

B.C. IS BEASTLY FROM THE SEAT OF A BICYCLE

Seven-day, 325-kilometre race will thrash even the sport's elite athletes

A decade ago, Olympian and former Canadian national team mountain biker Andreas Hestler sat down at a coffee shop in North Vancouver with Dean Payne to discuss a vague concept of a seven-day mountain bike stage race running through coastal British Columbia.



PHOTOS: DAVE SILVER/FILES The B.C. Bike Race is running for the 10th time this month. The seven-day race begins on Thursday in Cumberland, southwest of Courtenay.

The logistics were daunting, but the two began talking about hosting a seven-day stage event with races on Vancouver Island, the Sunshine Coast, North Vancouver and Squamish, before finishing in Whistler. The rest, as they say, is history. Hestler, who competed in mountain biking's Olympic debut at the 1996 Atlanta Games, had retired from the World Cup and turned his bike-racing focus to multi-day stage events like the Trans Rockies Challenge.

A three-time winner of the gruelling seven-day race through the Rockies, Hestler had a good idea of what type of multi-day mountain bike event he would like as a competitor.

The now defunct seven-day race through the Rockies took bike riders through some spectacular highmountain countryside, but the race was often marred by brutal weather conditions like snowstorms and below-freezing temperatures.

Hestler, 45, thought a seven day stage race in southern B.C. in early July would be safe from cold conditions. He also knew there are some incredible single-track trails throughout southern B.C. — just wide enough for one bike — that would be perfect for a multi-day stage race. “When the racers come here, they want the single-track,” he said. “And we give them a healthy buffet of single-track.”

This year, the B.C. Bike Race, which begins Thursday, is 325 kilometres long, with about 80 per cent of it single-track terrain. The race is limited to 600 competitors who pay about \$2,300 for a full race package, which also pays for bike mechanics and massage therapists ready to help before and after the ride.

The 10th running of the race will begin in Cumberland and features a new route in North Vancouver.

Payne said they now have close ties with each community the race goes through, and said they work with local trail builders yearround as part of the race's legacy. Despite some serious obstacles in its early years, Payne said the race has helped mountain bikers forge strong ties with the area's authorities and land managers.

"It is a golden era right now for mountain bikers," Payne said. "We are becoming legitimate now, and it is exciting. We showcase the diversity of each town we go through."

Jeremy Grasby, the course director in Cumberland, said the town loves hosting the 600 racers and their entourages on Day 1.

Cumberland has emerged as a mountain bike mecca on Vancouver Island and the area's bike club, politicians and landowners have in the past few years worked together to create an exciting network of mountain bike trails, many that start and end close to the town centre.

Grasby has been a strong supporter of the B.C. Bike Race in the nine years it has run in Cumberland, and he said hosting the event helps them promote the local riding trails. Three years ago, he said, they finally had enough high-end single-track trails to do an all-Cumberland route.

"Our politicians get it," he said. "They see mountain biking as an economic driver in Cumberland."

Grasby said the event's 600 racers spend money locally, and many head back to the area with family and friends when the race is over. And the international publicity that comes with the B.C. Bike Race can't be bought, he said.

"The event is covered by all sorts of media and we get some pretty awesome coverage," said Grasby, who owns the Riding Fool Hostel.

Within hours of finishing **Day 1**, competitors take a bus and a ferry ride to Powell River for **Day 2**.

Russell Brewer, the Powell River race course co-director, said the B.C. Bike Race has helped spread the word about the high-end single-track in his area. The course is 52 km long, with much of the single-track trails featuring unique woodwork.

"We have seen a real increase in the number of people coming to ride here, and I'm sure it is because of the B.C. Bike Race," he said.

The town, he said, enjoys cheering the racers on, with bagpipes playing for the competitors as they exit the ferry to head to Willingdon Beach to pitch their tents.

Much of the Powell River course is in the forest, and if it is a hot day, the canopy helps keep riders cool.

One of the standout features on the course comes at the Aloha Bridge section, where riders first go underneath then over top of the other racers. "Powell River has a lot of woodwork on the trails, and the racers love it," he said.

Day 3 starts with a ferry from Saltery Bay to Earls Cove, where racers get off the ferry and straight onto their bikes and into the 58 km of tough and rolling trail that ends in Sechelt.

Day 4 takes the riders from Sechelt to Langdale, a 52-kilometre route with a final seven-kilometre descent through a bed of righteous, loamy single-track.

The B.C. Bike Race is a promotional dream, said Celia Robben, president of Sunshine Coast Tourism. She said the event showcases the hard work that has gone into trail building in the area, and has also brought together the local bike-riding community to run events on the Sunshine Coast.

"What they have done in every location is embrace the locals," she said of the race organizers.

"The media coverage of the race is incredible ... It does showcase what Sunshine Coast riding is all about."

Day 5 this summer is a time trial in North Vancouver. There were difficulties in running the race from Mount Seymour to Mount Fromme last year, so this year it takes place solely on Seymour. It is shorter — just 15 km — but it will be a tough one.

“There will be a lot of action that day,” Payne said.

Squamish once again showcases that area’s magical trail system and promises to be one of the toughest days, with a 53-km ride on some of the area’s world-class single-track. In past years, the riders have rated Squamish as their favourite course.

Finally, the 26-km ride on Day 7 finishes at Whistler’s Rainbow Park. Whistler course director Grant Lamont said the route has a bit of everything.

“I think it is a route that really shows the true character of Whistler’s trails,” he said.

The seven days of racing is a true test of conditioning, and Hestler said organizers send out emails to all the competitors throughout the year advising them about being in shape and the type of terrain they will contend with.

Competitors, many who are from Europe and have an elite road-cycling background and are not as familiar with the roots, rocks and wood that has made B.C. riding famous, are given hints on the type of tires and forks they should be running. All of the serious competitors are on 29-inch wheels.

Out of the 600 who race, about 100 are really serious. Kris Sneddon is an elite world-class mountain bike rider from the Sunshine Coast and has been in the B.C. Bike Race eight times. Despite being at the peak of fitness, he said it is a tough seven days. The seven-day grind is also very hard on your bike, he added.

“You go in with a new bike and come out with it thrashed,” he said. “The first year I did the race I didn’t know whether I could finish the seven stages. A lot of people come here thinking it will be easy. It is not. It is pretty taxing physically.”

Wade Simmons, 42, who is known as the godfather of freeriding, has done the race twice. The seven days of single-track is very stressful on the body, he said. He did one year with a lot of rain the other with the heat.



The Powell River stage’s Aloha Bridge, seen during the 2015 edition of the B.C. Bike Race, is a memorable part of a 52-kilometre day as it takes racers above cyclists further back in the pack.

“You see some people implode,” he said. “Day 3 and 4 were the toughest days. The technical trails beat you down. A race like that, you have to pace yourself.”