

## Wheelerville Trails Mountain Bike Festival returns for third year

By Greg Hitchcock

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Mountain bikers compete in the Live Free and Fly Downhill Race at the Third Annual Wheelerville Trails Mountain Bike Festival in Caroga Lake, Saturday, Aug. 24, 2024.

PETER R. BARBER



With one foot on the ground and the other on the pedal, the mountain biker overlooks the trail he is about to descend with the Diamondback he modified himself.

This is Carter Scribner's second time competing with other mountain bikers from across the region, as his heart beats in anticipation of the finish line.

The third annual Wheelerville Trails Mountain Bike Festival, held Saturday and Sunday, pitted racing enthusiasts to a weekend full of trail events as spectators cheered on their favorites.

"It's an awesome event," Scribner said.

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Coming from Mayfield, Scribner went to Clarkson University, where he was introduced to the sport of mountain biking.

"I just got addicted," he said, "And now I race downhill a lot in the Northeast.

"There's a huge adrenaline rush. I just love going down the mountains," Scribner said.

Called the tech, the trails are filled with grass, weeds, rocks and roots, daring bikers to outmaneuver them.

"You just ride over them, go around, and jump off of them," Scribner said.

The festival featured many mountain biking events, including three bike companies offering free bike demos. Lawton Denis, known as "the wheelie king," offered a wheelie competition and wheelie clinic.

Wheelerville Trails Manager Jeremy Manning never knew it would grow this big.

"In the mountain bike community, people travel quite a bit for these events, and we try to do things here that are exciting for the crowd, the riders, and for spectators," he said.

Mountain biker Andy Hayes, 23, from Syracuse, said he competes a lot, including the Adirondack Festival at McCauley Mountain in Old Forge.

"There's nothing like it anywhere around Syracuse," Hayes said. "I've experienced probably some of the biggest features in the downhill races you gotta jump over — that's crazy."

The Lakes, Christian and Kelly, arrived from near Rochester. Both mountain bike fans, it was their first time at the festival.

"You can't get me to exercise because I just don't have enough interest in it. But if you put me on a mountain bike and you tell me, I'm gonna, if I get myself to the top of the hill, then I'm going to have a blast coming down outside all of a sudden," Christian Lake said.

Lake said mountain biking is safer than road biking.

"A lot of people get hit with cars," he said of road biking. "I think you risk taking a gamble that someone's not going to be on their phone and take you out."

Shey Redolinsky, 15, of New Jersey, came to the festival to watch her uncle ride. She goes mountain biking in New Jersey a few times a month.

"I like going downhill and I like the features, like rocks," she said.

"I think more girls should be into mountain biking," Cooperstown resident Carol Lernihan said.

"It's an outdoor sport, and it's for anyone. You can take your bike with you and go wherever you want," Lernihan said.

The sun goes down, spectators are piling into their cars for the long ride home. Caroga is emptying its population of mountain bikers. It is the end of an intense weekend.

What happens to the Wheelerville Trail system after the party is over?

"We bring a lot of people in for one event, but the recurring tourism that we experience just from having the trails here, I think, is a bigger impact than just these weekends," Manning said. "You know, these are fun, and they put the place on the map."

Manning said the town of Caroga wants to expand the trail system. It got two \$100,000 grants last year to expand and improve trails, making them easier, wider and safer.

“We’ve been adding jump tracks and adding skills areas and things like that,” Manning said. “And we want to start adding a lot more. We’re doing another beginner trail this year that will connect back to the lake.”

Another future project Manning said is to extend the trail system down to the town of Caroga, all the way down to Sherman’s area.

“And so the hope is in the next year or two, we’ll extend our trail down there, to be able to connect down to the business district, and that trail would be more of a community recreation path. That would go right downtown and give people an access point to stores, bars and restaurants,” Manning said.

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Reporter