

Racing Down the Mountains

COMPETITORS SPEED DOWN MOUNTAINS ON MARKED COURSES, TAKING JUMPS AND RACING THE CLOCK TO WIN. SKIING? NO, DOWNHILL MOUNTAIN BIKE RACING.

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Just for fun, in October 1976, some members of a California cycling club called Velo organized a downhill race on a Mount Tamalpais trail. They rode “klunkers”—beefed-up Schwinn bikes—which were the toughest bikes available at the time. The course involved a descent of 400 meters in about 5 minutes. The fire road they used came to be known as Repack Trail because they had to frequently repack the bike’s brake as the grease around it softened and drained from the hub due to overuse.

Two of the Repack Trail race organizers, Gary Fisher and Charlie Kelly, started MountainBikes to produce bikes intended for use on rugged terrain. The company name quickly became the generic term for all bikes of this type.

Within a few years, people all over the world were riding mountain bikes, and both cross country and downhill racing quickly followed. Like other competitive cycling, downhill mountain bike racing falls within the purview of USA Cycling, and riders must annually renew licenses through this organization. A large network has developed around the sport, with professional teams, qualified coaches and managers, scoring systems, and



Alex ready to begin his solo gravity run down the mountain on a marked course at Snowshoe Resort, competing against the clock. PHOTO BY DAN HEDDERICK

special equipment to protect riders and to make off-season ski resorts excellent venues for races.

Two main types of downhill mountain bike races have emerged: solo gravity runs down the mountain on marked trails, competing against the clock; and dual slalom races in which two riders race side by side on similar courses, switch sides for a second run, and win by the combined time differential with the other rider.

Cumberland bike shop Cycles and Things, with owner Mike Hutt and master bike mechanic Bill Harris, caters to the needs of local riders. The business supplies mechanical support as well as products for cyclists. The pandemic caused many people to dust off bikes they

hadn’t used for a while. Mike says the shop was suddenly bursting at the seams with bikes needing some repair or maintenance. Mike has also seen a recent increase in interest in biking among children and teens—something that had waned considerably when electronic devices became a favored past time. Most of their customers are riding road bikes or comfort bikes, but they also have a few



Left: Alex ready for some practice rides on the wooded slopes at his home in Cumberland, MD.

PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN

Right: Some 350 riders and 25 teams prepare for practice at the Downhill Southeast Series race.

PHOTO BY DAN HEDDERICK



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mountain bike racers coming in for bikes and repairs. For those interested in taking up any form of bike riding, Cycles and Things is a good local resource.

Cumberland resident Alex Hedderick has gotten involved in mountain bike riding in a big way. In 2016, 14-year-old Alex received a mountain bike for Christmas. He carved out some trails and built in some features for practice. In rapid succession, he learned about downhill mountain bike racing; participated in his first race; was invited to join a competitive team, Phenom; began earning points; and moved to another team, GT Racer's Edge.

These teams participate in races in the Eastern part of the United States and benefit from knowledgeable owners, managers, and sponsors. Mike Hartlove, one of the managers of GT Racers Edge, grew up racing BMX bikes and began mountain bike racing in its early days when he was still in college. He won the first national race he entered—and

the second and third... Mike became a pro, traveling throughout the United States for competition and forming the team that is now GT Racers Edge before returning to amateur status. He earns a living as a general contractor, but he continues to organize and promote downhill mountain bike racing in the mid-Atlantic area.

Alex wryly remembers that he crashed several features on the first course he raced, finishing in third place for the simple reason that there were only three participants in his class. Undeterred, he continued to improve his performance. Since his family's back yard contains extensive wooded slopes, he was able to set up practice trails, designing and building his own features. Along the way, Alex has moved from his first small mountain bike with a 26 inch wheel to his current ride, a large GT Fury with a 29 inch wheel. He has left Cat 3, the beginner category, behind and has



been doing well enough in Cat 2 that he expects to move to Cat 1 this season.

Mike Hutt describes Alex as a racer with unusual potential because he is gifted with nerve and lightning reflexes, and he is disciplined. By 2017, Alex was excelling in competition with older and more experienced riders, winning the Mid Atlantic Gravity East Downhill Series and placing third in the Mid Atlantic Dual Slalom Championship. He had a strong season in 2018; he snagged third place at the USA National Championship Race and first place at the Mid Atlantic Dual Slalom Championship. A health setback in 2019 limited Alex's participation, and pandemic restrictions put a serious crimp in the 2020 season, but Alex still managed to place third in the 2020 West Virginia State Championship.

This year, the team's schedule ranges from New York to Tennessee. Alex, now riding in the 19-29 age group, often competes against 30 or more other riders. Even with the new level of challenge, Alex has earned a place on the podium in several events and has again taken third place in the West Virginia State Championship.

Racing on steep, rough slopes peppered with both natural (rocks, roots, ledges) and purposely-designed features (jumps and drops) is not for the faint of heart. To prevent serious injury, riders can choose helmets, clothing, and shoes with safety features. They also decide what bike components (such as various types of pedals and tires) work best for them. None of this is inexpensive, and the travel and lodging required for the racing circuit is also pricey. Some riders find help in the form of discounts and other financial benefits from sponsors or as rewards for doing well in the standings.

As Alex's father Dan puts it, while competing, Alex has had everything go wrong and everything go right. Dan credits downhill mountain bike racing for having

Alex has been able to set up practice trails on the wooded slopes at his home, where he designs and builds his own features.

PHOTOS BY MIKE CALHOUN



Alex Hedderick, Kevin Liebig and Jimi Saltsman, teammates of GT Racers Edge, after competing in the Downhill Southeast Series and WV State Championship earlier this year. Alex took third place out of 30 riders.

PHOTO BY DAN HEDDERICK

taught Alex a lot about life, about setting goals, overcoming setbacks, and celebrating victories. While pursuing downhill mountain bike racing, Alex has completed high school, begun classes at Allegany College of Maryland, and prepared the way for a transfer to Frostburg State University this fall where he plans to earn a degree in fisheries biology. In his spare time, he has started work on his grandfather's farm.

At nineteen, Alex feels that full-time professional participation in this sport is probably not in the cards for him. In addition to being very expensive, it would require too much living on the road and being away from family and friends, and it would prevent him from fully engaging in his many other interests, career goals, and personal goals. Still, he enjoys racing and plans to continue doing so as long as he can—just for fun.

Many parks in the region—such as Rocky Gap State Park, Deep Creek Lake State Park, and Swallow Falls State Park in Maryland; Cacapon Resort State Park and Canaan Valley Resort State Park in West Virginia; and Seven Springs Resort and Ohiopyle State Park in Pennsylvania—offer recreational trails for mountain biking. Downhill mountain bike racing is also a thrilling sport to watch. There are local events and for those willing to travel a little further afield, both the World Cup and the World Championships of downhill mountain bike racing will be held at Snowshoe Resort in West Virginia this September. Check UCI and USA Cycling websites and other online resources to find events in the area where you can go to see people flying down the mountain on two wheels.