

At Razorback, fling off mental training wheels

Sometimes, you just have to throw yourself over the edge, no matter what grave warning your inner voice is screaming. I was traveling far too fast down a steep, rocky trail — half-way to the bottom but barely a hair away from panic. And my trusty mountain bike was rattling as though it would shatter into a thousand tiny aluminum pieces.



action figure
eric michael

emichael@orlandosentinel.com

You can't call a timeout when you're accelerating under the relentless tractor beam of gravity. The only path to safety: Lean back . . . let the bike run . . . and ride it out.

I'd either crash — or not. But I would definitely learn something.

Progression doesn't come easy for sportspeople of any breed. If pushing your personal performance up a notch is the goal, you had better be willing to pay for it — with flesh if necessary. For me, mountain biking is the latest outdoor endeavor to

milk my adrenal glands. And after two short seasons feeling sheepish in the saddle, I was hungry for a breakthrough.

But first I would have to loosen my death-grip on self-preservation. And **Razorback Mountain Bike Park** was the perfect place to ditch those mental training wheels.

Before down, it's 'up again'

Razorback is as close to "world-class" as off-road cycling gets in the flatlands of Florida.

The private playground north of Ocala has been rated the top mountain-bike trail in the Sunshine State — and one of the top 50 in the U.S. — by *Mountain Bike* magazine's annual readers poll. And for good reason. With mile after mile of smooth single-track terrain offering everything from technical expert runs to a kid-friendly short loop, there's something for every rider.

"Awesome," is how park manager and trail-building guru **Dave Berger** of Ocala's **Gone Riding Race Promotions** described the topography of the working limestone mine. Since the park's opening in 2000, Berger and crew have carved a 12½-mile monster out of

the Marion County countryside. But don't worry about dodging heavy machinery. Razorback is only open on weekends, when the mine is closed.

The park is another example of Florida riders making due with what limited terrain they have available. Like **Santos, Carter Road, The T.O.E.** and other top trails built on abandoned mining land, Razorback benefits from machine-made elevation changes. As a result, there are dozens of steep hills along the course that are bound to make a rider's pulse race with pure speed thrills.

But in order to fly downhill, first you must climb. And during the three hours it took my riding buddy and me to complete the full course, "up again" became our litany of pain. It was so worth it.

Surviving Grannies Revenge

The first hill took me by complete surprise.

Emerging from a canopy of moss-draped oaks, the steep incline looked downright alien. I thought to myself,



ERIC MICHAEL/ORLANDO SENTINEL

For riders such as Johnny Morris, 11, Razorback Mountain Bike Park offers everything from expert runs to a kid-friendly loop.

"Are we still in Florida?"

That thigh-burning introduction was the first of many tough climbs to come. And after the first hour, the trail became a sweaty blur. Fast, flowing sections linking one banked turn after another through the forest led to rocky, off-camber climbs along threatening cliffs high above the open mining pits.

And the descents, oh boy, the descents.

Expert runs with foreboding names such as **Grannies Revenge** and **Hero Hills** took their toll on my body but built confidence at the same time. And for every gnarly hill that I slid down with my bike on my shoulder, there was another that I rode — and survived.

As treacherous and demanding as my rookie Razorback ride turned out to be, the challenge really helped break down a barrier or two. By the time we reached the end of the line, I was spent — but unbroken. For now.

on the radar

There's no such thing as a free lunch in journalism (unless you're the Chow Hound).

Contrary to my own sense of decorum, I'll be putting my ego on the line for the "**Celebrity**" **Hot Dog Eating Contest** (and I put that first word in quotes for good reason) at **George Fest 2007** in downtown Eustis on Saturday.

As fun as it sounds, I may be biting off more than I care to chew. I hear the frank in question is massive. But there's company pride at stake. Last year's champ was none other than retired *Sentinel* column-toonist Jake Vest. And if I fail to keep the priceless "Hot Dog Hat" trophy on a *Sentinel* head, he'll never let me live it down.

The contest is one of a dozen festive events during the 105th annual Washington's birthday party, which runs today-Sunday at **Ferran Park**. Also on tap are a parade, carnival rides, canoe and bed races, a concert, a laser show and more. For more information, call 352-357-3434, or go to eustischamber.org.

try for
yourself

Case File #95 Pedaling past my limits

What: Razorback Mountain Bike Park.

Where: Off West County Road 316, Reddick.

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

Cost: \$5 per rider, ages 11 and older.

Call: 352-873-9279.

Online: goneriding.com/RAZORBACK.htm.

RATINGS

Bang for your buck: 5 out of 5.

Evel Knievel factor: 4 out of 5.

Degree of difficulty: 5 out of 5.

Overall fun: 4 out of 5.

attractions

Eric Michael invites your comments, ideas, challenges — whatever. Contact him at 407-420-5259.