



SCOTLAND'S MOUNTAINS can do funny things to people, particularly when on a bike. "It's that big backcountry riding that I find so special – just being a tiny little ant in these huge landscapes puts everything in its place," reflects Andy McKenna who runs mountain biking tour operator GO-WHERE Scotland.

Like many of Scotland's small band of guiding companies, the majority of McKenna's customers come from overseas. All are blown away by what they discover, he says. "They can be enthralled by a section of trail and then turn a bend and boom, they've got Blaven, Ben Damph, Slioch ... all these phenomenal mountains towering above them. They are not looking at a brochure, they are right there, riding amongst them."

McKenna's own mountain biking epiphany took place in rather more urban surroundings. "Thinking about it makes me sound and feel the age that I am," he says. A somewhat

accident-prone BMXer in his youth – "I was always the one in hospital getting patched up" – he first came across couriers using mountain bikes while in his teens working in Toronto in the mid-80s.

It was the possibility of exploring that particularly fired his imagination. "Suddenly, with gears and brakes that actually worked, I could get up mountains and was even reasonably competent. Since those early days, I've made a lot of friends [through riding] and visited a lot of incredible places around the world."

But even when returning from trips to the world's most celebrated mountain biking destinations, he always felt that Scotland's own trails stacked up well by comparison. "I've been riding abroad for more than 20 years, but I kept coming back to Scotland and realising how amazing it was here, too," he says.

And plenty of others agree. By any measure, mountain bik-



THE WHEEL DEAL

WITH ITS ACCLAIMED TRAIL CENTRES AND VAST NETWORK OF NATURAL TRAILS, SCOTLAND HAS BECOME A MAJOR PLAYER ON THE WORLD MOUNTAIN BIKING STAGE. **RICHARD ROWE** ASKS WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SPORT THAT HAS SEEN EXTRAORDINARY GROWTH OVER THE PAST DECADE

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDY MCCANDLISH; ZSTANES; IAN LINTON; STEVEN MCKENNA; FORESTRY COMMISSION SCOTLAND; PAUL MASSON/CYCLE THERAPY

ing is a major Scottish success story – with the buzz and momentum around it prompting the International Mountain Biking Association to proclaim Scotland a ‘global superstar’ for the sport. Areas such as Dumfries & Galloway, the Tweed Valley, Fort William and parts of the Northwest Highlands are either established hotspots, or on many a rider’s wish-list of places to ride. Overall, mountain biking tourism in Scotland is thought to contribute around £49 million per annum, much of it to rural economies.

So, what happened? The free-spirited pioneers of the sport have long shown passion and commitment for mountain biking, but that vitality is now coupled with a professionalism and support infrastructure that simply wasn’t there before – from top-level coaching to skills courses, guiding outfits, dedicated festivals and a host of events that cater for riders of all ages and abilities.

Now one of the prime venues on the circuit, Fort William’s

successful hosting of the UCI Mountain Bike World Cup since 2002 is a perfect demonstration of the sport’s appeal. For one weekend each June, the car park at Nevis Range is converted into a vibrant event village with 9,000 or so visitors who come to see the world’s elite downhill and 4X riders in action.

“At first, there was scepticism about whether we could create a world-beating event here, but it feels established now,” says Mike Jardine from event organiser Rare Management. “It is still regarded as one of the best events on the circuit and an important part of the wider events calendar in Scotland.”

Although visitors come to watch two disciplines, it is the downhill competition that is considered the blue riband event, often with a strong British contingent of riders to **D**

High drama: riders enjoying natural trails and big landscapes on the Isle of Skye



D cheer on. “The course is one of the longest and toughest on the circuit, but riders love it,” says Jardine. “The most important thing for them is the enthusiasm of the crowd – when they drop down into the finish arena, it’s a great feeling.”

The success of the World Cup gave others faith in the demand for mountain biking. Formed following the 2004 World Cup, Fort William-based outdoor events organiser No Fuss Events now runs a range of adventure races, with mountain biking at their core. “I would never have predicted that we would have three full-time staff running an events company here in Fort William,” says co-founder Frazer Coupland.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the rider demographic has changed. No longer the sole domain of adrenaline-seeking young males, mountain biking now sees far greater participation from all age groups, women and families; it’s telling that Coupland at No Fuss hints at the development of many more family-focused events in the future. Given Team GB’s continued excellence in other cycling disciplines, the fact that mountain biking has attained Olympic status will likely inspire even more people to take it up. Future participation is only set to head in one direction.

