

a date at the Dump

I MOVED to Victoria from Calgary in 2004 to attend the National Coaching Institute, a move that was meant to last eight months. My passion had been road racing, and though my post-graduate plans weren't set yet, I did plan on returning to Calgary, where I had raced at a national level (Cat 2) for five years. But it didn't take me long to realize that as someone with a serious cycling addiction, Victoria was a great place to live.

As I had not met anybody special yet in Victoria – and, besides, my passion for frequent, long bicycle rides had led to the demise of a number of relationships – I decided to try an ad on an online dating service. So I was thrilled to find a woman who claimed to be an avid mountain biker, among other shared interests. We met for an initial quick coffee that turned into a three-hour date (I think there is some rule where after a certain length of time, meeting for coffee can turn into a date).

Kat did not have a racing background, but had been mountain biking for a long time. Since it is rare to find a cycling enthusiast not already attached, we agreed that we had potential. But talk is cheap, and we had both been around long enough to realize that there are people out there willing to say whatever it takes to impress someone. Despite the thrill of a great first meeting, there was this nagging thought that this might not be the Miss Right I had been looking for.

But seeing her fleet of mountain bikes quickly laid most of those fears to rest. Our first official date occurred on Feb. 1; a Valentine's mountain bike ride. I picked Kat up at her house to drive out to the Dump (the Mount Work/Hartland mountain bike park parking lot is next to the Mount Work garbage dump, hence the name 'the Dump'). She owned three mountain bikes (an RM6, a Sugar 3 and a Brodie hard tail) plus a commuter

Mountain bikers find a rare connection pedaling the grueling trails of the Mount Work/Hartland mountain bike park



Rick and Kat together on a trip to Mount St. Helens, long after their initial ride.

By Rick Thiessen

bike. Owning not just one bike, but a fleet which was almost as big as mine (Lightspeed Classic, King Kikapoo, Independent Fabrications Planet X and a Marinoni fixed gear) was an attraction that a guy like me does not often see. She came out dressed in well-used baggies, a loose jersey, well-worn gloves and a camel-

back hydration pack, which indicated that she knew how to dress for the occasion. I made sure to wear my brightest racing jersey, spandex shorts and no camel-back (we roadies and cross-country racers rely on a bottle cage on the bike).

I had found the network of trails confusing on my only other ride at the

Riding The Trails

Dump, so I was happy for Kat to pick the route. Her ten years of riding the trails put me at a huge disadvantage, as it allowed her to pick trails which could show off her talents. To make it even more interesting, “island winter rules” applied. Due to the extra moisture and lower temperatures, the rocks and roots tend to be extra slippery.

We left the parking lot and started out on the gravel road, which was to my advantage as it did not require technical skill. I was a proper gentleman and waited for her after the first climb. Kat was such a lady when she urged me to lead on Plunge Extension. It is a steep ascent on firm ground with a bunch of roots and rocks to make it interesting. I had no problem gapping Kat on the first 100 metres of smooth climbing, but stopped short on the first little obstacle of roots. I managed to jump off the bike and walk over it by the time she arrived; meanwhile, she easily rode over the roots. The only thing that saved me on the climbs was my road cycling fitness, and the ability to do cyclo-cross dismounts and remounts. Kat again let me lead Little Face, as it is uphill for a bit. I was able to regain some composure, as it is fairly smooth.

On Crazy Horse I let her go ahead, as there are more technical rock sections, and it is more downhill than up. I was able to stay on her wheel for the most part, although I had problems as she easily rode over the rocks, and I would have to put a foot down here and there. The road climb up Centerfold was again in my favour, but as I was trying to impress I made sure to stay beside Kat, and we were able to talk. We stopped for a breather at the bottom of Switchback, but it didn't help me. As it was a climb, Kat urged me to lead. It starts off smoothly easily enough, but the first tight switchback threw me off, even though it is quite smooth. I was off the bike again and walking a few steps to remount – in plain sight for Kat. And from there it just got harder. Most of the following 10 switchbacks incorporate some kind of step-up to make it very challenging on the steep grade. Well, as the roadie boy I may have made it to the top first, but it had nothing to do with mountain bike skills.

Fortunately Kat has this way of acting nonchalant and helpful, while still being competitive. But she was also being tested on the ride. She told me later that she cleared two obstacles that she had never done before.

The next set of obstacles was the Water

Getting there:

The trailhead for the Mount Work/Hartland mountain bike trails is at the end of Hartland Avenue at the Hartland Landfill. From Victoria take Highway 17 north, then West Saanich Road to Hartland Avenue. The trailhead has parking and washrooms, with a nearby technical training area.

- More information: trail maps created by the South Island Mountain Bike Society are available at stores in Victoria and Sidney. Visit www.simbs.com.

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Bars, which I did not even try to ride, as I could not see anyone riding up these natural stairs. Kat, of course, made it look quite easy. I have been around good athletes for years, including women, so it didn't hurt my ego too much to be upped by a girl. I realized that there was no way that I was going to impress her with technical ability, so I tried to be as fast and smooth with my dismounts and mounts as possible.

Twister is a fun trail, which is fairly smooth, and as the name implies, has many corners. I managed to almost keep up with Kat, although I just could not flow through the rough corners with her.

The BC Bike Race

Last year the inaugural BC Bike Race featured seven days of logging road and single track riding from Victoria to Whistler, with the first three days on the island. The 2008 ride/race is set to repeat again June 28 to July 4. It's a mix of high-performance cyclists plus a strong cycling community more interested in fun than competing. Visit www.bcbikerace.com.

From Champs Café it is pretty much all downhill, so Kat took the lead again. It was impossible to keep up. The trail is quite fast, but it also has some funky little obstacles which require knowing the trail. I ended up following blindly, and hoping for the best.

The crux of the ride came when we got to Fun Trail. My initial feeling would not have been “fun”, but more like “Oh my god, I can not believe I am doing this.” If I had been there by myself I would never have attempted the steep rock rolls and rock gardens. The obstacles were five notches above what I had ridden prior, but I made it, which made me feel really good – later when I realized what I had ridden. At the time I was just hanging on for dear life.

From there it was a relatively easy ride back via Bottom Feeder, Cross-Over, Madonna, Heads Up, Two Trees and Shock Treatment. We stopped quite a bit during the ride, so we were able to keep it social and date-like. I dropped Kat off and after agreeing that we should definitely do it again, but left without a goodbye kiss. It was fairly obvious early on that we both obviously loved riding bicycles, and it would be a shame to not pursue this to see if it could get serious.

(That took all of a week until Kat's birthday, and the rest is history).

It is now after the third anniversary of that memorable day, and since then I have ridden Water Bars with ease, and most of Switchback, while Kat surprised me last summer with the purchase of a road bike. She even borrows my spandex for those rides.

One thing that has made my cycling experience exceptional here is the other friendly individuals who I have met on the trail and road. Locals are often wary when outsiders intrude on their home turf. I have found most of the island riders go out of their way to show off their favourite trails and riding routes. It helped that Kat had ridden with many people over the years, but I have seen the same friendliness offered to other newbies.

To me, cycling is a lifestyle choice and it is exciting to meet more kindred spirits. It is not about the bike you ride, gear you wear, or how fast you go. It is about the kinship that I have found in other cyclists. ■

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