

# Aussie and Kiwi success at the BC Bike Race

Words **Andrew Findlay** Photos **BCBR**

Seven days racing epic singletrack in British Columbia is tough but it didn't stop a bunch of Aussie and Kiwi riders achieving success in this year's BC Bike Race

**T**HE NORTH SHORE of Vancouver, British Columbia, has become synonymous worldwide for steep, technical, mountain biking. Whether in Scotland, Switzerland or Slovenia, you'll hear mountain biking aficionados use the term "North Shore" to describe a certain style of black diamond trail. And so it is fitting that the BC Bike Race (BCBR,) a seven-day stage race that attracts 600 competitors from more than 30 different countries, began its 13th iteration with a short prologue on the North Shore trails that have made BC famous in the world of mountain biking.

## The challenge for the unfamiliar

Let's face it; riders from Canada's westernmost province can be a little smug. I should know – I am one. After all, we have enough technical trail to fill several lifetimes around this rugged province and on which to hone our chops. However this year a contingent of competitors from Down Under, including Aussies Brad Clarke, Andrew Low and Jon Adams, as well as Kiwis Gavin McCarthy, Karen Hill and Mandy Hancock, to name just a few, would quietly set out to dismantle any notion that to master BC singletrack you need to hold a Canadian passport and have the North Shore in your backyard. The BC Bike Race is an odyssey that takes riders on a weeklong tour of trail on BC's south coast. This year, after the North Shore prologue, aimed at seeding competitors for the week, racers boarded buses, then a ferry, for the journey across the Strait of Georgia to Vancouver Island and the start of Day 1 in the North Cowichan Valley. This first day featured a two-summit stage on Mt. Tzouhalem and Maple Mountain. Days 2 and 3 were based out of Cumberland, a historic coal mining town further north on Vancouver Island that, in the past 10 years, has become one of the premier riding destinations on the BC coast. After another ferry crossing back to the Mainland, Days 4, 5, 6 were played

◀ Geoff Kabush and Felix Burke spent the better part of the first five days locked in a pitched battle. Geoff (#1 Plate), the two-time reigning champion did not relinquish the title easily. In the end, young Felix took his three-second lead out to a winning margin of 3:30 minutes.

▼ The start line at BC Bike Race is presided over by BOB (Bear on Bike). The BC Bike Race's now legendary logo speaks clearly and eloquently for those in the know; singletrack, roots, rocks and good times on mountain bikes. – Stage 1, Cowichan Valley.



out on the trails of the Sunshine Coast, between Powell River and Langdale. The week culminated in Squamish with a burly 50-plus kilometre stage, which included a feast of local trail favourites like 50 Shades of Grey, Leave of Absence and Half Nelson. Throughout the week racers experienced it all, from sunny, hot and dry, to rain, mud and greasy roots and rocks. But when they crossed the finish line at Squamish's Brennan Park the skies were warm and blue, a fitting way to cap a 300km week with more than a Mount Everest's worth of ascending.

## The Down Under charge

Brad Clarke, who captured top podium spot in Solo Masters Men, co-owns Mornington Cycles in Victoria. The professional engineer and crusher on a mountain bike has twice participated in South Africa's Cape Epic and made multiple appearances in Australia's Port to Port, Reef to Reef and Cape to Cape stage races. However this was his first BCBR, not to mention his first time riding a mountain bike on North American dirt.

"I was surprised that I managed to adapt quite quickly to the technical trails and terrain, although there were a few moments on that second half of stage 1 that had me a little worried about what potentially lay ahead of us," Clarke told me as he was preparing to return to ►



Getting to the finish line each day represents one of the goals; for many it's a race but for many others it's a pilgrimage to the culture of mountain biking in BC. Here, Payson McElveen takes the win on Stage 4, Powell River.



While 3-6 hours a day are riding your bike, BCBR is a full-service week of good times. The staff have a blast with international competitors that attend the event.



Canada in August for the UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale) Mountain Bike World Championships in Mont-Sainte-Anne, Quebec. "That first stage was a bit of a slap to the face; that said welcome to mountain biking in BC. We have some tech trails at home, but nothing like this that we would normally ride a cross-country bike on."

Clarke says he knew he was up for some seriously challenging trails but didn't expect the volume of technical singletrack.

