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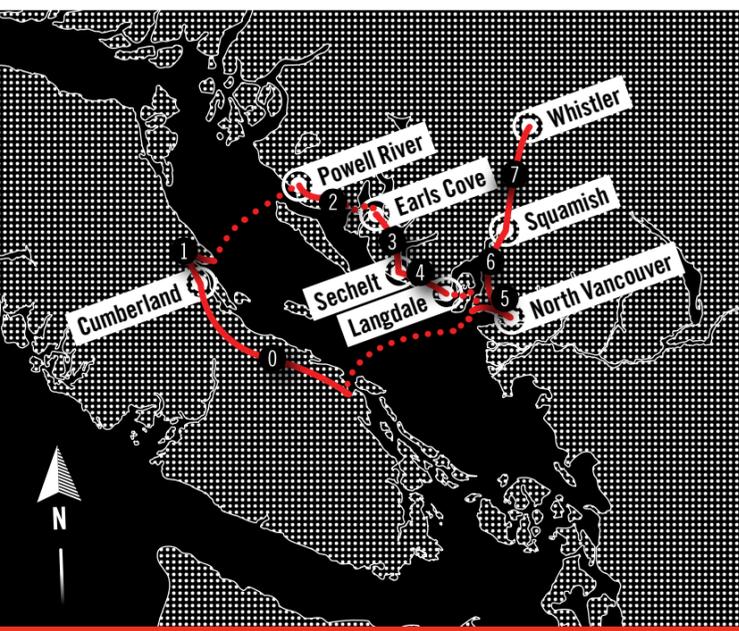
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ROOTS, ROCKS & RUGGED RIDING



For many years, **Tim Ellerbeck** has been dreaming of lush green coastal vegetation, giant redwoods, moss-covered granite boulders, elevated narrow wooden bridges, a labyrinth of roots channelling hundreds of kilometres of peaty single track, and of course, a bear or two... This is BC Bike Race.



PHOTOGRAPHS MARGUS RIGA



DAY 0: NORTH VANCOUVER

All participants had to attend a rather humorous mandatory race briefing before being loaded onto busses; from there it was a ferry trip and another bus ride until we reached our first base camp in Cumberland.

DAY 1: CUMBERLAND (43km, 1 159m ascent)

This was the first day of "racing" and as such, 630 eager riders from around the world lined up in anticipation before the big show. We quickly left the main tar road and transitioned to a sustained gravel climb which then became a punchy single track climb. This worked out well as riders were spread out nicely by the time we were spat out on our first single track descent after about 12km of ascent.

From there on, our introduction to the roots of Cumberland had begun, it was like holding onto a jackhammer that was trying to free itself of your grip. To spice things up further, there were big slab rocks, steep drops and log rides thrown into the mix too. Trails named Further Burger, Blockhead, Bear Buns and Vanilla were encountered in quick succession. The trails mellowed before becoming forest road which then took us skyward once again. From there it was into some fast flowing trails with jump lines as options, and some full-on blind drop options too before popping out at the village park to cross the finish line.

It was a short day in terms of distance; however a common theme through the week would prevail – a punishing upper body workout and tired head due to the continuously technical nature of the course. This was proper mountain biking and we were loving it.

WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY

Race finally arrived, I grabbed it with both hands! As with any foreign travel expedition, the journey began long before setting foot on transcontinental soil. I excitedly set about researching the area, terrain and weather patterns online, picked the brains of those that had already done the race and also consulted with friends who live in BC.

The plan was to forget about regular training. High intensity intervals and lots of longer tempo intervals were scrapped in favour of getting physically stronger and improving my technical skills. There wasn't any pressure to attain a specific finishing position for the race, which was a blessing in disguise as it meant my ego was checked even before boarding the plane, and let me tell you, there were many instances where I was blown away by the technical proficiency of local riders, men and women alike!

After the mandatory paperwork that comes with having a green mamba as a passport, a few anxious weeks of counting down sleeps and the inevitable torrential rain and seemingly never ending traffic jam on the way to the airport (really!?!), the long flight from Cape Town to Vancouver began. Thirty two hours later and I'd arrived in the land of the maple

leaf on 1 July; unbeknown to me it was their 150th anniversary of independence. Pushing a bike box, and carrying the rest of my luggage from the Skytrain to the ferry and then onto the bus terminal, whilst threading a line through thousands of patriotic (and many drunk) Canadians, was a chore at best.

