

Lethbridge BMX

TYLER STEWART

PHOTOGRAPHY: BARON PHOTOGRAPHICS



BMX racing is a family event inclusive of all ages, genders, and abilities, and offers an easy entry point for first-time riders. If you can ride a bike, you can race.

"A HOMETOWN KID on his BMX against the best in the world. At Helltrack...the heat is on." With the promo tagline for the aptly titled *Rad*—arguably the most influential film to bring BMX bike racing into mainstream consciousness—how could you not get hooked? The movie, filmed in and around Calgary in the summer of 1985, stirred the imaginations of many youngsters to dream of

effortlessly flying through the air on their bikes, and raised the hackles of many parents to wonder what nefarious scourge this trend might present.

At the same time down here in Lethbridge, dreamers had already begun to take action towards building their own BMX utopia. First formed in 1979 as a ragtag bunch of riders, the Lethbridge BMX Club struggled its way towards

finding a permanent home for the first few years, until the City came on board to help them build their dream-come-true track.

"It was kind of considered a rebel sport back when I got involved," explains Club President John Lavorato. "There were rules, but the sport itself has really developed since then."

Now, after being involved with the club for 13 years, John has gone from dabbling a bit with one of his kids, to having it become a major part of life for the whole family.

"When my youngest was a little guy, we put him in Timbits hockey and it just wasn't what he wanted to do," John explains. "He really enjoyed riding his bike, so we

decided to see what we could find and discovered the club. We went down and tried it out, and he really enjoyed it, so we've been there ever since."

With all three Lavorato children making their way through the club—not just boys, but their daughter too—John has seen BMX racing move from being the rebel sport of yore to becoming a family event inclusive of all ages, genders, and abilities.

"We have lots of girls that ride in all different age groups, and there're many female riders across the province and the country," John says. "It used to be that there weren't enough girls to have their own division, and we merged them in with the boys' races, but our club has gotten to the point where we have a good amount of female riders to compete all on their own."

The club currently has around 120 members, with around a third of those being female. It has a focus on competing against yourself and the course just as much as on the other racers, and it offers an easier entry point than other competitive sports for a first-time biker. Beginning by competing against others in the same age and ability range makes it exciting but challenging, without scaring off those just trying it out.

"We do racing, so it's not really tricks and backflips, although there are some jumps involved," John explains. "It's really a sprint sport, trying to be as fast as you can on your bike, using totally different equipment than what you would see BMX riders using at the skate park for tricks."

Located just north of Dave Elton Park, the course presents many obstacles for riders to navigate. Skillful riders aren't just those who can pedal fastest, but those who have the finesse and control to hug the bumps and curves, to flow like water around the track towards the finish.

Over the years, many riders who have mastered the local course quickly progressed to the next level of provincial and national racing. Enter Darren Williams, the club's Director of Rider Development. "That's basically a glorified title for head coach," Darren laughs.

Accredited under the National

3 classic BMX films to get you stoked for summer & interested in trying it out!

Rad (1986)

Anyone on a BMX bike in Alberta in the 1980s was touched by this film that might have a terrible critical rating, but is certainly a cult classic. See if you can spot Calgary and Cochrane landmarks!

BMX Bandits (1983)

With an early career-starring role for Nicole Kidman, this film is the Aussie equivalent of *Rad*, but with perhaps even more neon. This one goes more into kid-crimefighter territory, with one of the most ridiculous chase scenes you'll ever watch.

The Birth of Big Air (2010)

This film follows the career of the biggest-name BMX rider of all time. Matt Hoffman's impressive freestyle skills are in focus in this Spike Jonze-produced documentary. Must-see for anyone looking to understand the trajectory of the sport's evolution.

Coaching Certification Program (NCCP), Darren has helped many riders get comfortable on the track, and has built up specialized training programs for those who were ready to take the next step in their racing careers.

First starting with the fledgling club in 1981, Darren

nationally ranked riders," Darren says. "We currently have one junior rider that is on the provincial team as a first year junior elite and has potential to make the national team in the next couple years, which from there the next level is the Olympics."



Members of the Lethbridge BMX Club.

raced himself through to the professional ranks in the late 1980s before retiring, which, as Darren recalls with a laugh, "Back then, was around 20 years old, or when you went off to college."

After a lengthy hiatus, Darren was once again bitten by the BMX bug after his son brought home a pamphlet from school about the club.

"He knew I was into it back in the day, so we went out to the track, and I got hooked again just watching," Darren says. "I rejoined the club about 13 years ago as a racer, then started coaching about eight years ago after getting my NCCP training, and now teach to other aspiring coaches throughout the province as well."

That coaching and training has really paid off over the years, with Darren guiding club racers to high levels of competition across the province and the country. And being as competitive as ever himself, Darren and his wife have been racing across the country on the national circuit.

"Lethbridge has always had a history of really good

After the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the first to feature BMX as an official sport, a resurgence in interest has increased club numbers after a dip in ridership through the late '90s and early 2000s.

"Back in the '80s when BMX was in its heyday, there were no dirt jumps or skate parks for BMX. That all came out of the first wave of BMX racing," Darren explains.

Now with the proliferation of trick riding in concrete parks, BMX riders have begun to come back to the roots of riding on the dirt tracks in stronger numbers. "Last year we had a real boost in numbers that took our ridership back to the levels it was when we began in the 1980s," Darren says. "It's been great to see the sport still have so much life years after I first began riding."

So in the 30+ years since BMX racing first gripped the imaginations of kids across the world, what else has changed?

