

Cyclists from a Different Tale¹

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Extreme sports have become synonymous with the 21st century. The word “extreme” in relation to sport is a sign of the risk that goes with doing these sports. Most of them have their origins in the United States and only appeared in Western Europe at a later stage. Many originated as an alternative to old, well-known popular disciplines. The global boom started in the 1990s. In 1995 the first Extreme Sports Olympics took place under the name X-games. The key disciplines that are present every year include skateboarding, rollerblading, mountain biking and BMX, climbing, freestyle motocross, as well as snowboarding during the winter edition. Every year new disciplines are added to the list, but the ones mentioned above are the core of these olympics. It is crucial that the word extreme, in relation to the discipline of sport, is spelled with an “x”. This letter has become a kind of a sign. Energy drinks, cosmetics lines, magazine titles, website names, clothing lines, etc. which contain the word extreme in their names are supposed to be directly associated with extreme sports.

¹ I wish to thank Rudy for being my “consultant” when writing this article. Cheers, mate!

Everyone is crazy about something...

Cycling, as it is widely understood, encompasses a few dozen officially recognized variations. They can be divided into two dominant camps. The first is made up of disciplines originating from road racing and are closely related to it; the common factor here is the so-called racing bike. This includes: road bicycle racing, track cycling and cycle-cross. The second camp lists all types of mountain biking. In this group we find disciplines named after extreme sports for a good reason. Two of the most dangerous and spectacular ones are mountain bike downhill and four-cross. Extreme disciplines also contain several variations of BMX, that is a small durable bike whose name originates from combining MX-Moto Cross and Bicycles, and some types of mountain bike trials.

Here I wish to focus predominantly on the mountain bike disciplines, that is the abovementioned downhill and four-cross. These disciplines were first popular at the beginning of the 1990s and were considered amateur racing: some groups of friends would organize timed downhill races in the mountains on marked trails or 2 and later 4-people races down specially prepared courses. Quick technological advancements have allowed for constructing better enhanced bikes specifically for these disciplines within a short period of time. And as a result, more and more people began taking up these sports. Competing also became more professional and spectacular. Racers were soon recognized by the International Cycling Union (UCI) as official variations of mountain biking. These two types of cycling are considered extreme, which means

riders are required to have exceptional bravery and possess extraordinary abilities. In downhill (DH) events, riders must hurl themselves down a marked course as fast as possible. The race usually begins at the top of a mountain while the finish line is a few hundred meters below, at the mountain's foot. On fast, open course sections, for example a ski run, riders often gain enormous speed – up to 100 km/h. Slower sections are just as challenging and require skillful riding on steep sections peppered with natural obstacles. There are no words to describe how dangerous such a race is – the courses are often marked in a way that makes it impossible to go down on foot. Despite a great set of skills, racers must wear full body protection since accidents in this sport are common and some end badly. Downhill competitions take place first and foremost in mountainous areas with chairlifts that help racers get to the top as well as places with marked special downhill courses. The most popular places in Poland for downhill racing include Szczyrk, Myślenice and Wierchomla.

The other abovementioned sport is four-cross (4X) which is a 4-bike race on specially built trails. The race always leads downhill and consists of dirt mounds that send fast riders flying and with steep-sided bends and other elements that make the race more difficult. Competitors begin at the starting gate and the first one to cross the finish line wins the race. This sport is extremely spectacular and sometimes the trail is built in such a way that racers fly up the air as often as possible. Competing on the trail is an extremely contact sport, there are frequent crashes and pushes during the race.

