





creative force

THE GRIT OF EARLY SUPPORTERS TURNED THE STEVENS PASS BIKE PARK
FROM A MONEY-STARVED IDEA INTO A RIDING-RICH REALITY.

BY HEATHER HANSMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARRETT GROVE

THE TRAIL WRAPS RIGHT, UNDER THE CHAIR-lift, then spits left to the south, spilling downhill in even grey sine curves. It's called Rock Crusher, named after the explosive the Stevens Pass Bike Park crew used to excavate the trail. It gets steeper and tighter as it winds down the mountain and as I pick up speed I can feel the G-forces in the berms. At the bottom, Joe Cocker's voice blares out of the lift terminal speakers. I walk my bike onto the lift then sit down on the next chair and lap back up for another run.

The three-year-old Stevens Pass Bike Park, which has both machine-built trails like Rock Crusher, and tacky, technical singletrack is the only lift-accessed mountain biking in the state. There are 50,000 bikers in Washington, and many more across the Pacific Northwest, but despite that, it was a battle to build trails here. And it really only happened because of those riders.

In 2006, Joel Martinez, the mountain's director of operations and John Meriwether, its environmental planner, went to an International Mountain Bicycling Association conference in Whistler. On the drive back down the Sea to Sky Highway they started brainstorming how they could build a bike park like Whistler's. They were pretty sure there was a need for it. "There's a huge community here that wants to ride lift-assisted," says Jon Kennedy, marketing manager of Seattle-based Diamondback. "From the Seattle area we were willing to drive four hours, even for a day, to ride Whistler."

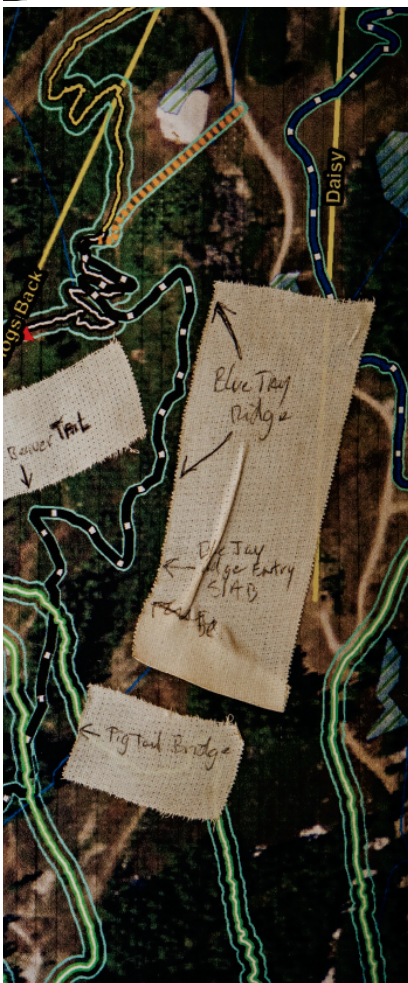
Martinez and the Stevens on-hill crew pitched the park to the mountain's board of directors. They weren't immediately sold—in fact, it was the board's first-ever non-unanimous decision—but they tentatively agreed to the idea.

Once they swayed the board, Martinez and Meriwether had the more time-consuming task of convincing the local Forest Service district since the resort is on Forest Service land, and gaining environmental approval, which they did by taking their local rangers to B.C. to ride bike parks in the nucleus of lift-served radness. They figured the trails would speak for themselves. "It was the smartest thing we did," Martinez says.

But, convincing the government that bike trails wouldn't rip up the environment only got them so far. In 2008, after the Forest Service OK, the bottom dropped out of the economy and the resort's capital dried up. Suddenly, there wasn't any money to excavate trails. The project got nixed.

clockwise from top left: breaking rad; builder Josh "Wookie" Holton on one of his works of art; Barry Collins of the Forest Service and Stevens' environmental planner John Meriwether hike the park; Collins, left, and Meriwether scope future lines; builder Patrick Hennessey ; Joel Martinez, Stevens' director of operations, first started brainstorming the bike park in 2006; a work in progress; Martinez is always just a kneepad away from a lunchtime shred session.







DIY determination

Martinez and the late Chris Rudolph, then the mountain's director of marketing who was also behind the plan, wanted a bike park, and they knew the local riders did, too, so they got creative. One of the ski patrol doctors had an idea: What if they crowd-funded the park? They could sell 5-year lift passes in advance and raise money before they broke ground.

They went back to the board, and asked for a deal: If they raised \$200,000—or 200 \$1,000 park passes—could they build trails? The board

agreed, and gave them a deadline of just two months. If they raised the money by June 2011, the board would support the rest of the project.

The future of the bike park was on them.

