

Event Report: Get Active in the Forest (Inc. South Derbyshire Extreme Sports Summer Competition) on behalf of Sporting Champions.
Location: Rosliston Forestry Centre, Derbyshire, 3rd July 2008
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I have recently been out and about to two events on behalf of Sporting Champions. The first was the South Glos Festival of Youth Sport, a multi sport event for youngsters from 7-11 years of age. The second event, last week, was Get Active in the Forest, a joint venture between South Derbyshire District Council and South Derbyshire School Sports Partnership. The day marked local schools' first extreme sports competition, which added a competitive element to each of the four activities on offer. The activities included a climbing wall, archery, pedal karting and mountain biking. With British Cycling's Go-Ride set up on hand, run by Regional Development Manager Simon Watts, this event provided a perfect hands on visit for me to inspire and motivate youngsters, although I must admit they were pretty motivated from the outset!

I was quite envious of these guys as I never had anything like this when I was at school, and may well have discovered mountain biking at a much earlier age with such an opportunity. So, bearing this in mind, I was keen to use this excellent taster day to try to signpost the youngsters towards continued involvement in the new sports they had tried. With a Go-Ride mountain bike club soon starting at the venue there was no shortage of school-club links. It was really just a case of getting the activity done, having fun and then getting the youngsters to consider how they could do more in the future. By talking about how I came across the sport (in a far more random sense!), got out on local trails and gradually developed my racing in a step-by-step way, they began to realise the process that all athletes go through in the early stages of their careers and that this commitment and improvement cycle is something that they too could easily begin by attending the new club.

Of course, I was also quick to point out that they could diversify into downhill, duel, cross country or enduro and this variety certainly seemed to appeal. On the day we got them set up quickly on their Treks and Gary Fishers and then they completed a couple of practise laps of the short circuit we had designed for them. They followed me on these laps and soon found that even a seemingly simple short circuit could present challenges, especially the greasy U-turn at bottom, where a change of direction and gradient on slippery ground called for some smooth gear changes and forward thinking. It was interesting that many of the girls initially found the whole thing tough and daunting with lots of "can'ts" in the air but, when the race was on, rode really clean and fast laps.... definitely a clear case of less haste more speed.

Once practising was done we ran a relay where three teams battled around the circuit. This is where the thrills and spills began to occur and teamwork and encouragement certainly got many to the finish line. Once the competition was over it was time for a quick Q&A session before they headed off to the next activity. With my gleaming Gary Fisher Superfly 29er at the event, it was inevitable that questions about how much a bike costs would come thick and fast, but I have an answer for that one, and it is not the actual price! My first off road forays were aboard my Mum's 45 year old Raleigh Lenton, certainly not an off road machine and certainly not an expensive machine (although I know Mum would argue that point!). Anyway, I learnt plenty on that bike before moving onto an entry level mountain bike. When a boy at the back repeated the question about how much my bike would cost the lad at the front replied, "did you not hear her mate, you could win a race on a £100 bike".... with a healthy dose of motivation I might add! But the Superfly certainly played its part as an aspirational bit of kit that, with plenty of hard work and determination, they could find themselves riding in the future. As always, the GB kit and National Champion's jersey proved equally aspirational on the day.

With four schools in the morning and four new groups in the afternoon the day was long and hard but very rewarding. The rain conveniently chose lunch hour to come and go and everyone left tired but happy. Organiser Jon Widdowson deserves praise for such a great event, as does Go-Ride coach Dom who, at the sprightly age of 72, was running about all day helping youngsters, some of whom had never ridden a bike before, to tackle the challenges. I really hope these guys come back for more and wish them good luck in the future.

Photos courtesy of www.topcornersports.biz



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