

ROUND UP

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'Three Minutes of Organized Chaos'

Duryea Downhill offers thrilling bike race straight down the mountain

by Susan Ryder

THE RIDE BEGINS AT THE TOP of a wooden ramp on the side of a mountain. As the wheels of the bicycle roll down onto the loose, rocky, steep slope of Mt. Penn, dirt and stone fly into the air. The rider negoti-

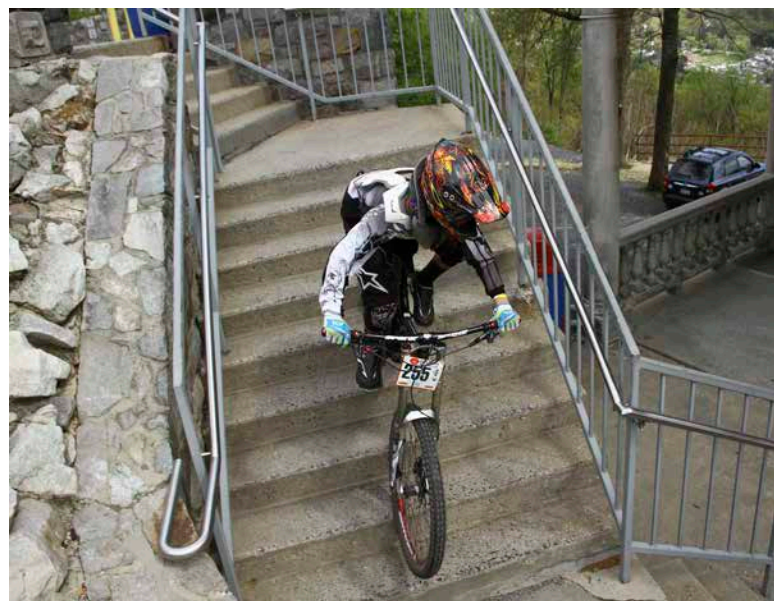
ates turns, trees and roots and launches from rock formations and manmade platforms. The goal is to pick a line of travel from the top to the bottom and arrive there as fast as possible without wrecking your body or your bike.

(left) Local Reading rider Neko Mulally achieves some big airtime off of a jump at the downhill event. (below) Titus Nicholson navigates the stairs at the foot of the pagoda where the race starts.

This is downhill mountain biking at the Duryea Downhill. Held in the city of Reading each spring, the Duryea Downhill is believed to be the only urban downhill for bicyclists in the



Berks County



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(above) Steep slopes dominate the route down the hillside for racers in this uniquely urban setting for a downhill event.

(below) Cyclists and their bikes are shuttled up the mountain in Penske trucks to the start line near the Reading Pagoda.



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distinctive urban setting where Penske moving trucks transport riders and their bikes up Mt. Penn to begin the course. Last year, the race attracted 175 riders from all over North America.

Fred Heinly, founder and organizer of the race, calls it, “Three minutes of organized chaos.”

Competitive Sportsmanship

THE 2015 COURSE was technical and fast with 11 jumps, two road gaps, areas where riders could jump the road, a number of big step-downs and one run, down the steps of the famous Mt. Penn Pagoda.

“Riders love it because it’s unique in the sport,” explains George Ulmer, Eastern States Cup Race director.

Riders agree. When asked what they think of Duryea, many enthusiastically answer, “steep and gnarly” and the “best track of the season.”

Participants at the race also enjoy the camaraderie among competitors. Second-year participant Nicole Murray says that when she moved to a new area, downhill racing helped her to

make new friends.

“Even though we’re competitive, it seems like we’re on the same team,” she adds.

Spectators to the sport echo her thoughts.

“Everyone is so chill, and you see good sportsmanship,” says Brianna Bowling, whose boyfriend races.

The “hot seat” is a fine example of this. After racers speed through the course and cross the finish line, the leader will take his or her place on this throne of sorts, until another rider surpasses the leading time. When unseated by a competitor, the sitting rider typically rises and congratulates the rival with hugs and a fist pump.

Although riders compete with individuals and the clock, mostly they compete with themselves. “It’s like you versus the mountain and what you can do with it,” says Dan Davis from Downhillbilly Racing.