Both sports, as well as the abovementioned BMX, are listed as extreme bike sports. From the types of mountain biking described above derives the so-called freeride, i.e. free variation of mountain biking. This phenomenon has been known under this name only for a couple of years now, it is a type of free riding which the UCI does not officially recognize as a mountain biking sport in contrast to downhill and four-cross. Freeride is a very wide term in the world of extreme biking; yet they somehow appropriated the name and today it is associated with them. For some it means a ride in the mountains and a search for more challenging trails (mostly downhill), for others it is on a street or in an urban setting with bicycle jumps, for instance, from rooftops, stairs and brick walls. Other bikers jump on the mounds, pass over high gaps or ride on woodland ramps they themselves have built. A freerider can be anyone who uses his or her bike in an extreme way and will enjoy it while showing no interest in races or competitions. The finish line is not what matters. The only prize is satisfaction. For the prevailing majority of freeriders, the dream-come-true mythical land whose name makes one's heart beat fast is Canada, especially British Columbia – the birthplace of this sport. It is there that one might come across the highest number of courses and from there originate the brightest stars of freeriding.

Sloopstyle, a brand new mountain biking discipline has been going strong for several years now. In short, this sport was created so that competition could be organized in the abovementioned freeride. During sloopstyle competitions

riders show off their abilities on specially built courses with mounds, ramps and gaps. Every rider has their favorite trick (or stunt) and everyone chooses the ride course themselves, deciding on how best to impress the jury. It is the freedom derived from the abovementioned freeride spiced with competition that led to the creation of this new discipline.

Mountain Biking in Poland

It was relatively late that the mountain biking found its way to Poland, which was to a great extent caused by the political system. At the end of the 1980s, when mountain biking in the West was at its peak, there were only a handful of bikes available, mostly imported by wealthy Poles. They were the object of desire and dreams of young people who often, because of financial difficulties as well as market shortages, were forced to resort to the fine tuning of their old fold up bikes.²

In time mountain bikes become more available. Romet, a Polish manufacturer,³ noticed a new trend and marketed mountain bikes in Poland which in no time led to the rapid development of mountain biking in our country. The 1990s saw the first events in cross-country, a strenuous sport closest to MTB racing. In those times it was typical to give or be given a mountain bike as a present; when there were more mountain bikes around not having one might have led to embarrassment and peer pressure.

² A fold-up bike –the name of very popular bikes in Poland in the 1980s and the 1990s. The possibility to fold it up made the name stuck.

³ Romet – the most popular bike brand in Poland. Although it no longer exists, even today it is associated with the biking industry in Poland.

In 1996 the first International Bike Festival took place in Szklarska Poręba and was the largest event for Polish bike riders. At that time a similar event took place only in Trentino, Italy at Lake Garda. It was then that the first dual slalom (later transformed into four-cross) took place. The Italian festival was an excellent opportunity for the most passionate ones to mingle and hang out and despite the fact that a majority of participants were in favor of “ordinary” mountain biking, extreme bikers were also welcomed.

Biking brethren

At face value the community of extreme cyclists is a hermetic one. In fact, they call themselves by different names, including: freeriders, downhillers, streeters or dirt-jumpers. The names refer to the equipment they use and their preferred style. The average age of extreme bike riders has been decreasing for years now; until recently it was 20-25 year-olds and up. Now, as we observe online and at events, it is 15-30 and above. It is rather the mature lot that take part in races because of long distances one has to cover. In order for a minor to sign up they must be accompanied by an adult. There are younger people at local meetings and age diversity of particular groups is often noticeable. Younger folk often ride with their own lot while older ones keep together – but this is not always the rule. There are situations when both groups meet and hang out together. The older ones do not try to hide it, however, that in the long run the young fellows can be a pain in the neck: “Let’s get out of here! Those brats never shut up with their questions!”⁴

⁴ The citations in the article come from the author's study of the biking community.

Riders most often hang out at so-called spots. It could be a four-cross track, an architecturally adequate part of the city, with special mounds, a skate park or woodland downhill trails. Such a place is usually located in a secluded spot – for instance a track in Morasek in Poznań or Cytadela. Practically speaking, in every big city there are hidden tracks. For some time now riders have been trying to get legal permission for four-cross tracks. There are many problems including, but not limited to, bureaucracy. In 2004 the European Four Cross Championships were organized on a legal circuit built in the district of Wałbrzych-Szczawno-Zdrój. In the same place in May 2007 there were international championships with top riders from around the world, including competitors from outside Europe. A legalized track will always be of better quality and more spectacular. Many riders dream of this kind of track. It cannot be destroyed by the authorities as it takes place sometimes with independent construction: “Our new trail, that took the whole weekend to dig, was bulldozed in an hour by the greens [Urban Greenery Office].” Legalizing a trail might tighten the relations between members of a particular group. In some situations when fighting for official recognition of a trail they must set up an organization, such as a sports association or a club.