BIRTH OF THE TRAIL CENTRE

To truly understand how mountain biking in Scotland got to where it is today, we need to rewind just over a decade to the dark days when foot and mouth closed large swathes of the British countryside. In the south of Scotland, mountain biking, and specifically the development of the 7stanes trail centres, was seen as a way to encourage people into the outdoors, with Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) at the forefront of development.

In the very beginning, there was not really a comprehensive plan, admits Alan Stevenson, FCS’s Head of Communities, Recreation and Tourism. “There was just enthusiasm from the mountain bikers and a response from our local staff to build some trails and provide very basic facilities. Everyone was swept along on an exciting wave, with the help of some investment from a range of public sector sources.”

Since those early days, more than £13 million of public

“THE FACT THAT MOUNTAIN BIKING HAS ATTAINED OLYMPIC STATUS WILL LIKELY INSPIRE EVEN MORE PEOPLE TO TAKE IT UP”

money has been invested in mountain biking facilities, with over half that going into the trails themselves. But it wasn’t just the money; there was also the passion of the biking community itself with a variety of people – including former elite riders – setting up cafés, bike hire and other support services that did as much to build an energy around the sport as the trails themselves. They helped forge camaraderie between mud-spattered folk of different ages and backgrounds whose common ground was riding their bikes. As a result, Scotland’s purpose-built trail centres soared to heights that few could have envisaged; by 2009, they were attracting more than half-a-million visits a year.

In particular, it was the launch, on the back of the foot and mouth economic recovery plan, of the 7stanes network of trails that took participation to another level. Between them, the trail centres at Glentworth, Kirroughtree, Dalbeattie, Mable and Ae in

Play time (above, from left): free-wheeling at Ae trail centre; the TweedLove festival’s Glentworth Seven event includes trails that are off-limits the rest of the year; the finish arena at the Mountain Bike World Cup, Fort William



Dumfries & Galloway, plus Glentress, Innerleithen and Newcastleton in the Borders offered big climbs, exhilarating descents, juicy stretches of single-track and challenging technical features – and all free-to-use. Many riders had never seen the like before.

The ski centre-style colour coding of trails from easy to expert provided options for all abilities, while coherent branding and their sheer accessibility for trail-hungry riders from the Central Belt and the north of England helped attract a huge following. According to latest figures from FCS, the 7stanes centres see almost 400,000 visitors a year – with almost three-quarters concentrated at Glentress – and contribute £9 million to the local economy.

In some cases, it has taken time for local businesses to really 'get' mountain biking and reach out to visiting riders. But they should do: whether being guided or riding under their own steam, mountain bikers typically have money to spend. "Our customer base is pretty much 100% professional," comments Euan Wilson who runs Inverness-based international mountain bike holiday company H&I Adventures. "These guys have got all the gear, all the toys – plenty of disposable income. They have money and will spend it while on holiday."

Some areas have switched on to this more than others. In the Borders, now also home to the excellent TweedLove festival, the Tweed Valley Tourist Consortium has developed a mountain bike hospitality scheme that sees participating accommodation providers offer secure bike stores, drying rooms for muddy gear, plus work stands and hoses for bike maintenance and cleaning; all simple touches that show an understanding of what riders want – and that ensure repeat visits.

With Glentress on its doorstep, Peebles has been the greatest beneficiary of the demand for mountain biking; even the demographic of the town has changed as riders and their families move from the Central Belt to be closer to an area where

they spent many of their weekends anyway.

There is also a buzz at nearby Innerleithen, best known as a downhill venue, where the community-led AIM-Up group recently received outline planning permission for a bike chairlift that will be the focal point of a major new development at a popular location that currently doesn't even have a toilet. The project, which would see the community lease land through the National Forest Land Scheme, includes the development of additional trails, a visitor centre and – more curiously – a toboggan run to diversify what's on offer. It's just one more example of how the Tweed Valley is looking to become a destination where riders – and their families – stay longer and try other activities.

Interestingly, as the recession continues to bite, recent studies suggest that while the overall growth in mountain biking has declined, it has not suffered to the same extent as other tourism sectors. "We still see significant demand and also potential for further development," says Alan Stevenson at FCS. "The economic value of mountain bike visitors will probably grow by £15-18 million over the next five years and rider numbers by 15%."

TIME FOR A RETHINK

In recent years, Forestry Commission priorities have changed dramatically; given the expense of building major new trails and then maintaining them – the 7stanes trails alone cost £200,000 a year to maintain – it has pulled back, revisiting old trails and implementing new design ideas at existing sites rather than creating new trails. The focus now is on ensuring the economic sustainability of current trails and bringing trailhead facilities up to the standard expected of a country that wants to be seen as a world-class destination for mountain biking.

