

EMERGENCY SERVICES MOUNTAIN BIKE CHAMPIONSHIP 2009

SATURDAY 3RD OCTOBER - HAMSTERLEY FOREST, BEDBURN, CO. DURHAM

HOSTED BY CLEVELAND FIRE BRIGADE

On Thursday 24th September 2009 I made my final visit to Flatts Lane Woodland Country Park office, Flatts Lane, Normanby, near Middlesbrough to "rubber" stamp the risk assesment/health and safety details for the Emergency Services Mountain Bike Championship 2009 which was taking place 8 days later - Saturday 3rd October. The evening before the meeting the Countryside Warden e-mailed the course route and details to the Redcar & Cleveland Public Rights of Way officer for his perusal and more as a courtesy gesture. Both myself and the Countryside Warden had spent the previous 6 months "fine" tuning the course route, gaining permission off private land owners and ensuring the paperwork was in place. Amazingly, on that fateful Thursday morning I was given the "earth" shattering news that the Redcar & Cleveland Public Rights of Way officer had perused the chosen course and had "uncovered" a Law dating back to 1994 which prohibited the use of public rights of way for "racing". After a heated debate I was left with no alternative and to be fair the Countryside Warden was as devastated and frustrated with the ludicrous prescriptive Law as myself BUT there was no leeway and Flatts Lane Woodland Country Park was "out of bounds".

Needless to say with 8 days to go before the "big" day I was in abject despair and "blind" panic. Did I cancel the event at the 11th hour or frantically scour the Cleveland Hills and available forests/woods for an alternative venue. That Thursday evening, both, myself and Dave Howard Cleveland Fire Brigade, rode aimlessly around Silton Woods desperate to find a course which catered for ALL levels of ability. Sadly it was a wasted journey as the Forestry Commission had effectively destroyed all the routes within the woods due to extensive logging operations.

The next morning was spent pleading with the "powers to be" within the North-East Forestry Commission to give us belated permission to explore Hamsterley Forest, Bedburn, near Bishop Auckland - a venue which we had used over the years for Fire Service MTB races to great success. More importantly was the fact that the new location was NOT a million miles from the original venue and in real terms was easier to access. On Saturday afternoon both myself and John Collingwood met in Hamsterley Forest to recce a possible race route. After several hours we beleived we had discovered some new single track sections which linked to our original sections which gave what we considered to be a "true" Championship course with a mixture of forest

track, tough climbs, technical single track descents and which most importantly was in a remote section of the forest and which would be rideable by ALL levels of competitor. That same afternoon we visited the Forestry Commission Ranger who after scrutineering our maps gave it his tacit approval. He confirmed that the final decision would have to be made by his North-East Manager - Alex MacLennan. That same evening I sent out my start sheet and my revised venue e-mail. Needless to say my phone and e-mail in-box was "red" hot that evening.

On the Monday morning I was given the "wonderful" news that my race had received the "green" light and the "powers to be" were happy with our route and paperwork which I had frantically completed with the help of Simon Davison (who had run the last Fire Service in Hamsterley Forest in 2007 and still had the "generic" risk assessment/health & safety paperwork) on the Sunday and e-mailed it to the Forestry Commission HQ.

On Tuesday 29th September I re-visited Hamsterley Forest with Alan Nixon (Durham & Darlington Fire & Rescue), Dave Howard (Cleveland Fire), Charly Cook and Rob Loughrey (Cleveland Fire) to carry out a "final" recce of the race course. I specifically chose 2 "Elite" category riders and 2 "complete" novice riders to allow me to judge whether the course was too tough and also enlisted the support of Dave to negotiate the course at "full" race speed to allow me to select the number of laps. He did a storming lap in just under 18 minutes which after consultation with Alan made us reach the decision to select 5 laps (15.5 miles) for the Sports(18-29 yrs) & Masters(30-39 yrs) categories and 3 x 3.1 mile laps for the Vets(40-49 yrs), super Vets(50+yrs) and Ladies.

On Friday 2nd October I spent ALL day frantically trying to contact John Collingwood to accompany me up to Hamsterley Forest to set out most of the race course in advance to save any unnecessary stress and anxiety the following morning, race day? Unbeknown to me John was in the forest setting it out himself before he started a 16 hour nightshift at Marine Fire Station, Middlesbrough. I finally contacted him at 1645 hours on his return. Needless to say I was "mightily" impressed with his Herculean achievement and one which I attempted to acknowledge at the post race awards ceremony?

Saturday morning arrived and I left home at 0745 hours to set out the road markers and reach the Forest Visitors centre in good time to prepare the event HQ. I laid out all the race numbers and "freebies" - 2 x 750 ml drinks bottles - Zipvit Cervelo test Team & High 5, energy bars and gels. I then set out the "beautiful" trophies and the "huge" haul of prizes.

