software company in San Mateo. Mr. Nelson, 44, loves to go abalone hunting, in which divers, without scuba tanks, face the multiple hazards of drowning, jagged rocks and sharks. But even when he escapes the office to go diving, he said, he doesn't always leave his work behind.

A few weeks ago Mr. Nelson spent an afternoon diving off the Sonoma County coast with Michael Wallach, an executive vice president at Citadon, an Internet firm. Not only did Mr. Nelson surface from the kelp beds with a rare mollusk 10 inches in diameter, but also he and Mr. Wallach struck a deal to bundle their companies' software products.

Some employees just happen to pursue the same exotic sport as the top executive does, playing out a Silicon Valley version of joining the boss's country club. "Silicon Valley companies tend to be extremely personality driven, and what the guy at the top does the organization emulates," Mr. Nelson said. Perhaps not coincidentally, he added, "my V.P. of sales is now an ab diving addict."

Like cars and homes, adventure sports can confer varying degrees of status, defined by hierarchies of gear and of playgrounds. It's a social reality not lost on the work force. Some professionals will climb an adventure-sport status ladder to help them rise on the organizational chart. Rank and file skiers, for instance, confine their activities to Lake Tahoe,

explained Mark Pincus, a founder of Tribe.net, a social networking Internet company in San Francisco. But "it's Sun Valley for normal V.C.'s," he said, referring to venture capitalists, "and Aspen for the über guys."

Traditionally the country club golf course or the exclusive urban racquet club has functioned as a locus for the old boy networks that kept a firm's business humming. In the forward-looking Bay Area, however, a region that places a high premium on egalitarian, meritocratic principles, no shortage of women have made their mark in the extreme-sports culture.

"I go hiking with other V.C.'s, both male and female and have also had entrepreneurs pitch me on the Dish - the local hiking trail at Stanford," Heidi Roizen, a managing director of Mobius Venture Capital, wrote by e-mail. "It is a great time to talk without the interruption of phones, BlackBerrys and without PowerPoint."

All this devotion to sports can add hours of training and play time to an already overloaded work schedule, said Mr. Saffo, of the Institute for the Future. "There is no downtime," he said. "People don't go jogging anymore. You see all these people racing out of Google and Sun, up to Coyote Point to go windsurfing across the bay."

Lisa Hazen, 41, an information technology manager at Labcyte, a biotechnology company in Sunnyvale, is an open-water swimmer who rises at 4 a.m. three times a week to put in a vigorous two-and-a-half-hour training session at a pool. She will often also skip lunch to hit the weight room, she said, acknowledging that the routines only add to a busy schedule at work and at home, where she has a husband but no children.

"Maybe we're just not accepting that we're getting older," Ms. Hazen said.

That sentiment resonates in the Silicon Valley business world, which is in a sense built around the organizing principle of instant obsolescence. Not only does technology constantly go out of date, but so do ideas. And every year thousands more young college graduates full of new ideas descend on the valley, eager to make their score. Small wonder then that the grown-ups feel compelled to show they can still keep up with the kids in the boardroom or in the swimming pool.

Keeping up can be even tougher if the sport is a risky one like kite surfing, a high-adrenaline variation on windsurfing in which the feet are strapped onto a surfboard and the body is borne by a parachute. That pastime has become the rage among many Silicon Valley executives in the last three years.

One is Pierre Wolff, 41, a vice president at Tribe.net. He said he kite surfs up to six times a day in the spring and summer with a posse of young tech entrepreneurs at beaches like Crissy Field near the Golden Gate Bridge. Mr. Wolff has already hammered out one business deal at the beach, he said. "That's what happens," he added. "That's the nature of action sports."

Still, technology executives say, networking is rarely the main reason any of them pursue these sports. It's more about adrenaline, they say. Many say they go looking for that rush the moment they steer their Audi TT convertibles out of the company parking lot. Play without a dose of peril seems a little staid to them.

"I think the focus on fairly demanding extracurricular activities is a reflection of the expectations we have," Mr. Nelson of NetSuite wrote in an e-mail message. "We expect extreme success in our choice of career, which means we work extreme hours and demand extreme dedication and efforts from our employees. It seems that that drive spills over in our personal lives, so that we don't just sit on the couch when we get home. We go out and push it."

Because so much work in the re-emergent Internet industry is done online, work hours are usually flexible. Even the hardest driving entrepreneur can make time for a sport by leaving the office at, say, 4 p.m., then returning after a shower at 8 p.m. and working until midnight. Or he can just take his work with him to the trails or the beaches. Mr. Wolff said it's not uncommon to see kite surfers at the beach tapping out e-mail messages with soggy fingers on their BlackBerrys in those spare moments when the wind dies down.

In that sense, action sports offer these disciples of high technology a fitting way to celebrate what to them is a credo of Silicon Valley work culture. As Mr. Wolff of Tribe.net put it: "Give us our flexibility, and we'll give you our life."