

# this one time, at bike camp

Kids aren't the only ones getting dirty at Andrew Shandro's Whistler-based mountain bike skills school—their parents are strapping on full-face helmets and getting their huck on, too.

BY JOHNATHON ALLEN  
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"THAT SHIT'S LIKE BIKE CRACK!" Ottawa Jeff says as he loads his bike onto the lift for another run. He's referring to Whistler's A-Line and it's the fifth time in three days I've heard someone use a drug metaphor to describe the trail. With more than a hundred dirt jumps of every imaginable size and shape crammed into 4.5 miles of fast flowy downhill, A-line isn't just a trail, it's a highly evolved adrenaline delivery system.

Ottawa, a 33-year-old engineering student who has only been mountain biking for three years, cultivated his newfound habit in a matter of days after plunking down a pile of hard-earned loonies to attend Andrew Shandro's Summer Gravity Camps, one of the world's premier mountain bike skills camps. On the lift ride up, he mulls different strategies for quit-

ting his job, dropping out of school, dumping his girlfriend and moving to Whistler. Whether it's to the air, the speed, the scenery, or the constant terror of personal challenge, addiction is a common theme at SGC. Once you taste it, you can't get enough.

Hosted each summer at Whistler Mountain Bike Park, SGC provides riders of every skill level an opportunity to learn the finer points of hucking, pinning and ralling turns from some of the best riders in the world. Most of the weeklong sessions are geared toward kids and teenagers, but the final session each summer is reserved for adults. Under the tutelage of riders like Andrew Shandro, Cam McCaul and Wade Simmons, campers spend a week taking their mountain biking to the next level. For your typical teenager, it's the perfect blend of



Class is in session:  
Andrew Shandro,  
Whistler, British Columbia



Terror at first sight: Whistler's Boneyard slopestyle course. (Right): When A.J. Shandro talks, people listen; coach Jordi Lunn cheers on a rider in the Airdome; one-on-one with the coach.



speed, air, and cool; for your average thirty-something weekend warrior, it's a Molotov cocktail of treacherous terrain, DVD-inspired delusions of grandeur, and repressed angst taken out on a full-suspension rental bike.

I'm an old school purist. I like my singletrack served fast and light on a steel hardtail, preferably designed by Joe Murray. The only problem is the gnawing suspicion I have that the kids are having more fun than I am. So when I heard rumors of Shandro's weeklong summer camp, I traded in my team Old School jersey for some new-school body armor and hopped a flight to Vancouver. I figured, why break my arm all by myself when I can get the help of a trained professional?

The first camper I meet upon arriving is Taipei John, who is causing a stir by casually strolling through customs with a fully intact, Taiwanese-made, bright-red downhill rig.

"How the hell did you do that?"

asks an American dragging a taped cardboard bike box.

"Ah, it's easy," John says with British nonchalance. "I just tell them that's how I always do it. They say no at first, but eventually I sign some waivers and they take the bike."

John has the stubborn tenacity that only comes to a British architect living in Taipei. We discuss Taiwanese knock-off frames in the bar while Steve-O, SGC's logistics point man, corrals the last few campers. With one arm in a cast and the other permanently attached to a cell phone, Steve-O is a master of multitasking. He loads us into a 15-passenger van and drives it like a rally car up the Sea to Sky highway while chatting in the rearview mirror about the dry sketchy conditions, the expected mid-week rainstorm, and Whistler's new foam-pit facility.

Also on board are Nia, a bike cop and mother of two from Santa Barbara; and *Los Dos Stevens*—

Steffen and Steve—a bike shop owner and construction worker from Massachusetts, attending their third year of camp. When I ask why they keep coming back, they grin and chant: "Dirt Merchant, A-Line...Dirt Merchant, A-Line."

*Los Dos Stevens* are 30-year-old East Coast white boys who wear plaid button-down shirts. When you meet them in an airport bar your first thought isn't: *Man, I bet these guys catch fat air*. But clearly these guys are on a mission get their fix.

#### //////// ROLLING PILLOWS

Shandro wastes little time getting things started. There are 44 campers—38 men and six women from all over the world, ages 19 to 55, with widely varying, sometimes exaggerated, skill levels—and a team of pros that includes Canadian National Downhill Champion Tyler Morland; World Cup pro Katrina Strand; and dirt jumping king of bling Jordi Lunn, among others.

