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Don Morton poses at his apartment in Tokyo. GIANNI SIMONE

## Don Morton raises a mug to bicycles and cold beer

### Tokyo club cycles and chugs in hot pursuit of mediocrity

By GIANNI SIMONE  
Special to The Japan Times

Film buffs may know American Don Morton for the reviews he writes for Metropolis magazine. During a recent interview in his apartment, though, he mostly talked about bicycles. In fact the 67-year-old native of San Francisco is the founder of the Tokyo-based Half-Fast cycling club.

Morton shares his living space with two bicycles. "The orange one lives in the *genkan* (entrance)," he says casually, as if talking about a person, "while this one takes pride of place in the living room," he adds while patting his black Trek as if it was a prized thoroughbred.

Morton's road bikes are neither persons nor animals, but they certainly are among his best friends. The 27-speed, carbon-fiber Trek cost around ¥300,000 and it goes very fast. That's the one he uses for his club outings.

The orange one cost about ¥60,000. "It carries a lot of baggage and gets me around. It's my faithful workhorse," he adds with a grin.

Morton has been a bicycle enthusiast since the mid-1970s. "Until then I was on the edge," he says. "I'd had many bikes, starting with the red



Members of the Half-Fast cycling club enjoy the cherry blossoms during one of their cycling tours in Tokyo this spring. COURTESY OF HALF-FAST CYCLING CLUB

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Schwinn my dad gave me when I was 7 or 8, but I wasn't entirely into it. Then, when I got out of the military in 1971 after coming back from Vietnam, I decided to bicycle around Europe with my girlfriend and we took it very seriously. We even took a weekly class on bike repair. We saved money for more than one year and then we went on a 14-month tour of Europe."

Five years later Morton started a solo round-the-world tour. He left from San Francisco and headed north to Alaska. Then he flew to Hong Kong.

"I cycled around Southeast Asia and went as far as India, but once there I ran out of money. So I sold my cameras and other stuff and came back to Tokyo, planning to work for six months, earn a quick buck and resume my journey. That was in March 1981.

"I had already spent one year and a half in Japan during the Vietnam War, and I found the place too expensive so I didn't want to stay. But once here I met a girl and soon after I was offered the editorial job at the just-born Tokyo Journal, so I ended up staying for good. For me true freedom is being able to change your mind, and anyway I had nothing to prove cycling-wise."

This of course didn't mean the end of Morton's love for cycling as he began exploring the city on two wheels. "People move to Tokyo and want to ride around town, but they feel intimidated because it looks a little scary. It's not, actually. Tokyo is arguably the only megacity in the world where you can bicycle with any degree of safety and awareness. Here the taxi drivers do not try to hit you. If you are careful you can get around town quite easily."

According to Morton, the best strategy to tackle any sort of traffic is to go as fast as you can.

"Not slowly on the side. You have to get out in the lane and go with the flow. In Tokyo it's very easy. You will actually pass many cars because you go faster. Your biggest danger is automatic taxi doors. That's where most accidents happen."

In 2003, Metropolis asked Morton to write about his rides. "I introduced some of my favorite routes, and at the end of the article I wrote something like 'call me up and let's meet at a certain place next weekend and we will ride together.' A bunch of people showed up. So I kept putting an ad in Metropolis, and the rest is history."

Half-Fast might be a bicycle club, but cycling per se is not Morton's goal. "We are not an extremist group. There are clubs out there whose members train for races or for triathlon. Take, for example, the Tokyo Cycling Club. They don't do anything less than 100 km. We are not like that."

Morton never fails to make people notice that his club's name, Half-Fast, is also a pun. "You see, it also sounds like "half-assed," which means mediocre. I'm determined to preserve the mediocrity because after all there are many people who like to cycle around Tokyo but don't want to go 100 or 200 km. This does not mean we are not athletes. We are noncompetitive athletes — who love beer."

Now, what about the beer? "We call ourselves a bicycle club because cycling is what we do, but in a sense we are more like a social club; a group of regulars at a bar except the bar is always in a different place every week and the regulars are a little more fit because they have to cycle 30 to 50 km to get there."

The sense of what Morton and friends do is clearly spelled around the collar of their colorful club jerseys — "Cervicia et Birote," Latin for "beer and bicycles" ("We actually made up the bike bit . . . they hadn't been invented when Latin was spoken") — and in their funny and informative website: "Q: Why do you bicycle from beer machine to beer machine? A: Because it's faster than walking."

"What's wrong with that anyway?" Morton asks. "Riding 50 km and drinking three beers is better than sitting on a couch and drinking three beers. We earn them!"

Unlike some other clubs, Half-Fast is a pretty loose bunch of people with a core of regulars and others who join once in a while. "There are other sports clubs where you have presidents, and elections, and they are always fighting! At Half-Fast we don't have these problems. I'm the dictator for life, period," Morton says with a wink, "and everybody's happy with that! We don't have any rules, actually, apart from wearing a helmet and bringing a spare tube to fix your bike."

Jokes aside, members are encouraged to become leaders and come up with different ride ideas.

"They research the courses and how to reach the starting point; find where the beer machines are; and lead the ride, which means making sure that everybody is equipped and healthy and ready to go, and that nobody gets left behind — because it's a terrible thing when you lose a rider," Morton adds with roaring laughter.

The club organizes different rides for different people. There are 30- to 40-km beginner rides to Haneda and Odaiba; 60- to 80-km medium level rides like the ones along the Tama and Arakawa rivers; and longer rides all the way up to 150 km. Beginner rides are on Saturdays and attract between six and 25 people, and you don't have to sign up in order to join. Just check their website for dates and other details and show up on time — usually 11 to 11:20 a.m. in Azabu.

"We are civilized, you know. Why don't we start at 8 o'clock? Because most of our members have just finished throwing up at that time!"

After all these years, Morton is still very much in love with bicycles. "The road bike is one of the best inventions of the 20th century, that's for sure. One of the things I like about cycling is, you can take it into your old age. That's not something you can do with many other sports. Even running will ruin your knees after a while. But cycling is rotary; it's fast and it's fun. I started when I was in my 20s, have cycled through 24 countries, and now I'm 67 and I'm planning my next 40-km ride this weekend. You can be happier and healthier if you take up cycling."

Then of course there is the social element. "Lifelong friendships have been made at Half-Fast. A couple even got married after meeting at one of our rides! Among other things, we have social meetings at the Pink Cow in Shibuya on the second Wednesday of every month. They are like parties: We bring a laptop, show pictures of our recent bicycles trips, and have fun. It's very laid-back and open to everybody."

*For more information on Half-Fast and how to buy their club jerseys, go to [halffastcycling.com](http://halffastcycling.com)*

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