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BACK

SEND TO A FRIEND FEEDBACK



[North Vancouver](#)



[West Vancouver](#)



Columnists

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[Catherine Barr](#)

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[West Vancouver](#)

[North Vancouver](#)

BC Press Council

[B.C. Press Council](#)

Municipalities

[North Van District](#)

[North Vancouver City](#)

[West Vancouver](#)

Getting Around

[BC Ferries](#)

[Lions Gate Bridge](#)

[TransLink](#)

Out and About

[Cypress Mountain](#)

[Grouse Mountain](#)

[Mount Seymour](#)

[North Van Recreation](#)

[North Van Cricket Club](#)

Real Estate

[Real Estate Weekly](#)

Sister Papers

[Surrey Leader](#)

[Richmond Review](#)

[The Westender](#)

[South Delta Leader](#)

[Peace Arch News](#)

War of the Woods - In a league of their own

By Jennifer Maloney (Rob Newell photo)

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Amidst a dozen team photos portraying kids in multi-coloured synthetic jerseys, is a close-up image of a teenaged boy clutching the handlebars of his mountain bike as he powers through a trail.

Sam Scorda turns around to look at the photo on the wall of his Argyle secondary office.

“Because of that kid right there,” he says. “When he was 16 he asked if we could try and get a school mountain bike team. I had my doubts, but I called a meeting and had 30 kids show up.”

That was 10 years ago.

Today, Scorda chairs the North Shore Mountain Bike Racing League and acts as the province’s school sports commissioner for what has become the fastest growing high school sport in North America.

The steps that took the extreme fringe sport into the mainstream were small, but steady.

In 1996, Scorda helped organize the first high school mountain bike race on the North Shore.

Approximately 70 kids participated in the informal race, only two of them female. The event took place in April between four North Shore schools in the Blair Range area, without the knowledge that what was happening would set a precedent and eventually include schools from across B.C.

The idea of having mountain biking in high schools appealed to pros like Lesley Tomlinson and Alison Sydor, who pioneered the sport, often favouring the North Shore trails for training.

“The North Shore is very strong based on the support we have given the sport in the school system and the number of pro MTB athletes who have and do live here,” Tomlinson says.

After the first North Shore school race, Tomlinson asked Scorda if he was interested in starting a league with Sprockids, the non-profit organization that had

Aldergrove Star

recently been created to teach kids practical life skills through mountain biking. The program, which became known as 'Kids on the Shore,' ignited interest from kids who were led through local trails by the two Olympians and other world-class local riders like Bruce Spicer.

"They were just ecstatic," Scorda recalls of the first ride-a-long. "They couldn't believe these top international bikers would come and ride with them. It was a nice kick off to the league."

A year later the first official North Shore Mountain Bike Racing League started with 12 high schools and more than 225 competitors.

With their careers often taking Tomlinson and Sydor out of country and requiring hours of dedicated training, it became apparent that the best way to encourage biking among youth was through the school system. Sydor, an Olympic silver medallist and three-time world champion, once said she wanted to see a mountain bike club in every school.

"It is a basis for a healthy lifestyle, developing social skills and great lifestyle habits," Tomlinson says. "It promotes physical and psychological development."

Scorda applied to the B.C. School's Sports Association in 1998, and after a three year wait the organization officially recognized mountain biking as a provincial high school sport.

"It means that you're recognized by the school administration as a legitimate sport," Scorda says of the accomplishment. "Mountain biking has not had a good reputation in terms of being a sport. In our system, we teach kids about the environment, trail maintenance, and to be respectful of the trails and hikers."

Today, Sydor's vision of having a club in every school is not far from reality. All but two of the 16 high schools on the North Shore now have mountain biking teams, but the sport has also taken off in Victoria, Coquitlam, Prince George and Valemount. One of the only areas mountain biking has not had a high impact in recent years is the Okanagan, but Scorda, who is retiring from Argyle next year, hopes that will change in time and through exposure.

At present, 115 high schools across the province have mountain bike teams, not including junior highs which Scorda estimates add another 30 or 40 clubs to the total. B.C.'s high school league has also become a model for emerging mountain bike organizations in Colorado and some parts of Texas. The biggest race is the annual B.C. High School Invitational Mountain Bike Championship, which started in 1998 and has become the focal point of the

racing season. Riders who finish fifth or better in their age category are invited to a national training camp where they spend two to four days learning how to hone their skills from pros like Tomlinson, Sydor and other athletes.

"[The purpose of the camp is to] introduce young riders who have shown an interest in participating in the sport to some of the other elements of being a high performance athlete," Tomlinson explains.

Although free riding or down hill racing has become a huge attraction to local bikers who like the challenge of completing more technical trails, the high school league only allows cross country races. The league does offer a "heavy bike division," in which riders with bikes weighing between 35 and 40 pounds track up hill.

However, Scorda said female riders, are still a minority. He estimates 50 amateur girls actively compete on the North Shore.

"From my perspective it hasn't grown as fast as I thought it would in girls," he says. "In boys it's grown beyond my wildest dreams. We're working on girls. I think it's the kind of sport they could really get into to if they just got out there and tried it."

Alyssa Garrison, 14, sees the advantages in being one of the elite girls in the sport.

"When there's so few girls you can kind of dream big," she says in a telephone interview. "I'd like to go to the Olympics one day, but I mainly just do it to have lots of fun."

The Argyle student took up the sport four-and-a-half years ago and last year became the youngest girl to ever compete in the Test of Metal, a 70-kilometre race in Squamish. Garrison, who also trains as a dancer, says most of her girlfriends prefer ballet to bike racing.

"I think a lot of girls these days don't want to get dirty," she says. "I have fun with that. They think it's a guys' sport and it's a lot of work."

Whatever misconceptions there may be over gender, there is no hidden truth about the amount of effort the students put into their training.

Tamara Lees, 17, started mountain biking at age 10 and continues to train up to four times a week for road and cross country. "It's an accomplishment to be able to bike," says the Argyle student over the phone. "It comes off as a boys' sport because it seems kind of rough and hard to do."

Lees frequently places in the top three at the B.C. Championships and has qualified three times to go to the national training camp.

"When I ride with some of the Olympic riders it

shows me how much I can do,” she says. “They’re very encouraging.”

Riding has taught Lees to be self-motivated and the skill transfers over to her other interests such as field hockey and soccer.

“I think people should just be motivated to do what they want to do,” she offers. “And if that’s mountain biking, it’s a really good sport; you can take advantage of living on the North Shore.”

As the sport spreads through North Shore schools, it’s become inevitable that the area will breed more professionals. Even without the man-made structures that make the sport more challenging, the area continues to attract riders with its difficult terrain. Scorda, meanwhile, will continue to focus on the positives of the activity, which is taking more kids away from their televisions and computers and directing them towards a healthier lifestyle.

“I think it goes beyond racing into lifestyle,” he says. “We’re teaching kids how to use their time in being fit.

“It’s a vehicle to exercise and it’s a lifetime sport — when they’re 50, 60, or 70 they can still ride.”

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