A little after 1000 am the first riders started arriving and my carefully prepared plans came to fruition with a seamless "signing on" process, collection of race numbers and most importantly "freebies" package (which amounted to well over the entry fee - £10 - in monetary terms!! and due to last minute support from Probikekit was extended to competitors "signing on the line"). Signing on was scheduled to run from 1000 - 1100 a.m. but from experience and appreciating the distances some of the competitors had travelled - Kent - Strathclyde - we extended that till the last, last possible time with me and my "merry" band of helpers leaving the Race HQ at 1230 hours. This gave me 30 minutes to drive the 3 scenic miles to the far end of the Forest drive, collect my bike, dress, warm up?(missed out on that?), ride around the 2 crammed car parks warning riders of start time and start location and then personally positioning my finish line marshals/timekeepers/scribes etc..... At least my heart rate was up to race speed before the race start.

73 riders (a record entry?) lined up on a small track 6 abreast and received my pre-race health & safety brief, lap distance and number of laps per category and any "daft" last minute questions. Remarkably we started "bang" on time at 1300 hours on the sound of a Fire Service railway warning horn (very loud). I would like to point out at this important moment I lead the race for ALL of 10 mm before graciously allowing the slightly better prepared riders the opportunity to leave me in their dust cloud.

The race was fairly close for the 1st lap with Dave Henderson (Lothian & Borders Fire & Rescue) and Stu Reid(Cumbria Fire - reigning World Firefighter MTB Champion - June 2009, Switzerland) neck and neck crossing the finish line in a remarkably quick time of 17 minutes !!!!!!!!!!! the chasing pack consisted of Alan Nixon (Durham & Darlington Fire), Dave Howard (Cleveland Fire), Phil Blacker (Hereford & Worcester Fire), Eelco Docter (Cumbria Police) and Paul Daly (West Yorkshire Fire - 59 yrs of age and 8 x World Firefighter MTB Champion - 1 more Maillot Jeune (yellow jersey) than Lance Armstrong). After lap 2 Henderson had applied the "afterburners" and showed WHY he is the current Scottish National MTB Champion. He crossed the winning line in 87 minutes 15 seconds a clear 6 minutes ahead of 2nd placed rider Reid. The remaining Top 10 riders crossed the finish line between 93 and 113 minutes. The best placed Police rider was Eelco Docter Cumbria Police, who sadly, suffered the ignominy and backlash at the presentation ceremony of having to personally revise our final placings which had myseriously omitted his fine 5th place finish in 99 minutes 13 seconds. I would like to go on the record as extending our apologies for that mistake and thankfully the Police rider who was mistakenly announced as the Police MTB Champion for 2009 was very gracious in defeat !!! The next Police rider was Stefano Detamaso Met Police in 8th place in a time of 106 minutes 34 seconds. A result which I personally

enjoyed apart from my Cleveland Fire rider - Dave Howard - finishing 3rd overall and 1st Master - was Anthony Oliver Cleveland Police who completed his 3 lap distance in 61 minutes 39 seconds taking a glorious victory in the Veterans category - obviously it was ALL the training he received off the organiser on the original course before the race (at NO extra cost to himself?) Vince Potter (North-East Ambulance-Stockton-on-Tees) was the only paramedic in the field but had a strong ride finishing in 8th place overall after a race long tussle with the chasing pack of Howard (Cleveland Fire - 3rd overall), Nixon (Durham & Darlington Fire - 4th overall), Docter (Cumbria Police - 5th overall) Blacker (Hereford & Worcester Fire - 6th overall) and Demataso (Met Police - 7th overall) with only 10 minutes separating them from the runaway winner and second place riders - Henderson (Lothian & Borders Fire) and Reid (Cumbria Fire).

There were NO injuries apart from the odd cuts and bruises so our resident Paramedic - Dave Althwaite, Stockton-on-Tees - who was on standby in his "gleaming" new 4 x 4 Ford jeep was not required.

Course conditions on the day were firm underfoot, clear blue skies, warm ish for the "grim" North - hovering - just above freezing - BUT with a very blustery wind gusting in excess of 60 - 70 mph on the exposed short moorland section???? The winner commented at the end of the race that the course was comparable to any Championship course he had ridden and expressed his surprise and delight as to how enjoyable the race had been? its just a shame he didn't break in to a sweat !!!!!!!!!!!

The post race buffet provided by Brenda (ex- cook from Thornaby Fire Station & Alan (retired? Police Officer - husband/chauffeur) from Thornaby was sumptuous and gladly appreciated after a "slightly" long winded trophy/prize presentation?

All in all a very good day!!!

Yours in appreciation,

Jeff Crawford
GB Fire Service Cycling Secretary
c/o Red Watch
Stockton Fire Station
Cleveland Fire Brigade