

BCBR goes full throttle

By Andy Prest, North Shore News July 11, 2010

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North Vancouver's Al Saunders hits one of the single track trails that the BC Bike Race prides itself on.

Photograph by: Dave, Silver Photography

THE BC Bike Race wrapped up in Whistler last weekend and by all accounts the weeklong mountain bike stage race, now in its fourth year, has grown to become a premier adventure event for riders both local and global.

The 2010 edition of the race kicked off in North Vancouver -- home to many of the event's brain trust -- with a short prologue time trial through a section of the North Shore's famous trails. From there the race's nearly 500 participants hit the trails of Vancouver Island, the Sunshine Coast, Squamish and finally Whistler in near perfect racing conditions.

"The race was fantastic, the weather was perfect, the volunteers were inspirational," said North Vancouver's Al Saunders, a 50-year-old racer who teamed up with Glenn Woodruff to finish second overall in the men's team of two veterans 100 epic distance category. This was Saunders' second crack at the race. "The stages were really, really good this year. More single track than ever before."

The abundance of single track -- purpose-built bike trails wide enough for only one rider -- is what is giving this event a good reputation around the world, said race spokesman Dave Howells.

"I think it's fair to say that Year 4 really solidified BC Bike Race as one of the premier stage races in the world," he said. "Everyone has worked really hard over the past four years to get it to where it is today."

Howells, a longtime North Vancouverite and the event's media manager, was there at the finish line in Whistler July 3 as racers completed the final stage.

"One guy, I said, 'Hey, give me your thoughts on this year's mountain bike stage race,' and he looked at me and said, 'You know what, this has been the best week of my life.' When someone says that to you you don't even need to ask another question."

While many of the riders were there to enjoy a challenging and thrilling ride, there were some elite racers who put in strong performances.

Barry Wicks and Kris Sneddon teamed up to win the premier event, the epic distance open men's team of two, racing the prologue and seven stages in 18 hours 34 minutes and 21 seconds. On the women's side Alana Heise and Kate Aardal won the epic in a time of 25:05:17.

In the mixed category Geoff Kabush and Catherine Pendrel, two elite Canadian riders, teamed up to finish in 20:27:54 -- a time that would have placed them fifth out of 34 teams in the open men's category.

Chris Sheppard won the open men's single epic category, finishing in 18:17:32 to post the fastest time on the course.

The performance of the week, however, came from a racer who did not win a single stage. Vancouver's Kris Holm completed every stage of the challenge distance -- with most stages about half the length of the epic -- on a unicycle. Not only did he race but he actually fared well, finishing fourth out of 10 finishers in the solo men's challenge category.

"It's something that I've just never seen before. It really blew me away," said Howells, adding that Holm is believed to be the first unicyclist to ever complete a mountain bike stage race of this length. "I've got to be honest -- and no offense to Kris -- when you first see it it looks a bit odd because you've never seen a guy on a unicycle riding through the bush, through the forest. You almost have to do a double take because we're so accustomed to seeing two-wheeled mountain bikes. . . . This guy's got incredible athletic ability, phenomenal balance, co-ordination and mentally is extremely strong."

Holm even reached the podium on one of the stages -- finishing third in the 45-kilometre Day 5 race.

"Kris rode that in about four and a half hours and in the challenge category he was on the podium, he came in third place in his category. That means he actually beat a lot of people who had two wheels," said Howells, adding that the stage included a massive 12-kilometre downhill portion that presented a unique challenge for the unicyclist.

"All the riders can roll that, coast it. Kris can't. You can't coast on a unicycle, it's a fixed gear. . . . For Kris from the moment the gun goes to the . . . finish line, he's pedaling that unicycle. There's no breaks, there's no rest, it's just go, go, go."

Registration opened for the 2011 race the day after the 2010 event finished and Howells said they filled nearly 20 per cent of their 500 spots in one day.

"It will be sold out before long so if you're thinking about doing it, sign up quick," he said.

The North Shore, however, may not be a part of next year's race for an interesting reason, according to Howells: the trails are too hard.

"Our trails are challenging on the North Shore -- to be honest with you, probably too challenging for most," he said. "We don't want to start our stage race with a really tough, technically challenging stage."

Wherever the race leads, North Van's Saunders said he will be back for more at least a couple more times. The trails of the West Coast are great, he said, but his favourite moments actually came off the bike with his family in their beat-up old van -- including a close call with catching a ferry before one of the races.

"Last BCBR vehicle on the ferry," he said. "They had to bring people down that were already upstairs eating breakfast to move the trucks forward another foot so that we could get the gypsy wagon on the sailing from Saltry Bay. And they had to tie the gates around our trailer because we were four inches too long. It was all good."

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Luke Myles powers his way up North Vancouver's Richard Juryn Memorial Trail during the prologue stage of the BC Bike

Race.

Photograph by: Paul McGrath, NEWS photo