A trail indicates commitment from a group in a given city; and is created by all the riders who later want to do the jumps there. The creation process is one that often unites a group of riders.

“When we returned from the championships in Austria our wish was to build this kind of trail. We didn’t stop digging for a week and virtually lived there at the time. Lenon went as far as to pull out his back, but it was worth it as now we get visitors from the other end of the country.” A failure to contribute in building a trail is not very well perceived by the community and an absentee often faces nasty comments. When building a trail or mounds, everyone is expected to pull their weight. Communal work often turns into a social encounter and is an important team-building element. “Tomorrow at 11 we meet by the trail; bring shovels and beer; Bławat is bringing the music. If we get ourselves together we will have finished this part of the trail by tomorrow night.” The best opportunity to join an existing group of riders is to show up when digging is in progress. Committing oneself to building is highly regarded in the group.

A group associates itself with a trail spot. It sends a message about its image and story: “[...] the best race ever in Poznań was in Morasek; it was quite something. We did everything by ourselves with no financing and ended up with a great event! Underground in some awesome style!” A trail is a show case for a group from a given city. Decent trails are frequented by visitors; they are talked about and promoted on internet forums and they are taken care of. A rider living near a good trail is lucky and makes others, who don’t live so close, green with envy. The best trails in the country are very popular and frequently visited: “I’ve been all over and the best trails are in Rybnik, Warsaw, Szczawno and Toruń. You can do some serious racing

there.” Interestingly, trails are also popular among those who don’t ride. Sometimes they are riders’ girlfriends, friends or could also be senior citizens who are eager to observe a trend that was nonexistent when they were young. One could also spot amateur photographers and camera men. Since the discipline is so spectacular, passers-by, kids and youngsters happen to be frequent onlookers as well. Some of them help out in building the trail by digging mounds or transporting some materials. Their connection to the place is often as strong as that of the riders – even though they will never ride there themselves.

Biking etiquette

When arriving at a spot, one has to greet everyone, even strangers. It is gesture which illustrates that everyone is a part of the team; everyone can be asked to share a wrench or a patch for a tire. In a moment, strangers turn into friends and behave as if they have known each other forever. When shaking hands, the rule of removing the glove does not apply, since it is one of the basic elements of a rider’s gear and must fit one’s hand tightly. In fact, taking off a glove is not always so easy. Therefore, the rule has been omitted. At times a rider who attempts to take off his glove is quickly put into place: “Don’t do it!” Riders might greet each other with a high five or gently tapping each other’s fists. The high five is a key gesture for another situation. After completing a challenge, i.e. jumping over a difficult rocky gap or a big mound for the first time, the hero of the hour is high-fived by his friends as a token of respect and approval.

The attitude towards those who no longer ride their bikes depends on the situation and the reason for ending their career. Such decisions influenced by factors like a girl, school obligations or a sudden change of hobbies are laughed at. There is an element of nostalgia in the comments once a good friend leaves the group: “I feel sorry for Wiśnia; hanging out with a chic and books cannot replace the bike”; “Witold is always out there with this camera; he hardly ever rides a bike now.”

Sometimes, giving up the sport for different activity perceived as trivial leads to social exile. This is actually true for most extreme sports. An individual who abandons a given sport for another hobby is treated almost like a traitor. Sometimes, such people avoid bike events and places nearby popular riders’ spots; most often they disappear in order to avoid being constantly questioned: “Why don’t you ride anymore?” Others, on the contrary, are often nostalgic about the times they used to ride and now change into companions. Interestingly, people who end their career as an extreme rider often don’t feel like saying their final goodbye to a bike and change the discipline into something less extreme. This is often cross-country (XC) or “endure” – its more aggressive type. Here is the paradox, since it is cross-country riders who are most often laughed at by other cyclists.

