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Assault on Liberty Mountain: Racing series brings competition to campus

December 01, 2008 ¦ Ron Brown

Behind the campus of Liberty University lies one of its best-kept secrets — the Liberty Mountain trail system. Approximately 65 miles of wooded paths intersect one another, creating the ideal spot for bikers, hikers, walkers and runners. Serving as a focal point for the university's Ultimate LU campaign, Liberty's mountain property is also great for activities such as horseback riding and the highly anticipated artificial ski slope.

After months of preparation and maintenance, the trail system hosted its first-ever mountain bike race on Sept. 20 — Assault on Liberty Mountain. The event consisted of 125 bikers divided into three categories with skill levels ranging from novice to expert. Starting and ending at Camp Hydaway, riders from Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina blazed the 19.1-mile course, pedaling through mountainous climbs, rugged terrain and steep descents.

Reigning short track and marathon mountain bike national champion Jeremiah Bishop crossed the finish line first in the expert category with a time of 1:41:46.1. Bishop, a 2003 Pan-American Games gold medalist, rides for Trek/Volkswagen and is a member of the USA national team. Following his win, the accomplished mountain biker talked about his first experience on Liberty Mountain.

"I am thoroughly impressed with the trails here. They were awesome," Bishop said. "I will be driving back down here to give them a ride again when there is nobody here in the winter because it was that much fun."

Assault on Liberty Mountain is part of the Virginia DeRailer Series, a six-race circuit that gives bikers the opportunity to compete in a friendly, family-oriented environment. Taking note of Liberty Mountain's natural features, the series expanded its racing schedule to include this unique event.

Encompassed in a single lap, Assault on Liberty Mountain functions as the circuit's lone point-to-point race. In its inaugural year, the contest pulled in more riders than any other series competition.

"We wanted to have a real mountain bike course atmosphere," race director Kenny Palmer said. "The 5,000 acres that comprise Liberty Mountain make it a very different course than all the others."

From the starting line, expert bikers travel down some lengthy single and double track before encountering a demanding uphill battle known as Peak to Peak. Not intended for the faint of heart, this rocky climb is loaded with technical ascents.

"A lot of runners like it because it is a little more challenging and it has some good inclines in it," said Lars Larson, Liberty Mountain's trail manager.

As Peak to Peak flattens out, riders make their way to LU's Monogram Road via trail 1971, a scenic, downhill slope. Racers then turn right onto Alternate Flight Pattern, a steep descent that travels from the mountain's bald spot to the ravine floor. The track then climbs back up to a vehicle road and runs into a zigzagged path called Z Trail.

After meandering through a series of switchbacks, bikers come upon one of the most popular trails of the system — the Upper Dam Trail. Both Upper Dam and its sister crossing, Lower Dam, are a rider and runner's best friends — featuring a quality combination of inclines and smooth pathways.

Leaving the more relaxed ride of Upper Dam, Downhill Run takes competitors on an intense drop leading back to Monogram Road. Riders travel up the fire road and eventually find themselves on Pa-Paw's Trail. This hilly path leads to two of the trail system's most challenging tracks — Walk in the Park and Great Escape.

Although its name sounds peaceful, the natural characteristics and manmade obstacles of Walk in the Park do not match its moniker. Complete with log bridges, steep climbs and exhilarating descents, this trail exposes the rider to a variety of physical elements.

The course's final leg, Great Escape, features two banked turns, perfect for ripping downhill without losing speed.

"It's kind of like a NASCAR track," Larson said. "People love it."

Shortly after exiting the single track, riders make the trek back to Camp Hydaway and cross the finish line.

Novice racers can also experience a scaled-down version of the course. The 8-mile route does not include nearly as many inclines and descents, but still presents a stimulating test for up-and-coming riders.

The mountain bike course is only a portion of the 65-mile system, which is made up of nearly 30 trails total. As trail manager, Larson spends much of his time maintaining these paths. Although he has added some manmade structures along the way, Larson notes that the best features of the mountain are those created by God.

“You get to enjoy what was put there for us,” he said. “There are a lot of manmade trails, but a lot of it is nature at its best. It’s just a great environment.”

Check out Liberty’s recreational opportunities at www.Ultimatelu.com.