Soon enough I'd arrived at my Airbnb located at the base of Mount Fromme on the North Shore. I hit the trails as soon as I could, and they were easily the best and most gnarly I'd ever ridden. To say I was a little intimidated is an understatement, as much as it was a real rush to ride them; I was secretly hoping that the race would have tamer terrain. After three days, my confidence had risen and I felt a lot more comfortable – it was just getting my head around the seriously steep descents. Easing off the brakes and keeping my weight back seemed to be the key.

The day before registration, my mate Jon arrived from Cape Town and I took him for a ride – he's a mild mannered gent who very seldom cusses... I will never forget one of the first sections of trail I took him down. I was waiting at the bottom with my phone ready to film his exploits, and all I heard was, "Timbo, this is f#@&ing hectic bru!" – only to see him pushing his bike down the trail and muttering that he's not quite sure that he'd be up for the challenge.

DAY 2: POWELL RIVER (52km, 1 080m ascent)

Once again we began with a climb out from basecamp before getting stuck into the single track. All I could think was, Thank goodness there's no rain... there were so many roots, my limited skill set would have put me in hospital.

One surreal, stand out moment was climbing a very tough single track called Aloha Trail, where a group of locals were dressed in traditional Hawaiian attire and playing the ukulele as support. Straight after that, the feature trail for the day – Death Rattle – which dropped about 200m in 2km, was upon us. It was steep, loose, rooty and intermittently rocky, requiring every ounce of concentration to keep things upright. Arriving just in time to give the forearms a rest, we hit some flat single track before finishing off with 51 Dodge and Dipper Down – both super fun and flowy trails.

The lasting memory of the day was a lush, mossy forest carpet, a feast for the eyes. You either had to stop and admire it or try and steal a glance at speed.

DAY 3: EARLS COVE TO SECHELT (57km, 1 710m ascent)

After a late start that included an incredible 15-minute float plane transfer to Earls Cove, we once again began with a climb for approximately 8km and then hit a steep descent known as Flat Alley. We'd been warned about the risk of puncturing towards the bottom, and I obviously didn't heed them. After attempting to re-inflate a number of times with a few plugs, a changed valve and some borrowed bombs from my mate Jon, I got going again.

The delay so close to the start of the race meant that I was now amongst the fish and chip riders. Passing them was difficult due to all the single track so it became a day of patience, passing where possible and getting to watch some spectacular crashes. There was one instance where a guy tried to pass about three riders on the inside of a steep and loose switchback turn by going straight off a six foot drop – it backfired in spectacular fashion and he came out of it after a neat tuck and roll without any issue, almost as if he'd done that

manoeuvre a few times!

Before long, we'd reached the only uphill feature trail of the whole race, Frogger, similar to many South African single track climbs, consisting of an open section of forest, steep switchbacks and plenty of heat from the summer sun. Shortly after, a small liaison section appeared before the world famous YFR trail – steep, flowing, mind-blowing single track bliss all the way home to base camp in Sechelt.

DAY 4: SECHELT TO LANGDALE (48km, 1 403m ascent)

The bunch stayed together on all the twisty tar roads through the town settlement before hitting a big climb at 6km which spread riders far and wide.

The first single track of the day signalled the beginning of lots of undulating trails, the picturesque Chapmans Creek Falls, some narrow bridge crossings and connecting dirt road sections before the midway point. Halfway into the stage, we encountered the steep double drop descents of El Dorado and the day's feature trail,



Tim Ellerbeck (right) is Velocity Sports Labs in-house sport scientist. Trails and adventure travel are two of his many passions. Follow him @Tim_Ellerbeck

PHOTOGRAPHS TODD WESELAKE, DAVE SILVER

Rio Grande, which were both challenging but grin inducing at the same time.

We continuously gained elevation until 7km from the finish; from that point on we were spoilt with 500m of elevation loss over three trails: Highway 102, Sidewinder and Sprockids. This was a highlight for me, I could make it as challenging as I wanted by either pushing the pace and the line choices or just getting into the groove to pump and carve all the way. By the end of it, my jaw was cramping from smiling.

DAY 5: NORTH VANCOUVER (18km, 871m ascent)

This was a stage I was a little scared of as I'd pre-ridden most

of it, and at scouting pace it was already intimidating, at race pace I was worried that one of the many OTB opportunities would become a reality. We started in groups of 25 riders due to the technical and tight nature of parts of the route, and after a quick road climb we were onto the single track 4km later. It began with some smooth sections but also contained some challenging step ups, meaning one always had to remain alert. Soon a tough, loose rock climb – Old Buck – appeared. Riding a steady pace put me at the front of my group by some way, even catching the group ahead.