However, everything changes once there is an injury. An individual who has given up riding due to injury is commonly respected and enjoys sympathy. An injury is most often as-

sociated with a daring ride and if a person participates in an event, despite an injury, they become almost a legend. “The whole second ride he was up there with his arm broken; he gritted his teeth in pain, but he made it; what a badass!” Injuries and broken bones are quite common in this sport. In fact, there is no athlete who has never had an injury. Clavicle fractures, broken arms and legs are very common and hardly anyone has a clean record in this respect.

The most despised group among extreme cyclists are the so-called “posers”. They are often people from wealthy families that virtually have nothing to do with extreme biking. The only link is a high-end and expensive bike and other gear, for instance specialized apparel. In the worst case scenario a poser is an individual sitting on his posh bike downtown, drinking beer and picking up girls. Sometimes, an individual who has high-end and expensive equipment but low skills is accepted nonetheless, provided he rides his bike as often as possible and is trying to improve his skills. In that case he doesn’t deserve to be called a poser. Modesty of the rider is the key factor keeping him away from this insulting term.

There is no going up for me

Cross-country cycling is traditional mountain racing. Races vary from a dozen to a few dozen kilometers and marathons; yet, they are deprived of extreme elements. There are no jumps, evolutions or downhill rides that are technically difficult; instead, there are long and strenuous uphill stretches. This is a group that might cause some animos-

ity. Many people believe that this discipline is too closely related to traditional cycling. There are commissaries, officials, anti-doping tests, constant endurance training, proper diet, fewer technical skills necessary- these make cross-country too ordinary for extreme riders. Cross-country riders are distinguished by different bikes, i.e. bigger and lighter than the ones for downhill or four-cross.

Moreover, the seat is pushed all the way up. The priority here is lighter equipment and clothing which makes a difference in uphill rides and on long distances. XC riders wear bright-colored tight Lycra clothing which is sometimes laughed at by extreme cyclists. "This guy is as strong as an ox; he makes 100 km daily but when he is to jump down 30cm he gets off his bike." Their main concern is endurance and stamina training. Cross-country riders are also mockingly nicknamed leg-shavers for even men shave their legs for better effectiveness of muscle massage. The terms like: a fag in Lycra, long-underwear dude, a Lycra guy, etc. are also popular and suggest their progressing emasculation. In some situations a group of extreme riders wish to get to a track and they have to take a longer path. In other situations they come across a hill and practically get off their bikes and go up with the bike on foot. This is often caused by certain bike features as it doesn't have such gears that would allow cyclists ride it all the way up. However, when a rider makes an attempt to ride up by himself he is sure to come across some nasty comments: "Look, guys! A cross-country dude... go get yourself a Lycra outfit!"

The Tough Guys

A desired or even required feature of character in this sport is being fearless, self-confident and confident about one's own abilities. Fear has to be overcome. Yet, this does not mean being a hero whatever it takes. Being scared is normal, but it is important that one overcomes this feeling. Total loss of fear might blur one's proper judgment. Taming fear is common and occurs by talking about it and laughing at oneself and one's friends. Cyclists keep saying that they are aware of their abilities and know how far they can go. Any new challenge, such as a long and risky jump or a very steep downhill ride is properly calculated beforehand. It is common that very young extreme cyclists have no psychological barriers and quickly go for new and perilous challenges. Therefore, accidents are relatively common. Being insecure and taking on big challenges without the necessary skills is perceived as stupidity. "This dude is a moron! He's been on his bike for like two months and now he is going for a big rock gap; I can't watch!" Fear is a popular topic and everyone knows that even the best ones get scared. One of the clothing brands producing clothes, helmets and protective pads is mockingly named "No Fear."

