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War of the Woods -The bike shop business boom

By



John Henry bike shop owner Willie Cromack had no idea the impact mountain biking would have on his North Van business when he opened 13 years ago.

Jennifer Maloney (Rob Newell photo)

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Long before snowboarding was accepted into the mainstream, ambitious borders were surfing the snow on makeshift boards in B.C.'s rugged back-country. The renegade sport has since shredded into the Olympic Games, garnering as much media hype and arguably as many retail sales as traditional skiing. A North Shore bike shop owner sees a parallel emerging with mountain biking.

"For us the growth is happening within the major population," explains Willie Cromack in his swag-strewn office at the John Henry bike shop in North Vancouver. "It's a little bit like snowboarding was in the days when you weren't allowed to snowboard on the mountain. The first people that broke the ground aren't the pulse anymore and that's good because it means it's established then."

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John Henry opened its doors on the North Shore 13 years ago, when mountain biking was still an underground sport. At the time, Cromack said his family had no idea the activity would become the epicenter of their business.

"It was just starting. We actually had no idea the impact it would have," he admits. "At the end of the day it's sustained this business up until today. It's the reason we've been able to stay a solid business."

Roughly 90 per cent of the 15,000 square foot store's sales are related to mountain biking, attracting customers from across the globe. Even the shop's staff have immigrated across Canada and overseas to be a part of what Cromack refers to as an emerging culture.

"So many people want to be working around the industry," he explains. "We don't always have to sell to the community at large. You have to take care of them, but sometimes in the middle of summer it feels like a bit of a resort. The concept is like Whistler. Whistler's market is outside the country. The same thing applies here. You get a large number of people walking in the door and you may never see them again.

"The fundamental thing is this is where the vibe of mountain biking is coming from. It's like the North Shore of Hawaii but to mountain biking."

Since John Henry opened, sales have increased by 20 per cent every year. The store has nearly doubled its original 8,000 square footage and is only now starting to see a bit of a plateau, mostly due to the high volume of locals who are already equipped with quality bikes, Cromack says.

Even with a slight dip in the number of extreme riders, the future of mountain biking looks strong. This is apparent in the store's supply for young generations, who can no longer buy a BMX or road bike.

"All you can get now is a kid's bike that's a mountain bike," he says. "They're durable, they have BMX style and they can ride them anywhere. They don't break as easily and they have gears to keep up with mom and dad."

The store sells about 1,000 kids' bikes a year. The average price of a mountain bike is \$1,000, but religious riders will spend 10 times that amount for a sweet ride.

While the store has thrived off the sport's success, Cromack is quick to point out the economic benefits have spread to local sectors. The pubs for one, are popular stops for thirsty riders, and with the hockey

season at a halt, Cromack notes businesses are happy to accommodate the year-round activity.

"It really has a deeper impact on businesses around us as well," he says. "We buy signs from the sign shops and cars from local dealers. The stronger we are as a culture, the more it helps the businesses around us keep strong.

"People want to ride here because of where they are," he continued. "The overall culture is on the North Shore. Bikes are just so prevalent. It's almost unfathomable to know how much money is being spent."

Dan Sedlacek, 33, was well aware of the impact mountain bikers were having on the North Shore when he opened On Top Bike Shop in March of '96 because he was one of them. It was the beginning of free riding, when pioneers of the sport were building a lot of the trails in the Alpine area. Although some shops were already retailing mountain bike gear, Sedlacek and his brother John saw a niche.

"Our focus was free ride right from the start," Sedlacek says sipping a coffee outside his Lonsdale-based store. "I met a good crew that was actively involved in [mountain biking]. I could see they needed a shop that catered toward their style of riding that built bikes with the performance needed, really, for this style of riding."

As they started testing more difficult terrain, it became apparent to Sedlacek and his fellow riders that suspension was needed on their bikes as well as a place to repair and maintain them. The Sedlaceks' shop started a service department, which maintains 40 per cent of its business today.

"Because of the demand in riding and the hours people actually spend on their bike, maintenance and service repairs is a large part of our business," Sedlacek says. "We've developed super solid brands of bikes. There's been huge development in the last seven or eight years in suspension, suspension frames and brakes. It's incredible the gains in technology in these areas and we've really catered to that market so, it's huge growth in that respect."

The small business has tripled in size in the last nine years with the other 60 per cent of sales coming from its retail component, which includes everything from machine components to streetwear and armour. The store's latest expansion is a 1,000 square foot area devoted to armour and technical gear.

"Armour is a big thing - helmets, safety, gloves - it's more than just buying a bike, you have to gear up as

well," Sedlacek explains. "If you're a beginning rider, a young kid on a trail bike with helmet, gloves and armour can spend about \$900 to a thousand. For some of our avid cyclists, where a big part of their life is cycling, I've seen investments of \$7,000 for a bike in itself."

While helmets can be bought for as little as \$30, Sedlacek said it's not uncommon for avid riders to spend \$599 on a carbon fibre Troy-Lee Helmet to protect their heads. Roughly half of the six lines of armour On Top carries, are designed or developed locally, however most manufacturing is done in China or Taiwan. The store's machine components such as chain rings, guides and stems, are made by eNVy, another local company that markets North Vancouver through its name. While Sedlacek agrees there is some novelty in buying North Shore products simply because the area is seen as a mecca for mountain bikers, he said the products are valued for another reason.

"Being such a challenging area and with the weather it's almost like a time machine out here for developing product. If it's done out in North Vancouver you know it's a high calibre product because that's what the North Shore demands."

While Sedlacek doesn't expect business to expand as rapidly in the next few years as it has in the past, he predicts the sport will continue to thrive in the community.

"There's just so many positives to the sport and recreation of mountain biking, that it attracts many people and the spin offs are gained by everybody in the local community: restaurants, gas stations, corner stores, pubs, hotels," he says. "Financially that's a great reward, but the biggest reward is the activity itself and the healthy lifestyle, getting in the forest that we're so fortunate to have."

"It's pretty rewarding seeing 12-year-olds with incredibly advanced bike handling skills just because they naturally grow up in this area. That's why we have so many top athletes out here."