

Trail Travails

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Publish Date: 28-Apr-2005



Mountain bikers and their foes search for peaceful coexistence.

On the North Shore, the mountain-biking war in the woods continues, but municipalities are considering a truce

The sun filters through the moss-laden trees for a rare golden moment in the normally dim North Shore spring forest as I walk on the old logging road that switchbacks up Mount Fromme. It's not just the weather that's brightening but prospects for the area's most famous, if beleaguered, sport.

A few years ago, rumours flew across North America and even Europe that the famous North Shore mountain-bike trails were finished after West Vancouver, in particular, went on a binge of tearing out the boardwalks and stunts that riders had built. So the riders got political, organizing conferences and sitting in committee rooms. Although there are still troubles—for instance, the District of North Vancouver has a moratorium on new trails and dismantled as many as five last summer—after 20 years, mountain biking is finally set to become officially sanctioned in the forests overlooking Vancouver.

“Mountain biking has really grown up in the last couple of years,” says Richard Juryn, event producer for the North Shore Mountain Bike Events Society (which initiated a groundbreaking international conference on trail-building last year) and my guide to Mount Fromme's tangled routes. We're on our way to Upper Oil Can, which is a poster child for a well-made, well-maintained trail, Juryn says. He pauses for a moment to pick up a small piece of metal, restoring the access road's absolute tidiness.

Juryn himself is a poster child of sorts: in his early 40s, the fit, dark-haired former pro ski racer and ex-high-tech analyst wears an array of quality outdoorswear, from his burnt-orange wind jacket down to his earth-toned approach shoes. He's a responsible family man, with a wife and two kids—not some crazy, meat-hucking 18-year-old hooligan. “That's the stereotype of the sport, but most of the people doing it are 30 to 40 years old,”

he says. Certainly, on this relatively quiet Friday afternoon in April, we see men and women ranging from their 20s to 50s.

Mount Fromme is the biggest flashpoint remaining on the North Shore. It's where bikers, hikers, dog walkers, and trail runners converge and collide with the concerns of environmentalists and wildlife advocates—and, most of all, exasperated residents at its base. That's because there are no parking lots, just dead-end streets, and No Parking signs blanket the blocks leading up to the Mountain Highway access point. It can't help but seem mean-spirited when you see the spacious driveways and double garages, though Juryn says he sympathizes with residents who have had family gatherings for which, because of mountain bikers' cars, there was no parking left for guests. The District of North Vancouver has indicated, however, that it has no interest in spending the \$500,000 or so that a parking lot would cost.

Because it has the most trails on district-owned land, Mount Fromme—"Freeride Grand Central", as Juryn calls it—is also a key component of the eagerly awaited Alpine Recreational Strategic Study, which district staff have been working on for the past couple of years in consultation with community interest groups. However, although the report had been due in front of council in early April, it will be delayed until summer, Susan Rogers, the section manager of parks planning, said in a telephone interview. The report will describe how mountain-bike trails could coexist with other uses, although some trails may have to be removed; it also cautiously allows for new ones if they are thoroughly studied and well built, Rogers said.

"If council is comfortable with the idea of mountain biking in there at all, we will go forward with this," Rogers said. It is surprising that the level of discussion is still so elementary. Everyone I spoke to for this article pointed out the obvious: that mountain biking has been happening for the past 20 years on the North Shore, so the sensible thing would be to figure out how to manage it.

Even though there are no studies on the economic benefits of mountain biking in Vancouver, Denny's is actively courting riders at its North Shore restaurant through discounts and even collector cards of the two mountain-bike teams it sponsors. "Our parking lot is riddled with riders," said Brent Armstrong, marketing manager for Denny's Canada, by phone from his Vancouver office. "They have increased sales for us, plain and simple." Recently, he even wrote a letter to the district council because, he said, he is worried that they seem so unsupportive of the sport.

Certainly, mountain bikers have a potent enemy in Ernie Crist, a councillor for the past 25 years. "I'm not against biking," he qualified while sipping tea in the White Spot restaurant at Park and Tilford shopping centre. "If it's on mountains, they can do it on any hard surface they want." That, however, is known as road riding and won't satisfy all those people who enjoy riding in forests.

So why is he opposed to riding on trails? "It's Mount Fromme I have a problem with. It's not big enough, and it's adjacent to residential areas. Parking is an issue. I proposed that

they set up trails in Electoral Area A, which is more remote.” (Electoral Area A is all the unincorporated land in the Greater Vancouver Regional District, including the northern portion of Indian Arm and the west side of Pitt Lake.) “It’s sensitive, the forest. I’m hearing from environmentalists and bear people that the trails [on Fromme] are being destroyed.” Crist could not name a specific group, however.

“Ernie Crist has been a thorn in our side,” said Cam McRae, editor of the popular local mountain-biking Web site, nsmb.com, by telephone. “However, he has managed to bring us all together to fight him. Right now he talks about environmental degradation, but the trails are in better shape now than they’ve ever been.”

The North Shore Black Bear Network, for one, accepts the reality of mountain biking on Fromme, Seymour (also in the District of North Vancouver, but the trails are mainly on GVRD land), and Cypress (in West Vancouver) mountains. “From the theoretical perspective, every mountain is best left pristine, but it’s unrealistic when they’re on the edge of the city,” group cochair Tim Condon said in a telephone interview. “The Shore is one of the world’s best places to go mountain biking, to the city’s benefit. We are not campaigning to ban biking on the mountains.”

