

Friends & Neighbours

Hard work makes bike park their own

By Cassidy Olivier

Thursday, Six o'clock.

After weeks of rain the sun has begun to burn hot. Colours stand out and the familiar smells of the season carry in the subtle breeze.

At the bike park, a reporter waits patiently in the softening light. Notebook in hand, camera ready. A car passes. The crack of a bat from the neighbouring field hints at a baseball game in progress. The wind blows.

Then they begin to come. Quietly, steadily they start to arrive in threes and twos. Occasionally one arrives alone. Regardless, all are soon part of the same group and, suddenly, the park's previous calm is replaced by the rhythms of rubber wheels on dirt.

They talk, in their own tongue, and take turns admiring the grace with which they take flight from sculpted mounds of dirt. Landings are effortless. Like birds.

The reporter continues to wait, content with watching people doing something they understand. Then, without warning, one breaks from the pack and approaches. His name is Braiden Anderson.

"We usually show up around six or six-thirty, ride for a bit and then fix up the jumps," he explains. "The numbers are kind of sporadic - anywhere between five to 15. A couple of nights we had over 20, and it was just crazy."

Anderson is calm, confident and easy. But what is most remarkable is when talking with him, there is a strong feeling he is much older than his 17 years of age. Especially considering what he has done.

It is no great surprise that the bike park has grown in popularity. Or that there is a marked improvement in those who ride there. What is more surprising, is that the kids have taken it upon themselves to maintain the park and teach each other the skills necessary to keep it in top condition.

As one of the oldest and most experienced riders who uses the park on a regular basis, much of the responsibility has fallen on Anderson.

"There is a lot to learn about building jumps," he says. "But a lot of the younger kids are learning how. Everyone is getting an idea how to do it."

At the core of the process is mentoring. Anderson himself says he learned a lot about bike parks and maintenance from older riders. Just watching them, he says, taught him how to build jumps properly and how to keep them in shape. A well maintained park makes it easier for beginners to learn and reduces the number of injuries.

"There is quite a bit more to building a park than just hauling in a couple of loads of dirt," Anderson continues. "It takes a lot of work and refining."

Now it is up to Anderson and some of the other seniors to make sure the lessons are passed down to the younger generations, much like it was passed down to them. As he explains, "it is about teaching younger kids not only how to have fun, but how to be responsible."

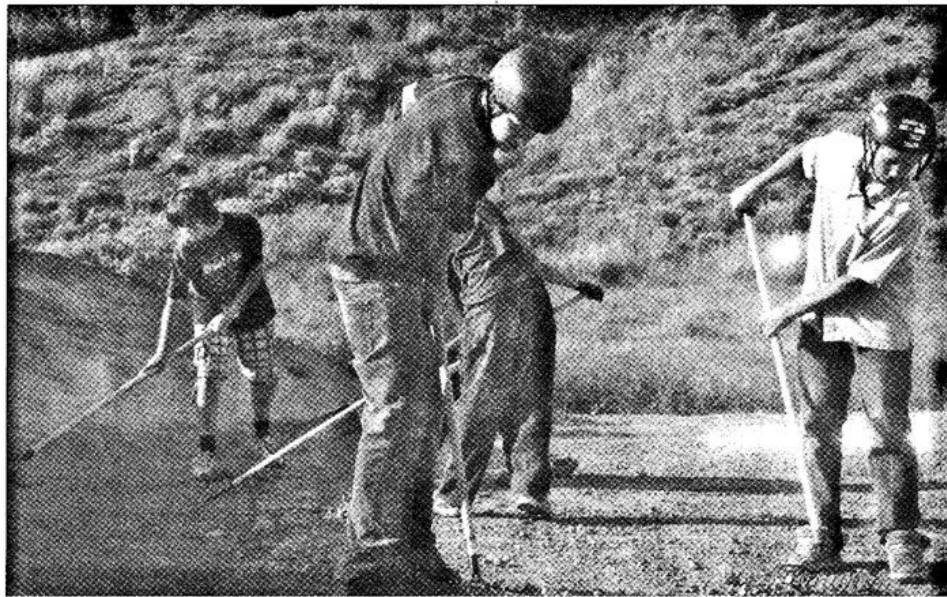
Fourteen year-old Jarret Turchak agrees.

"I think it is pretty cool that everyone comes out to fix it," he says. "A lot of kids come out to help. I'm still trying to learn myself, but I help my friends that haven't really learned how [to fix and maintain it]."

So far, the riders seem to be doing a good job. According to Darren Coates, a teacher at MSS and co-designer of the park, the response from the community has been nothing but positive.

"The kids have been great," he says. "They've pretty much fully taken over. It is kind of neat because I don't think there are too many other facilities in town where the kids sort of have ownership over it. It is a good positive experience for them."

Coates believes it is the direct role many of the kids had in designing the park that has resulted in its current dynamic. They are also aware of how lucky they are to have the park as there are few communities of Merritt's size that are afforded such a luxury. In



(Above) The crew is hard at work ensuring the mountain bike park is kept in great shape so that everyone can enjoy the park for years to come. (Below) Braiden Anderson gets some air as he goes off one of the many well-groomed jumps at the mountain bike park on Voght Street.

Photos by Cassidy Olivier

many ways it is theirs and something to be proud of.

Coates says it is particularly pleasing to watch the younger kids emulate the older kids as they work. Their enthusiasm and participation ensures the park will continue to serve the community down the road.

For Anderson, it is all about the love of the sport and doing anything to expand and improve it.

"Mountain biking has definitely exploded in Merritt," he says. "I've been really impressed."

In the meantime, there is work to be done. The notepad gets tucked away. The camera goes back in the bag. The reporter steps back to watch.

Anderson returns to the group who follows his lead as he replaces his bike with an armful of shovels and rakes. Little is said as they begin to work at smoothing the imperfections and strengthening the structures. Later, they will continue riding and marvel and their work. It will have been their hands that had helped them to fly.

Next week, they will return at the same time to continue what they'd started.

