

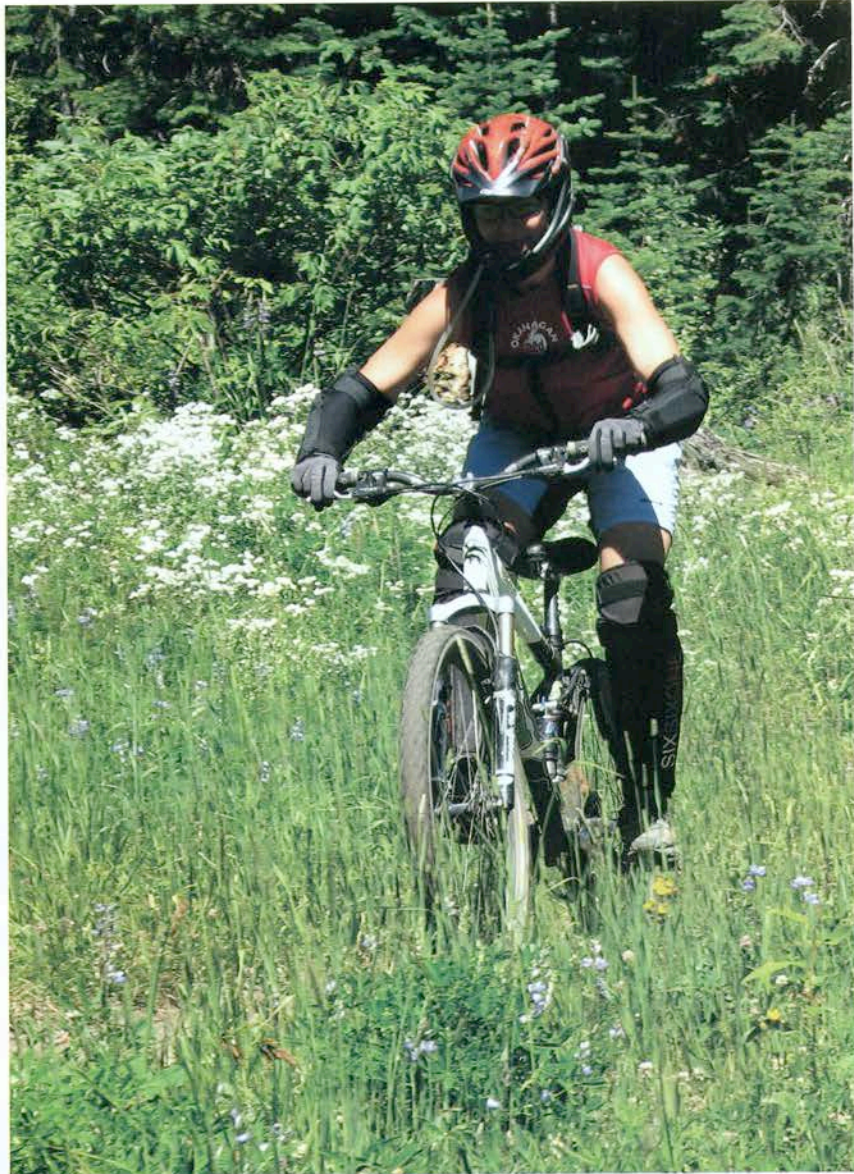
by Shelley Wood

It's a glinting summer day in the mountains and I'm decked out in biking garb, gloves, leg and arm pads, and a full-face helmet: I've had some spills and twice pulled my bike sheepishly into the brush to let faster riders pass. I count among my accomplishments my mastery of the undignified scuttle off the moving chairlift without the benefit of skis and a ramp of hardpacked snow.

A liftie in tank top and shorts (instead of snowsuit and toque), hands me my bike. "Have a great run," she says, as I've heard countless times mid-winter.

The routine is familiar, but a ski hill in summertime is oddly unrecognizable. For one thing, it's green — lush glades broken only by blankets of wildflowers. The trees seem taller without their beds of snow, the lifts incongruous, the slopes steeper — particularly if you've come, not just for the views, but to make your descent by mountain bike.

I visited Silver Star's bike park in high summer, delighted to find the temperature in the village almost 10 degrees cooler than in >>>



(GRAVITY x SPEED) + FEAR = DOWNHILL MOUNTAIN BIKING

Mountain bikers are after some serious downwards tilt. What better place than a ski hill in green season, where the chairlift carries your bike to the top and gladiators roam the village

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the city. I had come to sample the trails that are rapidly earning the mountain a reputation among serious downhill riders who have transformed their sport faster than you can say full-suspension shocks.

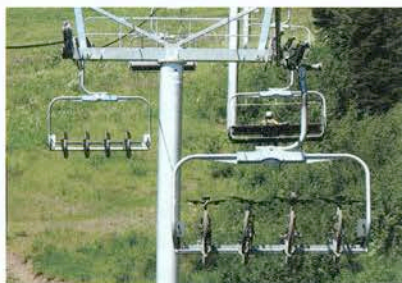
While Silver Star has offered summertime mountain biking for over a decade, in the past three years, it has expanded, opening the lower mountain and six-pack chair to bikes and riders of every ability. The resort now boasts 15 bike trails with varying degrees of difficulty, additional shared trails, plus a skills area and jump park.