Professional dog walkers with packs of unleashed animals are a much greater disturbance to bears, he added. Even hikers, if in large enough numbers, can be a threat. “Fortunately, bears don’t use the Grouse Grind,” Condon said. “There’s so many people on it, they would jump off the mountain.” However, he said that Mosquito Creek, on the west flank of Fromme, is a major bear corridor—and, in fact, this is where the district closed down two trails last summer. “Where existing trails impact bears, they have to be adjusted, and any new trails will need a close look,” Condon said. “I’ve talked to the key mountain bikers and they are very reasonable people; they understand the issues.”

Not all trails are created equal, Juryn acknowledges. Their effect on the environment particularly concerns him. He points to Severed Dick (which he discreetly calls Severed) on Mount Seymour, as many of its lines follow a direct downhill path, which then channels water. “That trail is really eroded and probably should be closed. Not many people ride it anymore anyway, because of its poor condition.”

After almost two hours of walking, Juryn and I reach the base of Upper Oil Can trail and head up. Although there were recently heavy rains, there is no deep channelling or ruts or puddles with worn detours. “It’s built like the old Roman roads,” Juryn says. It is set with huge flat stones, making it resemble a garden path, and sharp turns are edged with logs or a curved stone lip to prevent riders from widening the trail. Log bridges, developed from already fallen trees, are linked up and beautifully joined, almost like furniture. “There is a guy who has spent thousands of hours doing this,” he says. “He comes here almost every day.”

We stop and Juryn points out a huge boulder. “That’s called Big Smooth. It’s a really famous stunt.” Its height (about two-and-a-half metres) and near verticality make my stomach churn as I imagine riding down its face; a double-black-diamond sign, like those

on ski slopes, warns riders of its difficulty. A narrow plank forms the approach, which Juryn describes as “gating”: anyone who falls there will almost certainly not continue down the more challenging rock face. At the base of the boulder, some large stones have been inset in a gentle curve, providing a smooth transition for riders as they hit the ground. All these techniques—many of them pioneered on the North Shore—are now enshrined in manuals such as *Trail Solutions* by the International Mountain Biking Association out of Boulder, Colorado.

At a couple of places along the trail, signs ask riders to look for large rocks in the nearby forest, and there was a heap obligingly placed nearby, ready for further trail improvements. Every three weeks from spring to fall, the North Shore Mountain Biking Association organizes trail-maintenance days, for which as many as 150 people show up, and materials such as gravel and logs are supplied by the district. “The NSMBA even organized a trail-maintenance day on the Baden-Powell this winter, though that’s a hiking trail, to show our good will. Of course, some people thought we were planning to take it over. It was very Don Quixote,” he says, rolling his eyes.

Such mixed messages and misunderstandings characterize the present era of mountain biking in North Vancouver. Although Susan Rogers is clearly trying to hear from and accommodate all parties, other factions in the district have different attitudes. “About a year and a half ago, the district called me up and asked me to come in for a meeting,” North Vancouver’s Todd Fiander told the *Georgia Straight* in a phone interview. “It was the first time I’d ever talked to them in the 24 years I’ve been building trails.” Fiander, better known as Digger, is one of the most famous trail builders in the world, and his handiwork has been photographed countless times in international magazines.

“It turned into an inquisition. They showed me pictures of various trails and stunts and said, ‘Did you build this? Did you build this?’ and berated me for it. They told me to stop and that even to do maintenance I needed a permit,” Fiander said. “If they ever see my truck parked anywhere near Mount Fromme, they call me up and tell me I better stay away. They’ve also confiscated other people’s tools. At this rate, the trails will get in worse shape, and that’s when erosion happens.” Ironically, what the district is trying to prevent him from doing for free, Cypress Mountain is now paying him to do, as the private corporation plans to open a new lift-access mountain-bike park on its ski hill in July.

There are other mountain-bike areas in the works. The District of North Vancouver is allowing Juryn to build a skills park (which includes dirt jumps and wooden bridges) at their disused Inter-River property near Capilano College. However, Juryn says he has to scrounge for donated labour and supplies, as the district is not providing any money. Richmond, on the other hand, is spending money to substantially expand its skills park on Steveston Road, and West Vancouver is building one at Gleneagles Community Centre. Furthermore, West Vancouver officials are developing plans for an official mountain-bike park at the fourth switchback on the road up Cypress Mountain (where in years past they removed stunts), slated to open in 2006 if council approves it.

As Juryn and I leave the forest for the suburban streets, we spot a fellow in body armour on a full-suspension Brodie bike. “Hey, that’s the guy who did Upper Oil Can, Peter Morin,” he says. “I had a feeling we’d run into him.” He calls out a greeting, and they begin to talk about the trail prep work for an upcoming race that Morin plans to enter. Juryn asks him how old he is now. “Sixty-four,” Morin replies. Morin’s face, both jolly and peaceful, is only lightly lined, and he looks as fit as a 40-year-old. This alone should be a strong argument in favour of mountain biking. There’s no rest for the wicked, dude, and that is, evidently, a good thing for the soul.