"I absolutely loved it. The trails and terrain ticked every box for me. The dampness in certain areas and on certain days added another level of complexity. I spent a lot of time riding with a few riders that would be considered local, and I could definitely see that they had a natural advantage when it came to predicting what the trail was going to do next," Clarke says.

Despite three big crashes throughout the week, Clarke was lucky to be able to ride on injury-free and finish the event relatively unscathed.

Andreas Hestler, BCBR's director of marketing who lives within easy pedalling distance of Vancouver's North Shore, is stoked to see foreigners embracing BC's steep and techy terrain.

"The riders from Down Under really took to the roots and rocks of BC. They excelled in the wet, challenging single track much to my surprise," says Hestler, a five-time Canadian national champion who raced in mountain biking's Olympic debut in Atlanta back in 1996. "But really, as countries full of outdoor enthusiasts and all-round great athletes, I'm not sure why I was surprised."

New Zealander Mandy Hancock, who regularly rides her home trails around Wellington, was back for a second BCBR and wound up pedalling away from the pack in the women's Veteran (over 50) category. Previous experience put Hancock in a comfortable place to address BC's brand of single track.

"They are the best trails in the world. New Zealand has incredible riding too, but to put on a seven-stage race of over 300km mostly singletrack is something else. This is a cross-country race so it's not ridiculously technical at all. Wet roots and rock can make the trails interesting but this year I had no problems at all," Hancock says, adding that she hopes to see more plus-50 women tackling stage races like BCBR in the future. "The race is everything it says on the itinerary, plenty of climbing, magnificent descents and unbelievably good fun from start to finish."

Local fans come out each day to cheer and entertain riders. It's surreal to be deep in and old growth forest, tuned into your legs, when suddenly the sound of a slide trombone breaks the still summer air.



▼ Aussie Brad Clarke overcame the challenge of BC's rugged trails to win the Solo Master's category at BCBR.



**"At BCBR I felt very welcome... We got an opportunity to rub shoulders with the pros like we were all equal and in the journey together."  
- Brad Clarke, solo Masters winner**

### Keeping the machine rolling

Managing a stage race, and keeping it fresh, is forever a work in progress. It takes a team of 200 paid and volunteer staff to keep a caravan of 600 riders well nourished (the catering team serves more than 10,000 meals during the week) as well as moving on time and in the right direction, which includes coordinating bus travel with four ferry crossings. From year to year, Hestler says he and BCBR president Dean Payne are committed to tweaking the individual stages and incorporating new trail in a way that improves the overall flow of the week. However, beyond the challenge of stage racing on technical trail and not having to worry about the logistics of eating and sleeping, both Clarke and Hancock say BCBR's sense of community puts it in a different category. Most participants camp together in a mobile tent city, eat banquet style and shuttle between stages on school buses, giving plenty of time to get to know one another.

"You really feel that the race organisers, event team and all the volunteers are there to make sure every rider has an amazing week. It's incredibly friendly and inclusive, including the amazing bike mechanics staying up all night to ensure everyone with a mechanical can still ride the next day," Hancock says.

Clarke agrees.

"At BCBR I felt very welcome by everyone. We all got an opportunity to rub shoulders with the pros like we were all equal and in the journey together. Whether in the Rocky Mountain beer garden, waiting in the queues for whatever, or

sitting down for a feed at either end of the day, the vibe and camaraderie between riders was always there," he says. "The event crew was amazing too. Everyone went well and truly above and beyond to make mine and every other riders experience the best week on a bike."

BCBR's Andreas Hestler often refers to the mountain biking "tribe" when describing the event experience.

"It isn't really a creation, it's more of an articulation of the way we enjoy the sport and the culture that surrounds it," Hestler explains. "A race like this brings people together from around the world."

According to Hestler, putting into words the feelings and vibe and reinforcing that human achievement, keeps people on track, mentally and physically, enabling them to achieve their goals alongside the great opportunity to be part of an event that allows them to "share both good times and tough times on and off the bike."

"As the event organisers we simply impress that union from beginning to end. The hard work and experience is done by the participants," Hestler says.

It's a formula that seems to be working. Both Hancock and Clarke hope to return in the near future for another date with the roots, rocks and dirt of BCBR singletrack.

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To see video, photos and race results, or learn more about next year's edition of the race go to [www.bcbikerace.com](http://www.bcbikerace.com)