

IT IS PROBABLY FAIR TO SAY THAT I AM NOT YOUR USUAL [R]EVOLUTION RIDER... OR WRITER. BUT I DO BLOODY LOVE MY MOUNTAIN BIKING! I'VE NEVER WORN A FULL-FACE HELMET - WELL NOT ON A MOUNTAIN BIKE ANYWAY - OR KNEE PADS. UNTIL A FEW MONTHS AGO MY BIKE HAD 100MM OF SUSPENSION TRAVEL, TWO GEAR RINGS UP FRONT, 10 AT THE BACK AND NO DROPPER POST. AND AT 55, WELL I'M OLD ENOUGH TO BE THE AVERAGE [R]EVOLUTION READER'S DAD, OR GRANDAD TO SOME YOUNG RIPPERS.

I mention all this because it's integral to the story and why I recently decided to push myself so far out of my comfort zone and contest the 2018 BC Bike Race! Yep that BC Bike Race, the one in British Columbia Canada. Seven days, 625 competitors, 320km, 10,000m of climbing and some of the best singletrack on the planet. I started riding mountain bikes about 15 years ago and became aware of the BC not long after it was first established about 12 years ago. Local MTB mags regularly run stories about Aussies taking the race on and eulogising about their experiences on and off the bike. Those accounts stuck in my mind. There were others races, like the Cape Epic and the Transalp, but they just sounded like masochistic hard work. The BC had the work, but also the reward in those epic trails. Even so, I dismissed any thought I could possibly do it; not fit enough, not fast enough, not brave enough.

Why did I change my mind? In 2016 a mate told me he was planning to do it and he wasn't that much of a better rider than me. I was jealous. My work life changed that year so I got my weekends back. Mountain biking suddenly changed back from an occasional to frequent experience. And once more, I discovered my simple love of riding off-road on two wheels. The sheer joy of flow in the forest. And I was conscious the clock was ticking. Fifty-five is not that old but it's still edging toward the back-end of the bus when it comes to doing things like the BC. Come Christmas 2016 I made the call, I was going to do the BC in 2018, giving me 18 months to get my physical and mental shit together.

TEACHING AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

# BC BIKE RACE

## TACKLING ONE OF MTB'S GNARLIEST STAGE RACES

WORDS // BRUCE NEWTON

So, to put you in the picture; I am not a free-rider or anything like that, more like huck to fail than flat. I come from the generation that thinks riding an enduro means going round and round in circles for six hours; that seven hours riding 100km in spandex is a challenge worth taking on, not an act of masochism which deserves a padded cell. And, even more amazingly, in doing this stuff I wasn't even fast. Back third of the field, back half of my age category has always been about right. Fast forward to mid-2017 and I had the chance to sample Squamish, the home of the trails consistently voted the riders' favourite in the BCBR.

I was fortunate to borrow a bike from Rocky Mountain and gain some advice on where to ride from their ambassador and BCBR co-founder Andreas Hestler. Many of you will know 'Dre' is a bit of a legend. Multiple Canadian XC champ, Olympic representative, brilliant rider and all-round good guy. "This is not a cross country stage race, this is a trail bike stage race," he told me. "We are in a unique place in that way in the world. The Cape Epic is pure cross country, the Trans Provence is pure enduro, we're somewhere in between." He sent me off to Squamish with a list of trails to ride; Half Nelson, Pseudotsuga, Hoods in the Woods, Powerhouse Plunge, Roller-coaster, Lumberjacks, Leave of Absence, Ruperts, 50 Shades of Green. "If you can ride Hoods and the Plunge then you can ride just about anything in the race," Dre told me.

Well, encouragingly, I could ride those trails. But, I have to admit, I did have a few second looks at some of the technical features and struggled on some of them. The other thing that struck me was the climbing, they just think about it differently over there. Climbing 1000m in a 50km race is about normal for us. For them it's more like 1500-2000m. Days later back at Dre's place on a sunny Saturday afternoon, beer in hand, he soothed my fears and gave me what amounts to the equivalent of a footy coach's pre-match address. "You know the technical is something you are going to get better at as you go through the week, so ease yourself into it, have your bike properly prepared for the adventure in BC and then patiently build your skills," he told me.

"Don't throw yourself on day one down trails you don't know. Mountain biking is about walking, there is always some walking, we are all in over our heads at some point." Those words were to prove oh so prophetic. Suitably motivated, I returned home determined to train. The base ambition was 100-200km and between 2000 and 3000m of climbing every week. Off-road. Yep, none of that road biking nonsense for me, except for the spin sessions that filled in when I couldn't get out on my home trails at Red Hill in Victoria.