Shandro organizes campers into different groups based on skill level and assigns them a coach.

"I try to group people together logically, but there's no way to really know what level someone is at until you see them ride," Shandro says.

*Los Dos Stevens* and a posse of bit-chomping veterans hook up with Adam Billingham, the reigning king of Whistler's chainless downhill, and disappear in a cloud of dust.

Shandro's intermediate group practices wall rides on Crank it Up and then sessions the drop zone skills area for most of an hour. Shandro watches as campers huck off one of four progressively larger drops and provides them with direct feedback like: "Push out more," or "Focus on landing both wheels simultaneously," or, the piece of advice he dispenses most often: "Relax."

Katrina Strand's beginner crew works on turns in the skills area and then cruises the bump-laced berms



of B-Line. She is talkative, methodical, and can efficiently communicate the mechanics of a banking turn to someone who is just learning to ride. Not surprisingly, many of the women are in her group. Yuko, a small but scrappy environmental consultant from Hawaii, has never been on a long-travel bike, but says her primary goal is "sending" the 10-foot-high GLC cliff drop before camp is over. Heidi, a 44-year-old mother of four from Nanaimo, British Columbia, sent her teenage son to SGC earlier in the summer and signed up for the adult camp so she can keep up with him. She has the fearlessness that comes from being the mother of a teenager and a knack for drinking men half her age under the table.

The days go by in a blur of airborne exhilaration and near-death experience as I balance the desire to fly against the 50 pounds of machinery required to land without snapping a femur. One moment my

rental Kona Stab feels like a rolling pillow, the next like a gorilla in heat. My appetite for air increases with each run and I realize I'm hooked when I have to force myself to stop riding when I can't even clench a decent fist.

Each afternoon ends with a beer huddle on the patio of the Garibaldi Lift Company (GLC) where campers compare notes on the day's events. Once the various explosions and victories are replayed in alcohol-enhanced slow motion, the conversation drifts to coaching styles. At one end of the table, a faction of women extol the many virtues of Katrina Strand.

"Most women didn't get the benefit of growing up riding BMX bikes and building jumps, so having someone who can break things down really accelerates the learning curve," says Erika Schmidt, a 35-year-old school teacher from Bend, Oregon, attending her second year of camp.

#### //////// RIDER DOWN

As the drinking wears on, I realize that *Los Dos Stevens* represent a peculiar camp phenomenon—The *pro-stitutes*: expert level riders who come to SGC specifically to tear it up with the pros.

"Really, our main mission is to pimp out the fastest pro we can get and chase them around the mountain all day," Steffen says. "Plus, we get to cut to the front of the lift line, which means more air time."

One of the camp's most notorious *pro-stitutes* is a crazy blonde Swede named Pear who dresses like the drummer in a Scorpions cover band and is genetically programmed to pin it everywhere all the time. Pear's sole purpose in life is to pass anything in front of him, especially if it's a Canadian downhill national champion. The coaches are unfazed by this sort of behavior because they know the mountain will waste no time in beating down a careless rider.

The daily cycle of downhill



Whistler Myth #124 dispelled. It's really the trails that are huge and the jumps that are small. (Bottom left): Full faces in amazing places.

debauchery is increasingly taxing for those unaccustomed to life on planet Whistler. By Wednesday campers are either breaking through or breaking down. Yuko takes on the GLC drop while riding with Jordi's group and plunges ass over CamelBak down the cliff, winning a free trip to the nearest X-ray machine. Later, while riding the lift up for one last run, Arizona Ryan explains how last year during camp he blew a jump on Wednesday and separated his shoulder. Then he makes the mistake of saying: "Man, I'm surprised I haven't crashed this year." Minutes later he smashes his patella so badly they have to take him to the hospital in Squamish 45 minutes away to pick out the rocks.

again from the downhill side of the jump when a rider dressed in black appears out of nowhere and throws a huge, perfectly flat tabletop right on cue. After he vanishes around the next corner we realize that it's Shandro. "Uh...Yeah," Katrina says. "Like that." Boston sticks the move on his next run wearing a grin so big you can see it through his full-face helmet and heads immediately to the lift for another run. Another addict has been born. We end the day by following Katrina off the GLC drop pace-car style. We converge for the ritual post-ride drinking session and find Arizona Ryan sitting at the bar with one leg propped on an adjacent stool and a row of empty shot glasses in front of him.