Once we'd reached the highest point of the day, we pointed downwards back into the forest

for the start of the steep, gnarly and intimidating trails. Things went much smoother than anticipated and the trails were definitely easier at race pace, less braking meant more flow. This was not to say I wasn't getting passed by throngs of more technically gifted riders! "Rider!" was a sound that resonated often as bikers flashed past on either side whilst going down impossibly narrow and steep rocky sections.

The fun Red Bull-timed descent, Forever After, was safely negotiated, then the mellower feature trail, John Deere, was enjoyed before crossing the finish line less than 90 minutes after starting. It was such a blast that I immediately went for a second loop!

DAY 6: SQUAMISH (53km, 1 680m ascent)

Squamish was my favourite campsite, just pipping Powell River. We were camped below a huge monolith rock known as the chief, and surrounded by towering snow-capped mountains; it really was jaw-droppingly beautiful.

I'd been told that this was the "play day" of BCBR, so many of us were a lot more relaxed for a less technically challenging stage with some epic trail.

Another climbing start until 8km in signalled the flipping of the switch to play day with some of the most fun we could have with our pants on. Natural trails were mixed in with "machine" built trails that were less rugged and more flowing

TIM'S TOP TIPS

- The race sells out instantly. However, after speaking to the organiser, he suggested putting your name on the waiting list as there is a 20-25% dropout rate
- A dropper seatpost is highly recommended
- A Camelbak is not essential – there are enough flat sections to drink from a bottle
- Skills training is an area to focus on, a few skills lessons would be ideal
- There is a Lululemon yoga class every evening with Christie Baumgartner: do it!
- Do lots of upper body gym work to complement the skills training
- Purchase a quality inflatable mattress upon arrival for your tent
- Do the pre-race online surveys asap – there are some serious prizes up for grabs
- Don't get the meal plan option – there are a number of restaurants close to each base camp where you can choose what you eat and you'll save \$300 during the week (pack instant oats for breakfast)
- Bring a good book as there is a ton of downtime whilst waiting for busses and ferries and during transfers
- Prepare for some classic humour during the race medics portion of the pre-race briefing
- Arrive a few days early to ride the world famous North Shore trails
- Try and get a mate to join for the adventure
- Embrace the fact that Canadians are super friendly



with table top jumps and some monstrous bermed switchback descents. Sensory neurons were on overdrive. This was like Disneyland for mountain bikers, the trail builders being the Van Gogh of their crafts having masterminded such beauties like Half Nelson, Pseudo Tsuga and Powerhouse Plunge.

It wasn't all smooth sailing though as there were still plenty of challenging rock drop offs, root sections and narrow bridges. Incidentally, Day 6 has been voted the riders' "favourite day" in the post-race questionnaire for a number of years and I now knew why.

DAY 7: WHISTLER (33km, 1 569m ascent)

The fairytale was drawing to a close; with most races things are dialled down to get riders to the end without too much fuss on the last day. However this is BCBR and after an initial 10km of fun, flowing single track next to a creek, the trails jumped up a few notches in terms of technicality. We did some of the steepest and sketchiest drop offs of the entire week, rode on some steep and intimidating ridge lines, and experienced some sphincter clenching moments on Tunnel

Vision, the day's feature trail. The mineshaft drop on Dusty's Downhill was crazy, and once that was safely negotiated, the race concluded with 5km of newly cut single track which was rugged, bone jarring and tested the suspension and our tyre's sidewalls to the limits.

Before we knew it, it was onto the finish area with Brett Tippie welcoming all riders home. We'd done it; BCBR was an experience not to forget!

The BCBR team have done an exceptional job at putting together a race with enormous logistical challenges. With sensible opening stanzas to each day to spread riders out before hitting the tight single track, the days are a joy to the senses, owing to their natural beauty.

Due to travel constraints, I was unable to attend the legendary final banquet but did manage to chat to the male and female category winners.

The stages are more technical than anything I've ever ridden in South Africa, however you will leave with more skills than what you arrived with (if you don't put yourself in hospital). BCBR has to be my favourite stage race so far, I'd highly recommend doing it – just pray it doesn't rain. ⚙️

"We truly hope you have enjoyed your time with BC Bike Race. You are now an official BC Single Track Ninja. With great power comes great responsibility. You are now charged with a purpose, to spread the trail karma and cycling passion that fuels us and now you. Have a great summer, until next time when our single track paths shall cross!" – The BC Bike Race Team.



"The race was a tight battle the whole week with my fellow team mate, I'm really happy to come out on top but you know what, the result is not everything, the riding was just phenomenal!" – Female winner, Katerina Nash



"The woods and the natural dirt trails are unique, we really are treated to biking of the highest quality. Mountain biking being a big part of the communities and the way communities embrace the race along the route is really cool." – Male winner, Geoff Kabush: