

Pittsburgh cycling diehards attack 'Dirty Dozen'

By [Karen Price](#), PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW
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About the writer

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Eleanor Dubus stood at the top of Canton Avenue in Beechview, trying to stay warm as she waited for her son, Jesse, to appear on his bicycle at the bottom of the hill.

Staring down the steep cobblestone street, she shook her head.

"I couldn't walk up the steps up this hill; I don't know how they're going to ride up it," said Dubus, one of about 65 spectators waiting on the steepest of the 13 hills featured in the annual Dirty Dozen bike race.

"I'm nervous. I think this is the hill that has everyone worried. Jesse said, 'Will you be at the top of Canton?' and I said yes, so I hope I'm not picking up pieces."

The race was founded in 1983 by Squirrel Hill's Danny Chew and his brother, Tom, in an attempt to find the steepest hills in Pittsburgh. Five men started that first race and three finished, including the Chew brothers.

To this day, more than 577 people have ridden the Dirty Dozen. This year's champions were familiar, with Steve Cummings winning for the seventh year in a row and Betsy Shogren leading the women for the second consecutive year.

Canton Avenue may not be the most torturous of the 13 hills because it's not long, but at a grade of 37 percent, it causes plenty of spills and aborted attempts.

On Saturday, the 28th year of the race, only a handful of the 160-plus cyclists had started up the short but sharp incline when the first one tipped over. Gravity simply wins the battle when no amount of muscle is going to propel the bike another inch, and down they go.

"I got up the first time pretty strong, straight line, didn't fall," said Chris Helbling, 44, of Squirrel Hill, back for his second Dirty Dozen. "And no one fell in front of me either and that's a big thing, too. Sometimes it's just luck. That's what makes this hill so insane. That's why everyone loves it."

For Helbling, Canton Avenue isn't the worst of the

bunch, though He'd rather tackle Canton than the seventh hill on the list, Suffolk Avenue on the North Side.

"I think everyone here would say Suffolk is the hardest hill because it's long, it has a lot of long steep sections then cobblestones at the top," Helbling said. "It's very demoralizing."

At the top of Canton, those who'd already made it up - or realized it was a losing battle and walked up - waited, eating Pop Tarts and Power Bars and shivering in the cold while everyone got their shot at the hill. Danny Chew, who's ridden every year but one, walked through the crowd asking how people were doing.

Jesse Dubus, who lives in San Francisco but was back home for the holiday, had his chain snap when he started up Canton. He got it fixed and rejoined the pack headed to Hill No. 10, Boustead Street on the North Side.

Jim Logan, 51, of Shaler, said it's Boustead that hurts him the most.

"Canton is the one everyone works the hardest to get up, but Boustead is like a ski ramp in reverse," he said. "The top is just very, very painful."

Logan and the rest of the cyclists pulled into the parking lot at the Bud Harris Cycling Track in

Highland Park nearly seven hours after the race started, having covered 53 miles and gained 6,644 feet in elevation. It was nearly dark, a few snowflakes blew in the wind, and the temperature was falling.

Logan was nothing but smiles.

"It's always a challenge and it's very Pittsburgh, riding these hills," said Logan, back for his fifth Dirty Dozen. "I rode them all the first time straight up this year. I'm slow and steady. It was a great day."