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**By**



**Todd 'Digger' Fiander is a legendary trail building pioneer.**

**Justin Beddall (Rob Newell photo)**

*May 12 2005*

According to North Shore mountain biking lore, Ross Kirkwood created one of the first mountain bike trails on Mount Fromme, called "Kirkford," back in 1981. Back then, Kirkwood, now 46, was riding a \$750

Aldergrove Star

Stumpjumper, the first mass-produced mountain bike.

"I loved the new sport of mountain biking and didn't want to see us get kicked off the hiking trails," Kirkwood said in a telephone interview from his home in Garibaldi.

"The first goal was to build something where there was no hikers for our own amusement. Straight down the fall line on crap equipment."

Kirkwood, with the help of buddy Brian Ford, continued building trails on Fromme, and later formed the Secret Trail Society.

"The concept was created to keep the trails hidden and the location of the trailheads were passed on," explained Kirkwood, who noted riders were encouraged to walk their bikes into the trails to avoid detection and to maintain the mountain areas they rode on.

The pioneer's trail-building philosophy was "a modified two-directional Mad Mouse ride," that is, tight corners, switchbacks and steep drops. He describes his eco-friendly trails, always built on the ground, as "kinetically pleasurable," and "totally inclusive," meaning that they appealed to riders of all different skill sets.

Shortly after Kirkwood began designing trails, Todd "Digger" Fiander, who grew up just five doors down from Kirkwood, built his first trail called "Crosscut" in 1982 on Hollyburn Ridge.

"It was old-school," said Fiander, "no stunts, just up and down."

In 1984, Fiander's next creation, "Big Eye" included the first-ever mountain bike trail bridge in these parts - built two feet off the ground, it spanned eight feet and was about six inches wide. "It was the scariest thing," said Fiander, a concrete mason by trade. "I just started building bridges to get over sensitive areas."

It soon became his trademark. "I was always trying to put a different type of bridge on my trails each time, something different ... a concrete bridge, a ladder bridge, a teeter-totter bridge. It had to be different. Now it's roller-coasters."

Meanwhile, as Fiander continued building increasingly challenging trails, a young Handsworth grad named Dan Cowan started riding the North Shore hills in 1991.

One of his favourite trails was one of Digger's first creations, "The Big Eye."

Cowan liked the trail but figured it ended to soon - so he extended a line that came to include one of the first-ever North Shore "log rides." Cowan's debut trail

later became known as "The Fleishy Wound." Shortly thereafter, Cowan and Digger crossed paths in the woods.

The pair, along with another trailblazer named "Mountain Bike Mike," started to ride the North Shore mountains together.

After watching Cowan ride for the first time, Digger's jaw-dropped.

"I thought that guy's dangerous. That's how he got his name. He was the extreme guy."

Cowan, later to become Dangerous Dan, continued to build trails compulsively. In 1993, he built "The Reaper" on Cypress Mountain. The epic trail, which greeted riders ominously with a cracked bike helmet dangling from a tree at the start of a steep log descent, set a precedent of gnarl on the Shore. He later built a prequel to the trail, "The Pre-Reap."

Around that time, other new North Shore trails like the "GMG" and "Hangman" began to define the radical North Shore trail-building ethos.

Fiander's introduction of teeter-totters on a trail called "Ladies Only" inspired Cowan, a physics teacher with a penchant for extreme stunts, who was soon connecting series of teeter-totters with rubber in a contraption that became known as the "Discombobulator."

In 1995, the Canadian biking magazine Pedal did a six-page spread on the pioneering North Shore trail builders Kirkwood, Digger, and Cowan.

Around that time, Digger began filming the riders, which led to his highly successful series of mountain bike videos called North Shore Extreme, now in its eighth episode.

Just as the quality and complexity of mountain bike technology was evolving, so to was the art of trail building.

Cam McRae, a longtime North Shore mountain bike rider and founder-slash-editor of e-magazine nsmb.com, said when Digger began using cedar poles and slats to create ladder bridges to span mud puddles it marked a "a seminal moment" in the evolution of Shore riding.

"In 1994, Dangerous Dan took that idea and put the ladder bridges in the air. He made the North Shore photogenic for that reason."

Cowan recalls a cartoon-like light bulb going off over his helmet when he saw the ladder bridges, and soon began working on a trail that would become known as "A Walk in the Clouds" - an Ewok-like series of sky-bridges and stunts.

He would later, as he battled cancer, take above-ground, daredevil stunts one step further with his

now legendary "Flying Circus."

McRae said a subsequent article by West Vancouver writer Mitchell Scott in 1998 for *Bike* magazine, a bible for spokeheads, that featured local rider Andrew Shandro on the cover, enhanced the profile of the Shore even more. "The Internet and videos also helped," he added.

Technological advances in the equipment continued to push the limits of trail building.

"The suspension bikes came in to play in late 90s," Cowan noted. "By 2001, everyone was riding suspension bikes and disc brakes. It meant as a trail builder you could go bigger and faster. Disc brakes improved everybody's ability."

However, while the sport continued to gain international notoriety as a Mecca of free-riding through videos such as *Kranked 2* and *NSX 2* and *3*, there was also some discord growing in the woods. In 1999, the "Swollen Uvula," perhaps Dangerous Dan's most ambitious trails to date, was dismantled by riders following meetings with the District.

"It was just too gnarly," Cowan shrugged. "What people don't understand they don't know what to do with," he later said. Month's earlier, municipal authorities in West Vancouver destroyed "The Reaper."

Still, the Shore had traction as a destination for hardcore riders, and trail builders.

"From that point on there was a proliferation of building," said Cowan. "More and more people were mountain biking. There's been tons of building since then."

In the mid-1980s, when he was building "Granny's" on Fromme, Digger recalls not seeing another biker around for months. "Now there's 200 people riding up the road every hour on the weekend."

Many of the riders have come to sample a Fiander creation - of which there are 22 to choose from, covering approximately 50 km - or a Dangerous Dan trail, of which there remain four - three others have been taken down.

Today, a moratorium on trail building remains in effect as the District works towards completing the Alpine Study, which is scheduled to be finished this summer. The study will likely determine the fate of trails on the North Shore and future of the area as a mountain bike Mecca.