and massage tables faster than you can say "Rider down!" Nia and Jimmy duck out for a nap, while Erika and her boyfriend trade in their lift tickets for spa passes. Even the impervious will of Taipei John is being worn down to its final nub. Our group is reduced to me, Boston Dave and Katrina. Boston, a soft-spoken 35-year-old guitar maker, wants to feed his air addiction so we opt to do a few A-line runs. Before the last hit—a large wide table—Katrina explains how to maximize air time by launching it with a lateral transition from left to right. She demonstrates the move fluidly then stops from when mountain bikes were all-terrain road bikes and handle-

**///// OFF THE BACK**  
The bad news Friday morning is that the scheduled heli-drop to the top of Rainbow Mountain has been scrubbed due to low visibility. The good news is that my coach for the day is former Canadian national downhill champion Mike Jones. We take the Garbanzo Lift and jam Freight Train while Mike follows each rider individually, providing Yoda-like insights on body position and velocity control. Within one run he has identified my single biggest riding flaw. "Your elbows are too low," he says. "That position is a holdover from when mountain bikes were all-terrain road bikes and handle-



bars were like 12 inches wide."

To illustrate his point, Mike makes me do a push-up in the trail with my arms close to my sides and knocks me over with a foot nudge. When I do it again with my arms farther out, I successfully resist his kicking and push myself up, despite waves of laughter. After lunch he suggests that our group—which includes Taipei John, Ottawa Jeff and Boston Dave—take the peak chair to the summit and drop off the backside of Whistler.

"You can do that?" Ottawa Jeff asks.

"You can if you have a certified mountain guide with you, and apparently, I'm one," Mike says.

We cram into gondolas up to



few thousand feet of finger-numbing singletrack later we jet across a wildflower-flecked meadow and cross through a gate back into Whistler. The week of training is obviously paying off as we flow through the park attacking every jump, drop, and step-up with newfound style.

////////// ADDICTION ISN'T PRETTY

On Saturday night everyone comes unhinged. The coaches are ending a long season of corralling Red Bull-addled teenagers and are ready to unwind. Jordi, wearing a lizard-skin jogging suit, starts drinking shots in the Longhorn at 3:00 p.m. By the time the awards ceremony gets underway, things are out of control. Swag is awarded to deserving campers and flung wantonly across the patio. Pear receives the "Pinner Award" for being more insane than everyone else; Heidi is dubbed "World's Most Bad-Ass Mom"; Yuko wins a sweet Marzocchi fork; and Ottawa Jeff scores a set of Saint disc brakes just for being so damn cool. Campers swap war stories and e-mail addresses while shots of unknown origin are passed out by the tray-full, clinked, consumed and replaced in a vicious liver-crushing cycle.

mid-mountain and then switch to a slow-moving triple chair that floats through thick mist and deposits us on the 7,000-foot-high summit. Back on the bikes we rocket a few hundred yards down a shale-covered road, duck under a rope and turn past a sign that says: "Now leaving Whistler Ski Area."

When we regroup, Mike says: "Well, I'm pretty sure this is the right way, but I have a radio if we get lost. Did anyone bring food?"

We're way above tree line, about to drop 4,000 feet into a canyon with low visibility and a questionable outcome awaits us—it's an authentic old-school mountain bike experience. We careen down the steep upper road drifting through shale corners and kicking up football-sized rocks. A

Only after returning home do I realize how far my new-school assimilation has progressed. I catch myself lusting after any bike with more than six inches of travel and Googling "all mountain" in the middle of the night. I troll Cheap Tickets for flights to Vancouver and even try to sell my Kona on Craig's List under an assumed name. Addiction isn't pretty, but it sure is fun. ☒

////////// *Andrew Shandro's Summer Gravity Camps run in weeklong sessions beginning July 15. While most sessions are geared for kids, an adult-only camp is scheduled for August 12-19. Prices begin at about \$1,100 U.S. and top out at about \$2,000. For more information, check out the web site: [www.summergravitycamps.com](http://www.summergravitycamps.com).*



Getting high is encouraged at SGC. Rider: Andrew Shandro. (Left): First say it, then slay it. Katrina Strand leads by example.