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War of the Woods - A voice in the wilderness

By



Digger Fiander, Lee Lau and Kenny Maude stand outside the birthplace of their association.

Jennifer Maloney (Rob Newell photo)

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What started out as a conversation at the pub between three guys with one common interest has

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grown into an 1,100 member society that acts as the mouth and ears of the North Shore's mountain biking community.

On a winter's night in 1997, Todd "Digger" Fiander, Mitch Diem and Lee Lau sat down at the Black Bear Pub in Lynn Valley after a day of wheeling down the unmarked trails in the backcountry of Mt. Fromme. Digger was bothered by a rumour mulling around that Grouse Mountain was considering commercializing the trails on Fromme in order to make money off the expanding sport.

"He was concerned about that because he had built a lot of trails and even at that time we didn't like the idea of charging for trails," Lau recalled over lunch, nearly eight years later. "Grouse generally paves its trails with gravel so they appeal to a broader audience. We didn't want that, either. We wanted to keep it challenging."

Most people who participate in outdoor sports crave improvement. They become what Lau and others refer to as "endorphin junkies," always wanting to work harder to obtain that physical feeling of euphoria. The terrain on Mt. Fromme is conducive to steep trails and has been extensively logged, so the undergrowth is sparse, making it an ideal location for this type of riding.

The rumour that threatened access to the most technical trails in the area turned out to be false, but the idea of forming an organized voice for North Shore mountain bikers had been brewing in the back of their minds for some time. The perceived threat became the catalyst for the North Shore Mountain Biking Association.

The first step in creating the association was to solicit support from the North Shore's most prominent cyclists. Lau, who has a background in law, incorporated the organization as a not-for-profit within the year. With 300 assembled members, the group organized their first trail maintenance day in 1998.

"Our main role has been and will be to do trail maintenance," Lau explained. "We feel we have a moral responsibility that obligates us to repair them." Also, "we thought it would be a good gesture to show we weren't just slashing and burning."

In the beginning the group had very little structure and only a small inclination of who owned the lands they were riding on. Most of their time was spent trying to track down the various landowners to obtain permission to hold trail maintenance days.

"We were so disorganized it was impossible to get our message out," recalled Lau. "We didn't know who

to speak with in local government. It took us a while to figure out who we should talk to and what the issues were. We just didn't know."

Over the next two years the NSMBA started actively participating in community meetings, including with the North Vancouver Recreation and Activity Committee. On that committee, hikers, environmentalists, horseback riders and sea kayakers would come together and talk about their common interests and misunderstandings. It was through these meetings that NSMBA members became aware their sport was carrying a stereotype that led the public to perceive them as young, adrenaline junkies with no regard for the environment.

"I think (North Van) District now knows we're mainly a lot of middle-aged moms and dads who are just looking for a way to get outside and explore," Lau said. "It took a whole lot for politicians to realize we liked being out there because we're environmentally concerned and like the outdoors."

It wasn't a conscious decision, but the epiphany fueled the group to initiate a change in the public's perception of riders. Members started realizing there were some bad apples in the mountain biking community who were feeding the stereotype.

"One of our goals became to educate riders," Lau said. "As more people get involved in the sport there are more people who don't necessarily know what the right thing to do is for the sport."

The association responded by organizing more trail maintenance days. They went from five in 1998 to eight in 1999. The events became a practical way to teach trail etiquette and open up dialogue between riders and the public.

But as the North Shore's trails became a global destination for riding, local residents started to complain their streets were clogged with parked cars. Local politicians such as North Vancouver Coun. Ernie Crist spoke out about the environmental damage the sport was imposing on sensitive habitat areas. These concerns have brought the recreational activity into the political ring of controversial issues and have garnered a plethora of media attention.

Although Lau disagrees with many of the comments Crist and others have made about this issue, he said he is glad the councillor has brought the topic to the public.

"We like that Ernie and many other people caused mountain biking to appear as a controversy because it's encouraging landowners to look at it," he said.

"It's prodding local government to be more serious and to know about the issue. It's forcing them to get

a little more knowledge base. We couldn't continue going on as if we were a bunch of free spirits doing whatever we wanted. The sport has now become quite a bit larger."

Aside from environmental concerns, the lack of designated parking for cyclists visiting the trails is at the centre of the debate. Three years ago the District created resident parking only zones north of Coleman Road as an interim measure, but parking has since migrated down Mountain Highway. The District hired a traffic consultant, which determined the north end of Mountain Highway and Braemar Road as potential locations for formal parking lots, but there has been debate over whether or not the municipality can afford them.

"The objection is on the basis of why should we be treated as a special interest group and get facilities built for us," Lau said. "Our retort is it's no different than a baseball diamond that the District already builds."

Lau insists the NSMBA wants to work with the District and respond to concerns about the environment. If the District has a problem with a renegade biker, it is often the NSMBA who is contacted to investigate and educate the rider on proper trail etiquette. However, Lau said the association is still looking to the municipality for guidelines on what is acceptable from riders.

"This is a critical time in the fact that local government is beginning to realize they have to regulate this sport in some way," he said. "We encourage that regulation, but at the same time we want to understand what they want and want them to understand what our needs may be."