Even then, pedalling away in the garage, I watched BC PV (check him out Youtube) chest cam footage of the 2017 BC stages. I also did lots of races. You can do all the training you like, but competition is where you really put it all on the line. The lowlight was pretty much collapsing dehydrated during a 50km race in the Alice Springs heat last Easter. The highlight was storming to the finish on a half-broken bike on the 60km third day of the Port to Port 4-day in May and feeling strong enough to go and do another lap.

So, time to go, and here's some key questions you might have asked answered:

What bike was I on? Giant Trance Advanced 01. Long travel, comfortable, dropper post. Slightly less efficient on the ups, but way better on the downs. Awesome!

Lycra or baggies? Sorry, lycra. It's what I always race in.

Cambelbak or bottles? Camelbak for me. As a profuse sweater, the thought of running dry is scary.

I flew out about five days before race start, staying at the Pinnacle Hotel at the Pier in North Vancouver, around the corner from where the race kicks off with orientation day. Apart from recovering from jetlag in a nice place, getting in a few days ahead of time also allowed me to head up to Mount Seymour on the legendary North Shore with Endless Biking to pre-ride the most technical stage of the race. It really helped demystify the challenge of roots and rocks and I truly got to appreciate my dropper post. It's cool to tackle stuff that looks so hard but turns out to be rideable when you know how. And so to the race itself. It's split into seven stages and basically does a giant horseshoe that starts at Duncan in the south of Vancouver Island and finishes at Squamish, just an hour north of Vancouver. Transport is via buses, ferries, water taxis and even seaplanes (for the lucky few), most people sleep in tent city and pay the extra fee for the full catering package that provides breakfast and dinner. There's also massage, medical, bike maintenance and a beer tent on-site. The stages are cleverly constructed because you never finish on a grinding uphill. You do plenty of them during each stage. Kilometre after kilometre of fire road that disappears upwards into the fir trees. And if not fire road, then single track that does the same thing, zig-zagging up the side of never-ending mountains.

Unfortunately, the reality of how gruelling the toll of this race was set to be on my body became very clear on the very first day of competition! I cramped, bad, two-thirds up a climb on a place called Maple Mountain. But an hour later I was whooping and hollering down Maple Syrup, a 5.2km adrenaline rush over rocks, roots, steeps and gripless sand. I clipped a hiker-biker's handlebars at one technical bit and nearly wobbled into a ravine. A bloke buggered up a rock drop in front of me and face planted from about two metres. Bleagh. There were uphill bits that hurt like hell. I still loved it. It went like that much of the week. Vanilla was the highlight of day two at Cumberland, a bermed, high-grip rush through the undergrowth after kilometres of rocky and rooty slime. Day three around Powell River was full of undulations, the sort of place where you're constantly in and out of the saddle. Partway through that day was an amazing construction in the middle of the forest called Aloha, which was a figure eight bridge where the locals were doing the hoolah and handing out pineapple juice. In fact, the local fans are amazing all through the race wherever we went, handing out bacon and whiskey, popping up in the weirdest places in fancy dress, even bagpiping us off the ferry one afternoon.

Day four probably had a highlight, but at 60km with 1700m of climbing and 5hr 26 mins of riding the main thing I remember is pain. Day five climbed pretty much continuously for 40km until we reached Highway 102 and raced downward for 10km on some of the best bench cut you could imagine. Heaven, truly heaven. Day six was back at Mount Seymour. The pre-ride was crucial in delivering my best result of the entire week – don't get too excited, 394th out of 625 isn't anything to threaten Josh Carlson! But it was fun when I wasn't dodging hike-a-bikers, or bikes and riders tangled on the ground. This was the undoubted highlight of my entire week, especially the run down black diamond trails we've all heard of; Corkscrew and Pingu and then Upper and Lower Dale's and Forever After. Timber, roots, rocks, sheer drops and blind entries coming at you constantly. So beautifully built, but requiring utter focus and complete commitment ... and total satisfaction when you nail it. The last day at Squamish was a killer. I'd spent much of the night on the crapper with a dose of the runs, had cold sores bubbling on my top lip, a blister on the palm of my left hand and a sore back that refused to quit. Energy was understandably low. It didn't help that I had my first serious crash of the week with just an hour to fatigue. A root just reached and got me and next thing I was on the ground with a hole in my leg.

In the end, it was a relief rather than a joy to finish, collect my belt buckle and be confirmed as 422nd outright and 51st in class. I was 14 hours behind the winner and 16 hours ahead of last place. Later, as I enjoyed a beer and a bench race with the many great people I met during the week it started to sink in a bit. Now, a month on, it feels bloody good. I've not ridden my bike for the last month, I've drunk a heap of beer and eaten all the wrong food. Cool. But now I can feel those Canadian forests calling me. I dunno if I'll do the BC again but I'll definitely ride those trails. Might get a shuttle up those bloody fire roads next time... Hey, I'm getting old y'know!