Bike park director, Cam Sorenson, along with Rick Harman, director of mountain patrol, can take a lot of the credit for transforming Silver Star into a world-class bike park. Rick meets me in the village to talk about what they've created. He's stocky and bronzed with what appears to be a combination of suntan and trail dust; his tattooed biceps look as if they'd have no trouble heaving a 45-pound dual-suspension bike around a tight corner at Mach speed.

"Obviously having the bike park draws a lot of business up to the resort during the summertime," he says. "It gives people the opportunity to come up and see what the mountain is all about."

Our first ride of the day, by default, is Blast Off, a steep but smooth winding trail that takes us from the village down to the base of the chair. My friends, with eager whoops, soon leave me in their dust, taking the banked curves — berms in mountain-bike parlance — at high speed, while I snake along more cautiously, enjoying the sensation that's part rolling, part swooping, as my bike dances around the corners.

At the bottom, we load our bikes onto the chairlift bike racks, hop on the next six-seater and minutes later are considering our options for our first full ride: more than 1,500 vertical feet. We seek the advice



IN BIKE PARK SEASON, EVERY OTHER SIX-SEATER IS CONVERTED INTO A FOUR-BIKE RACK. YOU LOAD YOUR BIKE AT THE BOTTOM, AND THE LIFTIES HAND THEM OFF TO YOU ON TOP



RICK HARMAN HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN TRAIL BUILDING AND DESIGN AT SILVER STAR FOR MORE THAN A DECADE

of volunteer patroller, Steve Walker, stationed at the top of the lift. Another veteran rider, Steve is clearly eager to be relieved of his watch so he can take a few runs.

The grading system is the same for summer as for winter: a green circle for easy, a blue square for intermediate, black diamond for advanced and double black diamond for experts only. But within these categories are different styles of rides, as the friendly patrollers are happy to explain. Spoiled for choices, we opt for a tortuous blue run aptly named Super Star for its smooth, ego-building curves.

"Why is my heart pounding so much!" asks one of my fellow riders midway down the trail. The answer? Despite getting a helping hand from a chairlift to the summit and gravity on the descents, bike park riding demands a lot of balance, concentration, muscle control and a surprising amount of pedalling, topped up with adrenaline and a soupçon of invigorating fear.

Not that bike parks are solely for thrill-seekers, Rick insists.

"There's definitely something for beginners here too," he says. "We have everything from paved trails in the village to a nice downhill easygoing trail called Paradise, which is a smooth, five kilometres all the way into the village. From there you can bump up to Challenger, which is again a green but with more flow and a smaller trail feel to it, and little 'braids of blue,' we call them: little intermediate lines that dip off the green trail, then back

SHELLEY WOOD TAILS JESS PORTER ON FLOW, AN OLD-SCHOOL, BLACK DIAMOND RUN THAT COMBINES SWEEPING MEADOWS WITH BUMPY FOREST SINGLE-TRACK. BUT ONE GAL'S BLUE SQUARE TRAIL MAY BE ANOTHER'S DOUBLE BLACK DIAMOND, SO CHECK WITH GUEST SERVICES OR THE MOUNTAIN PATROLLERS FOR TIPS ON THE TRAILS, AND KNOW YOUR LIMITS. A FULL-FACE HELMET AND PROTECTIVE ARMOUR GOES A LONG WAY TOWARD AVOIDING SCRAPES AND BRUISES, BUT THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR COMMON SENSE

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on, giving people the opportunity to challenge their skills."

Many of the newer trails at Silver Star are machine made, a concept that originated at Whistler's bike park. Building traditional single-track trails typically involves zealous bush-whacking to find the natural contours, then much of the trail cutting is done by repeated riding, creating a skinny, meandering descent where roots and rocks serve as the major challenges. With machine-built trails, a crew will first go through and remove the trees along a predetermined route, then a small excavator actually builds the trail.

"The excavator makes those berms and tabletop jumps, creating trails that are very smooth, but with the big banked corners that let you go quite quickly," Rick explains. "A lot of people say this new stuff is like a bobsled ride, because with a downhill mountain bike you almost feel like you're floating through the trails, so smooth and fast."

As long as you're prepared to be overtaken by faster riders (and can move out of the way if necessary) the machine-built trails are a great place to get a feel for downhill riding.

"People who come up here, who haven't biked in a long time and get on a full-suspension bike on an intermediate trail that's machine-built, they can come to feel comfortable on that trail very quickly and feel quite safe," says Rick. "It boosts their confidence going down it and it doesn't feel as technical."

I admit I'm old school, happy to take it slow on the steep stuff as long as I can keep rubber on rock, and never too proud to get off and walk. I like the feeling of the forest closing in on me as I seek out the best line down a chunky section.

My favourite ride of the day? I think I'd have to go with Flow... which pretty much sums it up. **OL**