

Oh Canada! YOU ABSOLUTE BEAUTY

The BC Bike Race is truly a blood-sweat-and-tears MTB adventure, as Bruce Newton discovers the hard way. Would he do it all again? You bet.

WORDS *Bruce Newton*





Race winner Geoff Kabush
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver



Day 0: The campsite
PHOTO CREDIT: Bruce Newton



Day 0: The briefing
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver

Memory of the exact time I first heard about the BC Bike Race escapes me, but once I did, whenever that was and for reasons I shall disclose forthwith, it stuck in my brain like a pebble between ruts in a fresh tyre. It's a seven-day mountain bike race visiting some of the best singletrack Canada's British Columbia on the west coast has to offer. Or, in other words, seven days of riding some of the best singletrack the world has to offer.

Everything I read about the race had a similar theme; it'll be tougher than you imagine, it'll be better than you can imagine. The roots and rocks, the technicality of it, it's all a step-up from anything experienced in Australia.

It intimidated me just to think about it, but it simply would not let go. It came to the point, in late 2016, where I just went, "yep, I've got to do this thing".

A RENAISSANCE MAN

To put you more in the picture: I am the very definition of the average mountain biker. Although associated with two wheeled perambulation virtually all my life, be it bicycles or motorcycles, I only got into MTB in my early 40s. Before that I, like many, had been a necessarily sedentary bloke for a decade. More than ten years focussed on business, family and making money; tasks usually done in a swivel chair in front of a desk or in a car during rush hour tooling back and forwards along the same stretches of gridlocked road.

I'm 55 now and I kid you not, mountain biking saved my life. I lost weight, reconnected with my younger self, made a lot of new friends of all ages and simply fell in love all over again with the simple act of pedalling on two wheels.

I've raced, I've done epic rides, I've ridden in much of Australia and some great places overseas — one of the upsides of a job that puts me on planes too often.

But I'm not fast up or downhill, I balk at the technical stuff and, in a group ride, you'll find me huffing and puffing along near the back.

But that's one of the beauties of mountain biking; the challenges and accomplishments are personal, from climbing that hill, to rolling that rock garden to completing a seven-day race.

And what a race the BC is. Now 12 years old, its 625-rider field takes on a 300km-plus course split into seven stages, including 10,000 metres-plus heading upwards.

The logistics are mind-boggling; while the riders are out in the forests, a tent city is broken down, transported to new locations and set up again every day by a legion of red-shirted volunteers. There's catering, medical, massage, a bike shop with full maintenance and even a beer tent to greet you when you cross the line.

It didn't take me long to realise why all those support facilities exist. In fact, it was about three hours into the very first day of the race in the beautiful Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island. Only 40km long it included 1700m of climbing; about double what you would expect from a race of that length in Australia.

BC BIKE RACE BY NUMBERS

650
RIDERS IN 2018

185
RIDERS IN 2007



36
COUNTRIES
REPRESENTED



AVERAGE RIDE TIME

3-6
HOURS PER DAY



39
AVERAGE
AGE



85%
MALE RIDERS

50
KILOMETRES
ON AVERAGE PER/DAY



15%
FEMALE RIDERS



75%
SINGLETRACK
TRAILS

2
AID STATIONS PER DAY

Day 1: The race begins
PHOTO CREDIT: Robert Shaer



"On and on it went. I wilted and walked, then I stopped and then I cramped. Both legs locked solid"

AND SO IT BEGINS

I'd started out cautious, made the first big climb comfortably, immersed deep in the pack as I'd expected. Then I'd tackled the first steep, technical down, dropping off rock faces and rattling over roots. Immediately ahead of me a bloke had launched off a jump, attempted a tail whip and come crashing to earth.

Then it was through transition and on to the second big climb up Maple Mountain. It was gradual at first, just a bench cut trail meandering back and forth across the side of the hill. But gradually it ramped up, requiring efforts up rock faces and through rooty sections as the trail became more and more technical.

On and on it went. I wilted and walked, then I stopped and then I cramped. Both legs locked solid.

I'd trained for 12 months, averaging four to five off-road rides per week, pedalling close to 200km in distance and 3000m in climbing. I'd raced in single- and multi-day events in places as far flung as Alice Springs, I'd sworn off the alcohol, dialled my diet into a high-protein mix of reds and greens and spun endless hours on the stationary bike when I couldn't get out on the trail.