"[Looking back], the big challenge arrived with expectations of investment in trail development carrying on apace with **D**



D inadequate and in some instances no funding to sustain facilities and services into the future,” explains Stevenson. The economic downturn only tightened the screw further. “The trail centre model of public investment with little or no income streams was no longer tenable – so we had to pause and rethink. Continuing to build more and more trails without regard to how they would be maintained and managed was not a sensible way ahead.”

Funding is certainly a problem – or soon could be – for the 7stanes Community Interest Company (CIC) which is now charged with marketing the trails. According to its head, Mari Findlay, the CIC has explored a variety of ways to generate private funds, from sponsorship by bike manufacturers to a visitor payback scheme involving businesses that benefit from the influx of riders to each area, but with so far limited success. “The reality is that of the 150 or so businesses that benefit directly from mountain biking in southern Scotland, we’ve only managed to work with around 40 of them,” she explains.

Having had the 7stanes for free for so long, it could be that businesses feel they don’t need to pay into the sport to grow it further – a potentially dangerous assumption given that other parts of the UK, particularly Wales, are pushing hard on the development of their own mountain biking infrastructure. As it is, the CIC has funding for this year and continues to work towards sustainability without public sector funding from 2014 onwards.

In a way, FCS has both stepped back and stepped forward. On the one hand, it wants other landowners to pick up the mantle of developing trails, as has happened in a handful of cases with an additional downhill trail having opened in recent years at Nevis Range; AIM-Up’s community plans at Innerleithen; and a major new trail build by The Crown Estate at Glenlivet (see sidebar, *Creating a jewel in the crown*). But on the other hand, it remains very much at the forefront of developments through high-profile investment in trailhead facilities at sites such as Glentress, Ae and ongoing work at Kirroughtree.

In particular, the spending of the thick end of £9 million on a new visitor centre at Glentress – but no new trails, a surprise to some – is a reflection not just of different priorities but also the importance of that particular site. Visitor numbers have already swelled further since its opening 18 months ago, says Stevenson. “The new facilities at Glentress Peel, and at Ae, have

“THE TRAIL CENTRE MODEL OF PUBLIC INVESTMENT WITH LITTLE OR NO INCOME STREAMS WAS NO LONGER TENABLE”

Peel potential (above, from left): part of the new visitor facilities at Glentress; the sport now sees increased participation from all ages

provided a much improved experience with new opportunities for further development. They are also yielding higher income streams which help to pay for the recreation facilities which have been provided and maintained by the public purse.”

Many old-school riders could probably live without such shiny new facilities, and were quite happy with the raw but lively offerings of old. But in truth they are not the only ones being targeted; such investment is designed to attract a far wider audience – youngsters, more female riders and families – with mountain biking just one part of a wider adventure tourism offering. Glentress Peel is as much for those who come for the recently-opened Go Ape high-ropes course, walkers in the forest and visitors to the nearby osprey watch as mountain bikers themselves.

BACK TO THE WILDS

Such has been their impact that for many riders in Scotland, trail centre riding *is* mountain biking. Despite his own love of riding natural trails, that’s absolutely fine by Andy McKenna at GO-WHERE. “I can’t knock it if people don’t go further than Glentress,” he says. “What’s great is that they are riding bikes and doing it. A lot of people say that it’s not ‘real’ mountain biking – that trail centres are the equivalent of climbing walls – but I don’t subscribe to that at all.”

What trail centres have achieved is to introduce many more people to the sport – and at a scale that continues to amaze. “When the trail centre thing blew up, I couldn’t believe it,” says McKenna. “I never thought it would happen in this country. My only regret is that I’m nearly 43 and I’m now looking at seven-year-olds riding trail centres with more talent, and less fear, than me. I just keep thinking what a bright future mountain biking has in Scotland.”

Interestingly, one appears to be feeding the other, with more riders who have perhaps had their fill of ‘packaged’ trail centres now making the most of Scotland’s access laws and heading out to explore the almost limitless supply of natural trails. For such riders, it is a return to the roots of the sport, with an emphasis on adventure, exploration and journeying.

Of course, riding out on the hill is a very different proposition **D**

From riding at a trail centre – and comes with different responsibilities. Wild trails do not have the predictability of man-made ones, while help is rarely just a few minutes away should the worst happen. And they also have other users – from walkers to horse-riders – who do not take kindly to close encounters with out-of-control mountain bikers. “It’s quite a worry for me when clients say that their only experience is at trail centres,” admits McKenna. “We [guides] have a custodial role to play looking after the trails and how people ride their bikes in these environments.”