Extreme riders are tough people or so they want us to believe. This shows in the slang they use which is often rough and peppered with colorful language. Another aspect might be ignoring cuts and bruises, the aftermath of numerous falls. It is a common occurrence that cyclists ride with scraped elbows or knees; the wounds are not dressed or even cleaned off. Falls that don't end up with severe injuries

are underestimated and practically ignored. In extreme cases a young man jumps on his bike with his arm in a plaster. Only few, for instance young riders, consider it heroic. Most experienced cyclists believe this behavior to be reckless.

Naming most extreme sports as just “sports” might be perceived as an insult by some. This can be seen in media interviews. Representatives of various extreme sports describe it not as a sport discipline but a lifestyle. They couldn’t care less about being called athletes in the traditional sense. Many top competitors like to be seen before or after racing in situations one doesn’t usually associate with sport. Cedric Gracia, a French downhill competitor likes to have fun the day before the race by consuming large amounts of alcohol. It has become legendary that once he stayed up all night partying before a race only to win it the next day. This isn’t an isolated case.

Stimulants

Marijuana is also popular among bike riders. Smoking joints is normal during events and trips. Smoking is popular mainly among people who ride for fun rather than among the pros. Organizers and event managers can be caught with occasional joints too. Although some riders smoke marijuana, very few smoke cigarettes as they are commonly believed to be unhealthy and detrimental for one’s physical health.

Drug related associations are trendy in all extreme sports. It is connected with the laid-back lifestyle and a lack of

strict rules to the sport. There are snowboards with a marijuana leaf painted on them and baggy outfits with the pattern of the well-known leaf. There are bike tops with the leaf for weed enthusiasts and recently even bicycle frames decorated with the marijuana leaf. Creams for muscle tiredness branded with the leaf are popular too. Hidden motifs of psychoactive substances are occasionally even used in the name of biking equipment. In this case suspension systems of air-sprung frames are called LSD and a range of this company bikes is called XTC. These are obviously abbreviations and only insiders will take notice of them and will be able to decipher them. A manufacturer of branded bicycle spokes once had an item for sale called Psylo. The insiders associated this name with a family of hallucinogenic mushrooms.

The most popular stimulant among extreme bike riders is undoubtedly beer. Teetotalers are a rare sight. Beer is present when we build new trails and is indispensable at the end of a good day, once we feel exhausted from the rides. Beer flows like rivers once a competition is over as well. Obviously extreme bike riders are not the only ones who enjoy this popular drink; however, it can be seen that they don't often part with this beverage. It is interesting that Steve Peat, one of the most famous professional downhill bikers enjoyed his beer so much that he would open a bottle of his favourite brew when still standing on the podium. Just as there are very few cigarette smokers around bike riders, strong alcoholic beverages are also rarely encountered at bike events.

We are around

Spring has come, the days are warmer...most of us, especially big city dwellers, don't realize that practically every day we come across extreme cyclists. For a security guard working in a facility surrounded by architecture that is ideal for riding a bike, a group of riders will be intruders that have to be shooed away. For passers-by, young people doing jumps on mounds are insane kids who have to be given their dose of warning. For an average person, a bunch of riders in bright clothes and helmets on their heads is a funny sight, similarly to big boys on small, even kids' bikes like a BMX. You might be a parent telling your son how his dream of a durable but unfortunately pricey bike is only his wildest fantasy.

What if we looked at these people as passionate individuals who simply wish to go through their youth actively rather than sit in front of the computer, on a bench down the block or in a club? What if we saw people who can organize when things have to be done to achieve a certain goal; people who can fight and gradually overcome weaknesses? Can this alternative, however dangerous sometimes, be attractive for a young person? I personally believe that it can! Everyone chooses their own path in life and we do not necessarily have to be imposed the one we believe is not right for us. Advice is obviously very welcome. Let's not forget, however, that the world here is made up of different colors. When having a close look around, we will start noticing them all.

Translated by Justyna Chada