Yet here I was on day one, stopped and suffering, watching others grind on towards the top of the climb.

I didn't know it then but this was my nadir. I never cramped again and I defeated tougher climbs than this. Oh sure, I still walked some hills and I still suffered like a dog, but I was never to revisit this particular fug.

What turned me around on day one and every day after that is the shrewd way the BC course is constructed. For every grinding, suffering, endless climb there is an exhilarating, challenging, brilliantly-constructed descent.

On Maple Mountain, having ridden, walked and staggered to the peak, I discovered a trail called Maple Syrup. And my belief was restored.



Day 1: The climb
PHOTO CREDIT:
Raven Eye Photography;



Day 1: The fall
PHOTO CREDIT:
Robert Shaer



Day 6: Prepping the bikes
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver



Day 1: The smooth flow of Maple Syrup
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver

EXQUISITE CHALLENGES

The first section was a descent so loose and steep my bum was dragging on the rear tyre as I fishtailed down between hike-a-bikers, bounced right off a berm, cleared a narrow gap between two trees, turned left and down over roots and emerged intact, equally relieved and adrenaline-pumped.

And so it went, carving downwards, a narrow ribbon of trail sometimes hanging over the edge of a ravine, occasionally diverting over rocky outcrops and timber bridges and - fiendishly - making us climb again to earn more altitude.

I loved it - the balance, the calm and skills required to ride this stuff demanded focus on it, alone. It's this purity of thought that is integral to the joy I get from mountain biking.

In fact, this focus became the mantra for the entire week. I rode for as little as two hours on one day and as much as five-and-a-half on another, but all 24 hours of every day was

spent preparing for or recovering from time on the bike.

Crossing the line and the first priority was a sweet drink, something meaty to eat and a lie-down in the shade. Then it was: wash the bike and drop it into the shop if it needed maintenance, have a shower, jump on the bus or ferry if we were moving locations, find luggage, blow up mattress and unroll sleeping bag, go and eat and eat and eat ... and eat some more, prep hydration and nutrition, fit a massage in there somewhere, sleep ... a process that was initially a challenge, but became easier as the week went on and my fatigue grew.

In the morning it was eat some more, potentially transport to the starting line, the all-important evacuatory ablutions and then race.

Over the first four days my form improved and I moved forward through the field, albeit from 459th to 419th.



Day 2: Vanilla Trail
PHOTO CREDIT: Raven Eye Photography



THE TERRA AUSTRALIS BIKE RACE



"You'd come out at the top of some god-awful climb in the middle of nowhere and there would be a group of locals in fancy dress handing out whiskey and salty bacon. Awesome"



Day 3: Meeting the locals
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver

DAY TO DAY, BLOW BY BLOW

Each stage presented something different. Day two in Cumberland started with a 15-kilometre climb counterbalanced by a series of rough-and-tumble descents. It was during one of these I crashed for the first time, losing my front wheel crossing a slippery bridge. Only the solid trunk of a pine tree prevented an early bath.

Yes, I said 'first time' as in 'it wouldn't be the last time'. I ended up on or near the ground at least once every day, usually as tiredness took its toll and usually in slow motion.

Day three was a magical ride through old growth rainforest around Powell River. The highlight was an amazing construction called Aloha. It was a figure-eight bridge in the middle of nowhere with locals doing the hoolah and handing out pineapple juice.

In fact, the enthusiasm of the locals was a highlight all week. You'd come out at the top of some god-awful climb in the middle of nowhere and there would be a group of them in fancy dress handing out whiskey and salty bacon. Awesome.

But it was the other riders I bonded with most. Mitch and John from south-eastern USA who I raced with and against all week and shared a beer with after it was all over; Big Rob from Maui and his ever-smiling wife Sandra, who was a red shirt; Juliet from Tasmania, a brilliant rider who dominated the over 50s women's category; Andrew and Hannah from the UK - Andrew and I met in the first climb conga and kept chatting all week. There was Todd, Marinda, Ben, Bill, Nathan, Randall, Nick - and so many more.

Day four was a grind, 62km and 1700m of climbing; an eternity spent following power lines or wending up and down along forest 4WD tracks. There were a couple of great downhill to finish with, but by then all I was thinking about was the end.