Steve Coleman, cycling director for Gravity East Series, adds that riders push themselves to go faster and conquer new obstacles.

Bound by Adrenalin

THERE IS NO such thing as a stereotypical downhill rider. They range from young and old, men and women, blue collar and white collar. However, what binds these racers is the common thread of adrenalin.

“There’s something about flying down a mountain,” Davis says.

Jason Beckley has been downhill riding since 1991, and he describes it as an escape from real life. Ironically, he says, racing is where he goes to find calm.

That calmness comes from the pinpoint focus it takes to navigate the technically difficult, dynamic course. With the passing of each rider, rocks fall onto the course, and new paths and obstacles are created.

Of course, you can’t ignore the fact that tearing down a moun-



Brothers Niko and Logan Mulally ride down a slope at the downhill race, which is well known for its spectator-friendly environment and a "steep and gnarly" course.

tain on a bicycle poses dangers; injuries happen. When asked about the dangers of the sport, riders typically give a quizzical look, one that suggests, "Yeah, injuries happen." These are just an accepted part of the sport.

Even so, they take precautions to prevent them, Coleman says. Riders must wear helmets, and most also wear chest protectors, kneepads, thick protective pants and neck braces. Also, the courses always have alternate routes around obstacles and offer opportunities for riders to decide how far they want to push their skills.

When crashes occur, other riders are quick to respond. At Duryea last year, a young rider rolled off of a rock drop-off and fell hard on to his chest. Immediately, two veteran riders jumped to his aid, yelling words of encouragement as they made their way down the steep grade to the fallen rider. After a quick evaluation and admiration of his epic crash, the riders had him up and laughing before helping to walk his bike the rest of the way down the hill.

If you prefer to observe the action rather than participate, you have a few options. Spectators can sit at the finish line, where they can watch bikers ferociously pedal to the end; they can walk up the road to view the racers traversing the road gaps; or they can climb the steep hill and plant themselves in the middle of the action, where cow bells and whoops announce that a rider is on the track.

Whether watching or participating, downhill racing provides an added layer of excitement to time spent outdoors.

As Coleman put it, "Looking at a line down a mountain and thinking about how you, as an individual, can travel down and what risks you are willing to take along the way," he says. "There has to be a life lesson there somewhere." 🍷

—Susan Ryder writes from New Cumberland.

WHEN YOU GO

This year, the **Duryea Downhill** will take place April 30 to May 1 on Mt. Penn in Reading, Berks County. duryeardownhill.com

NOT QUITE READY FOR THE RUSH OF DOWNHILL?

Try mountain biking instead

Cyclists who prefer to experience the great outdoors with less gravity than downhill racing may want to try mountain biking.

State parks sprinkled throughout Pennsylvania provide easily accessible possibilities for this type of riding. Look under the "What to do" tab on the Department of Conservation and Recreation's website, dcr.state.pa.us, to find a list of parks along with descriptions of the bike paths by distance and skill level.

Lifelong rider Ray Adams advises beginners to stay within their skill level.

"I would hate for someone to go for the first time and hate it, because they were in over their head," says Adams who is the inventory manager at Holmes Cycling & Fitness in Camp Hill, Cumberland County.

He suggests newcomers try some of the fun, easy and well-mapped trails at Swatara State Park in Lebanon and Schuylkill counties, Mt. Gretna in Lebanon County, Raystown Lake in Huntingdon County and Rocky Ridge Park in York County.

Equipment, too, can make or break a new rider's experience. Likening a bike to a car, he continues, "Your Honda Civic is going to work great every day until the one time you want to drive on Jeep terrain."

He recommends heading to your local bike shop for guidance on whether a bike is properly sized and suitable for the terrain. If you're not ready to commit to the sport yet, many bike shops will offer rentals so you can give mountain biking a try.

You can also experience the mountain biking scene at the **Trans-Sylvania Mountain Bike Epic** held in State College each spring. A cross-country race that lasts five days and boasts 150 participants, this year's event will take place May 29 through June 3. More information can be found at outdoorexperience.org/tse/.