Engendering this sense of stewardship amongst riders is just one of the tasks being tackled by Graeme McLean, project manager for Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland (DMBinS). A consortium of parties involved in the sport, DMBinS is now three years in to implementing a national strategic framework for the sustainable development of the sport. “It’s about getting people on bikes, getting them riding better to achieve success on the world stage and bringing people to Scotland with all the economic benefits that brings,” he explains.

Good progress is being made, says McLean, with better coordination from national down to regional and local levels. One focus has been on creating development ‘clusters’ in different parts of the country that bring together councils, schools, community groups and those already working in mountain biking to promote participation, develop facilities and events, and attract more visitors to each area through the sport.

McLean accepts that some new trails will be needed if Scotland is to remain internationally competitive, but he suggests a move away from the ‘über’ trail centres to more accessible, smaller-scale trails closer to where people live. “That’s what will really get more people riding,” he believes. “People will holiday in places like Golspie, the Tweed Valley and elsewhere, but will ride locally on small, short loops day to day.”

With luck, the joined-up thinking will extend to making it easier to travel on public transport with a bike – something that still seems somewhat torturous, particularly if travelling as a group. If Scotland is to become a true world-class mountain biking destination, there is much to be learned from European countries where bike racks are fitted on buses and trains can take more than two bikes at a time.

But Andy McKenna at GO-WHERE strikes a word of caution. “Yes, there are lessons to be learned from other countries, but part of what is unique to riding here is the wildness, the rawness. I think there’s a bit of tension there; if improved infrastructure makes Scotland a mountain biking Mecca in a very organised way, does it lose some of the appeal that it has for many?”

For McKenna, however, the appeal of riding in a country that was made for mountain biking will never go stale. “Do you know, I still get as much satisfaction from guiding clients as I do from dragging a bike trailer with bivvy gear and spending a few days just exploring and knitting together new routes.” ■

Hard graft: working on a section of new trail on Glenlivet Estate



CREATING A JEWEL IN THE CROWN

It says much about the appeal of mountain biking that The Crown Estate is in the midst of a major trail build at Glenlivet, near Tomintoul. Costing a cool £500,000 – with half from The Crown Estate and the rest from other sources, primarily European Regional Development funding – the project sees the creation of brand new blue- and red-grade trails in the forest by Glenconglass.

“We have witnessed the success of trails elsewhere, and so wanted to recreate that here to help stimulate new economic activity for this remote community,” says Andrew Wells, Head of Countryside Management for The Crown Estate. “We have an existing range of trails mostly on forest tracks, but this will feature purpose-built single-track, adding to the attraction of Glenlivet as a biking destination.”

The design and construction of the trails has been entrusted to Paul Masson, a hugely experienced trail builder whose company Cycletherapy has had a hand in most of the major builds in the Highlands over the past decade. “I wanted the trails at Glenlivet to be in keeping with the surroundings,” he explains. “It’s an

unspoilt area, so a traditional design was needed to reflect that. I also wanted it to be inclusive and not too daunting.”

Unusually, the build started in August rather than in spring, giving only a few months’ grace before poor weather and lack of daylight became an issue. “It’s been a particularly hard trail build,” admits Masson.

Despite the challenges, he’s clearly enjoying it and is proud of what’s being created. “For a start, there’s great terrain. We are working with three hills, with no big land forms or crags that dictate the build. Instead, there are forests of mature Scots pine and spruce, so we can integrate the trails rather than force them upon the landscape. It’s a flowing river, not a motorway blasted through the trees.”

It’s an ambitious project, with more than 20km of new trail, 90% of which is single-track. At the time of writing, initial construction was almost complete with just a few of the link trails still to be built. A natural ‘as dug’ trail, with no imported material, it will need a longer time to settle and ‘weather’ than more heavily-engineered trails, but the intention is to open for riders sometime during the summer.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland
www.dmbins.com

No Fuss Events
www.nofussevents.co.uk

7stanes, Southern Scotland
www.7stanesmountainbiking.com

UCI Mountain Bike World Cup, Fort William, 8–9 June
www.fortwilliamworldcup.co.uk

Glenlivet trails
www.glenlivetestate.co.uk;
www.cycletherapy.co.uk

TweedLove, 24 May–2 June
www.tweedlove.com

Go with a guide

GO-WHERE Scotland
www.go-where.co.uk

H&I Adventures
www.mountainbikeworldwide.com

Trail Brakes
www.trailbrakes.co.uk

Macs Adventure
www.macsadventure.com

Wilderness Scotland
www.wildernessscotland.com