By now I understood my mind could be a powerful negative or positive tool. When I was struggling, it was important to remember I was not the only one deep in the hurt box. And just as important to believe I could and would surmount this challenge. It always helped on the long, steep climbs to deconstruct the pain. Heart; it's not in the red. Lungs; they're working okay. Legs; they're aching, but I'm not cramping.

Day five I felt the effects of day four. It was like I'd dropped a cylinder on the climbs and was unable to really punch through the lumpy, undulating singletrack. The day finished with a 10km descent on a trail called Highway 102. It was glorious; smooth, rough, technical and flowing. It had everything, including enough tricks to catch out fatigued riders pushing too hard. I heard about a broken collarbone and leg on this section ... and of another rider who faceplanted on asphalt as he crossed the line.



Day 3: Start at Powell River
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver



Day 3: Massage station at Powell River
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver



Day 4: Some were able to travel by plane
PHOTO CREDIT: Margus Riga



IF YOU THINK THIS IS AN EVENT YOU'D LIKE TO TRY, HERE ARE SOME TIPS:

Get there early: I flew in on the Tuesday for a Saturday race start. I stayed at the excellent Pinnacle Hotel at the Pier in North Vancouver, which allowed for recuperation and relaxation and served as a great base for some exploration.

Do some reconnaissance: The North Shore stage is technical, so pre-ride it! Get onto Endless Biking, which runs guided tours for BCBR riders on all the most challenging bits.

Catering: There are lots of added extras that you can sign up for in the BCBR. The must-do is the breakfast and dinner service, which is excellent and extensive. Here's a tip: sign up for the earliest sitting – that way you can actually eat whenever you want.



Living under canvas: The tent city is fun and social, so it's worth experiencing. But it's notable that people who come back for a second go often opt for motels or campervans. I get it, it's so much more comfortable and definitely aids in that all-important recovery.

Bike: After much consultation I got off my 100mm XC bike for this race and went for a Giant Trance Advanced 01, with its 150mm/140mm long travel suspension (with lockout) and dropper post. Maybe it slowed me a bit on the climbs, but it was awesome on the descents.

Gear: The great debate at the BCBR is baggies or lira. I went for the latter, just because I always do in races. Another toss-up is Camelbak or bidons and aid stations. I went Camelbak because I normally ride straight through races. But I ended up stopping at the stations as the week went on as my fatigue level and the temperatures climbed along with my consumption of liquid, gels and food.



Locals coming out to support the race
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver



Day 6: Prep and maintenance
PHOTO CREDIT: Dave Silver

Day six was the shortest stage of all, at just 19-kilometres, but it was on the dreaded North Shore. What that translates to is steep, technical trails that require skill, confidence and fitness to ride well. Local knowledge helps too, which is why I'd done two days guided riding there before the race started. It paid-off with my best finish of the week, even though it felt like I was in reverse gear on the climbs.

Fatigue had really got a hold of me by day seven at Squamish. Tummy troubles struck overnight and I spent more time sitting on the crapper than lying in bed; a blister in the palm of my left hand was making it painful to hold on to the handlebar; cold sores were sprouting on my top lip. I felt like shit.

This stage captured all that had come before it; big climbs, big descents and big kilometres. Finally, with just an hour of racing to go for the entire week, I had a big crash. I just pointed down the line over a jumble of roots and next thing I was on the ground. A rock took a chunk out of my left leg and it hurt like a bastard. But after a five-minute sit-down I soldiered on to the finish.

It was, to be honest, more relief more than joy I felt when crossing the line. After years of dreaming, a year of training, the week of racing and the sweat, tears and – finally – blood did not produce the emotional response I expected. I even forgot to stop and have my finishers medal (actually a belt buckle) draped around my neck.

In the days after, though, my pride grew as realisation sank in of achieving something truly worthwhile. Now, a month on, the intensity of that week's effort is a fading memory, like a fire burning on the horizon.

That's why I have to go and do the BC Bike Race again. Maybe not in 2019, I think my wife would kill me. But soon. The focus, the challenges, the trails, the people. BCBR remains stuck in my brain and it's calling me back. **1**



Day 6: Yoga and stretching
PHOTO CREDIT: Robert Shaer



Day 7: Finishing the race in one piece
PHOTO CREDIT: Raven Eye Photography