They called the program the Drop In Alliance, or DIA, and Rudolph, known for his infectious Stevens stoke, got to work promoting it. "It was 100 percent hypothetical. We hadn't moved any dirt," Martinez says. "We had approval and we had a business plan, but other than that it was just selling an idea." The bike industry supported it—Diamond-

back bought five passes—local riders from Leavenworth got on board, and momentum started to build.

But \$1,000 is a lot to put down for an idea, and by the deadline they'd only sold 120 passes. They begged for more time and Rudolph and Martinez started pounding pavement. They Googled every bike shop in Western Washington and went to visit, explaining their plan. By deadline two, a month later, they'd sold 197 passes, enough to convince the board. Martinez says Rudolph's ability to win people over made it happen.

The park opened for the first full season in 2012 with five trails. Two years later, at least seven new trails and a new lift are planned

"It was all knuckle punching," he says. "We didn't know what was going to happen," Martinez says. "The day we opened I was standing on the deck like, 'Is anyone going to show up?'"

Because of that face time, the Stevens mountain-bike community is tight-knit. People know each other. They call Martinez on his cell phone when they see something wrong. The lifties flip hot dogs outside the top shack and

heckle riders as they come off the lift. Dennis Opacki, a Seattle software programmer who was the first person to buy a DIA pass, says he recognizes people every time he rides.

still getting rad for rudolph

It's May, and Martinez and I are walking down one of the future trails. There are still several feet of snow on the ground, but the sun is out and you can hear water trickling under the bridges. That's one of the challenges Stevens faces in having a bike park in

the North Cascades, they're fighting a narrow weather window to stay open. There are others: The resort is on Forest Service land and there's nowhere nearby for people to stay. Leavenworth, the nearest city, is 37 miles east on Highway 2 and Seattle is 78 miles west, which means Stevens Pass is not making money on lodging like other resorts. Also, because the mountain is short but steep—the Jupiter Express lift rises 800 feet in 4 minutes—the park designers from Gravity Logic initially told mountain

ops that it would be stupid to build a park there. 'We said, 'Thank you very much, we're still going to do it,'" Martinez.

The bike park opened for two weekends in the fall of 2011. That morning Martinez stood on the deck waiting to see if anyone would come; 900 people showed up to ride. In 2012, it opened for its first full season. But it was missing a big part. Chris Rudolph—knuckle puncher, stoke spreader, voice of the DIA—passed away in a backcountry avalanche that winter. He

wasn't there to see the project he'd pounded the pavement for come to fruition.

His death ripped up the community. For a lot of riders, he was the guy who brought them to Stevens in the first place. "We had a memorial service for him and there were probably 1,000 people there,

from top left: media technology manager Julian Tracy keeps one eye on the screen and one on the trails; Chris Rudolph continues to inspire daily; follow the leader; a PBR pour-out at the newly minted Powered By Rudolph trail in remembrance of its namesake





telling stories,” Kennedy says. “You walked in, and were like, ‘Oh my God,’ you wish you affected that many people.”

Rudolph still feels very present at Stevens. There are “Get Rad for Rudolph” stickers on truck toppers in the parking lot. This summer the Powered by Rudolph, or PBR, trail will be completed. The fast, flowy, advanced trail full of big berms and tabletops drops through the gut of the mountain, under the lift, and matches Rudolph’s style to a T. The background of Martinez’s computer is a picture of Chris standing in front of a PBR truck. “I feel pressure to keep it

going for him,” Martinez says.

That pressure appears to be working, and Martinez is a fire starter, too: dedicated and still finding ways to get creative. There are five trails in place and another seven in the works, included a still-unnamed green trail that is expected to be finished this summer. Martinez has a map on the wall of his office that sketches out the plans for the future—more trails and a new lift. “It was never five trails and we’re done,” he says.

riding the dream

On a gray Friday, there are members of the DIA drop-

ping the steep and technical Slingshot Wookie trail, and first-timer ‘tourons’ in swishy pant and hiking boots tentatively making their way down Rock Crusher. I get passed on Lichen It by a scrawny pre-teen with a braid flying out from under her helmet. Turns out she’s the daughter of Josh “Wookie” Holton, one of the park builders, and the namesake of Slingshot Wookie.

The trails exist because of people like him, and like Rudolph and Martinez, who drove all over the state, selling the dream. And guys like Dennis Opacki, who had faith

swoopy turns and big berms are the stuff bike-park dreams are made of

in the bike park before it even happened.

“The coolest experience I had, I went to a bike movie premiere in Seattle and Stevens had a booth there, so I went up and introduced myself,” Opacki says. “Chris recognized my name. ‘Dennis Opacki! You were pass holder No.1! We put DIA up on the website and then we were all watching it, waiting to see what would happen. Ten minutes later you bought the first pass. That was the moment we knew it was all going to work.’”