"In some ways, there're a lot of things that haven't changed," Darren says. "It's still a single-speed bicycle with

livingfeature

20-inch wheels. However, things have gotten a lot more technical with the riding, bigger jumps, more jumps, and more skill-based riding.”

The course itself has changed as well, with crudely built dirt tracks now becoming highly engineered courses with technical drops and paved banks. With continuous improvements on its current track over the past 30 years, the club is now looking towards taking a big step forward with the next evolution of its home. “A total track rebuild would allow us to add the bigger Olympic-sized start hill so we can get some of our riders to that next level,” Daren says. “Our five to 10 year plan is to expand the track to take our riders to the next level, since right now, the closest place for riders to get that professional level course is in Abbotsford, B.C.”

Having an Olympic-level track just built in Toronto for the Pan-Am Games, and the World BMX Championships being held in North America for the first time in a decade, it seems the sport is ready to grow like never before in the coming years. With the Canadian Nationals also being held in Calgary this summer, the club is making a big push towards qualifying top riders for the upper levels of competition, and hopes to continue that progression with its track infrastructure in the near future as well.

“We’re in a situation now where we’d love to grow more to challenge our elite riders, but we don’t have space to expand,” John says. “So we hope to work with the City on

finding a place to expand our track in the coming years into a new location.”

As Club President, John is not just focused on the top-level riders, but is happy to roll out the welcome mat to new riders coming to the track for the first time. “We race

Tuesday and Thursday night from May to September, plus we have open track days on the weekends for people to just come out and ride for fun,” John says. “Because it’s an individual sport, you can choose to come out as much or as little as you want, with some people coming out five times a week who are really into it.”

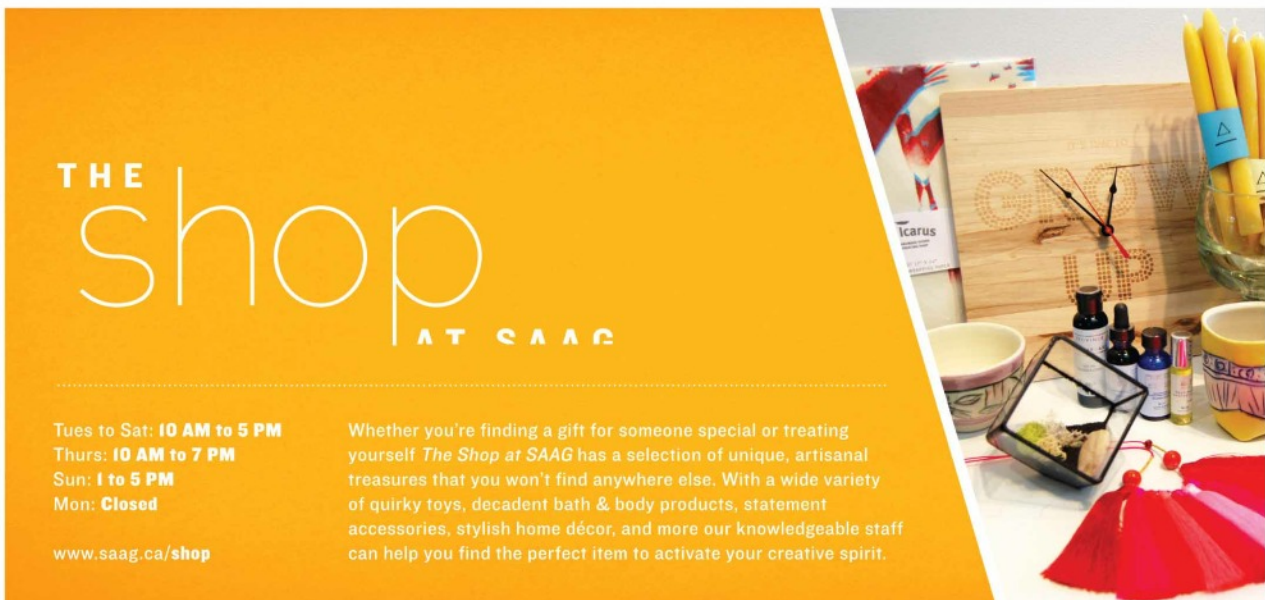
New riders need only a pair of gloves along with a long-sleeved shirt and pants to get started, with the club providing a demo bike and helmet to

those looking to test the waters. However, chances are good that you’ll soon be tearing up the track and hooked for life. This feeling is exactly what has kept coach Darren involved all these years.

“The most rewarding thing for me is seeing the little kids that can barely ride a bike at the beginning of the year, and by the end they’re ripping around the track and they’ve progressed so much,” Darren says. “Seeing the smiles on their faces once they’ve built up some skills and learned to ride—it’s definitely a good feeling.”

“We currently have one junior rider that is on the provincial team as a first year junior elite and has potential to make the national team in the next couple years, which from there the next level is the Olympics.”

Web: lethbridgebmx.com



THE Shop
AT SAAG

Tues to Sat: 10 AM to 5 PM
Thurs: 10 AM to 7 PM
Sun: 1 to 5 PM
Mon: Closed

www.saag.ca/shop

Whether you're finding a gift for someone special or treating yourself *The Shop at SAAG* has a selection of unique, artisanal treasures that you won't find anywhere else. With a wide variety of quirky toys, decadent bath & body products, statement accessories, stylish home décor, and more our knowledgeable staff can help you find the perfect item to activate your creative spirit.