

Readings

NEWS TO PERUSE



PHOTO: KURT REESE

Above: Competitor Brian Mitchell tackles the hill climb race on Mt. Crested Butte.

OFF-ROAD HANDCYCLING CHAMPIONSHIPS

by Erin English

Henry Lawless, a bundle of two-year-old energy sporting a mess of blond curls, a pint-sized straw cowboy hat and an impish grin, toddled impatiently around the Off-Road Handcycling Championships hill climb finish line. He was waiting for mom, paralympic athlete Monica Bascio, to come into sight. To stave off boredom, Lawless alternated between commandeering one of the race radios—babbling into it nothing in particular—and excitedly declaring to bystanders, “Mommy’s racin’, Mommy’s racin’!”

Bascio eventually rounded the last corner, tanned biceps pumping, face stony with determination. A delighted Lawless ran alongside his mother for the final 50 feet of what was described as a grueling and unforgiving three-mile slog up Mt.

Crested Butte, tumbling into her lap soon after she crossed the finish line. Bascio was the sole female finisher in the hill climb and placed fourth, with a time of 1 hour, 9 minutes, ahead of five other men. It was an impressive performance, not just in the eyes of her adoring Henry, but to anyone who knows a thing or two about off-road handcycling. It is a niche sport designed for individuals with low-level spinal cord injuries and requires a tremendous amount of upper body strength and mental stamina.

“I like racing against the men,” Bascio said. “And I like to get up another notch, if I can.”

The Championships took place over Labor Day Weekend (September 4 - 7), and featured eleven participants competing in the hill climb and cross country races on arm-powered One-Off Titanium handcycles, as well as two men competing in a downhill race. A trials exhibition in downtown Crested Butte complete with a log jam, rock pile/tire crawl, and teeter-totter rounded out the weekend of events, which was hosted for a



PHOTO: KURT RESE



PHOTO: TOM STILLO

Above left: Competitor Matt Updike. Above right: Daewon Mickelson navigates through rocky terrain on the Lower Avery trail on Mt. Crested Butte.

third year by U.S. Handcycling, the Adaptive Sports Center, and Crested Butte Mountain Resort.

Though it is an event small in scale, the pool of competitors in the Championships is big on talent. Case in point: paralympic skier Chris Waddell, who on September 30 became the first paraplegic to summit Mt. Kilimanjaro on a handcycle. Waddell's participation in the Championships served as part of his training regimen for climbing the world's highest peak. He placed third in the cross country race, and secured first place in the hill climb competition with a record time of 49 minutes and 43 seconds. In both competitions, he rode his own one-of-a-kind four-wheel off-road handcycle, which featured an articulating frame to help the rear wheels clear trail obstacles.

Drew Wills and Jake O'Connor, strong competitors in their own right, placed second and third respectively in the hill climb, and first and second in the 4.2-mile cross country event. Their battle for the finish line in the cross country race was tension-filled until the bitter end.

"One hundred feet from the finish line I was ready to pass Drew and my chain fell off and jammed. I had bumped him a few times coming down the mountain and I was rubbing his rear tire. But in the end, the best man still won. Drew is at the top of his game right now and is arguably the most fit off-road handcyclist in the world," said O'Connor.

While the strongest riders jockeyed to place in the top three spots, other competitors, such as 27-year-old Daniel Hersh from Milliken, Colorado, were quietly and methodically working to achieve personal goals at the Championships. Hersh rode across the hill climb finish line last, more than two hours after the lead rider, cheered on by a loyal cluster of supporters.

"It was tough and never-ending. I figured I wouldn't be up

with the top guys, but I wanted to prove it to myself that I could finish. My arms felt like Jell-O after," Hersh said.

Training for the Championships is intense, and participants collectively logged hundreds of miles on their handcycles throughout the summer in preparation for the race. In a sense, they are also preparing for a meeting of the minds that occurs at this venue each year. It is this group which will ultimately advance the sport of off-road handcycling, taking it beyond the few hundred people who currently participate.

"Everyone is pushing the development of the handcycle; new ways to ride it, new ways to improve it," said Drew Wills. "Most of us in varying degrees lose sensation in our chests somewhere, so we are fine-tuning where to place your upper body, how to keep it from turning over and not high-siding it, and learning different techniques for navigating large rocks, stumps and creeks. The hope is eventually we'll have something that can open up all kinds of new territory to others who aren't in tip-top shape or have less ability."

For Bascio, it is the refinement of technical skills that will ultimately allow her to move ahead in the sport. While strong on the hill climb, she struggled with her handcycle throughout the cross country race, sliding in the seat and fighting to maintain a comfortable body position as she navigated over gnarly tree roots and other trail obstacles. Little Henry served as "Mommy's trainer" for months leading up to the race, but alas—there's only so much true coaching a two year-old can do. On tap for next year's race: more technical training.

"I'm always trying for one better," Bascio says. "It's what keeps me an athlete. The social aspect is a great deal of [why I come out], but in the end, I still want to win."