

BIG MOUNTAIN ENDURO MID-SEASON RECAP

By Sarah Rawley Photos by Nicholas Ontiveros

IN A YEAR WHEN ENDURO HAS BEEN STEALING THE LIMELIGHT FROM ALL OTHER DISCIPLINES OF MOUNTAIN BIKE RACING, THE BIG MOUNTAIN ENDURO SERIES HAS STOOD CENTER STAGE IN THE U.S. THE SERIES WAS CONCEIVED IN 2012 WITH THREE STOPS, INCLUDING THE WORLD-ACCLAIMED WHOLE ENCHILADA. SINCE LAST FALL IT HAS EVOLVED INTO FIVE EVENTS, EACH WITH A CONSIDERABLE PRO PAYOUT FOR DEEPER COMPETITION.

Since the beginning, Brandon Ontiveros has been the mastermind behind catapulting BME into its place as the premier enduro series in the U.S. With the season at its halfway point, Ontiveros thinks they have the right formula. "Once people attend a Big Mountain Enduro event, they'll realize the true camaraderie and fun-factor that coincides with the enduro movement. At the end of the day, participants are walking away from our events with more confidence on the bike and creating a new social network of friends, and that's how we know this sport is growing."

Three out of the five events occurred within three weeks of each other, from mid-June to early July, including one stop on the North American Enduro Tour (N.A.E.T.) on the punishing slopes of Keystone. Athletes were primed to take on three full weekends that included two days and six stages of racing per weekend, with course details announced the week of the event. For the pro classes, where there is a \$30,000 pro purse over the course of the season on the line, BME not only tests bike handling skills and fitness, but a rider's ability to thrive on a steep learning curve as well.

BME #1 in Angel Fire/Taos dished out almost every aspect of enduro racing, including a mash-up of backcountry and bike park style trails. With one day in the backcountry and one day at Angel Fire Bike Park, racers had a lot of ground to cover.

Mike West (Yeti Cycles/FOX) took third in the backcountry stage on Saturday, and third overall for the weekend at Angel Fire/Taos. "I love the raw venues, ones that take a bit of effort to get to and practice," West said. "In my opinion, exploration in the backwoods is half of what enduro is. The first day on the South Boundary trail has by far been my favorite - raw, tight, natural and fun."

Day 2 of BME #1 in Angel Fire/Taos sent riders up the Chile Pepper Express Chairlift to caress down four distinct stages, with everything from finishing in the notorious dual slalom course, sections of classic downhill racing, smashy rock gardens, smooth turns and berms, and the never-before-raced-on "Angel's Plunge," which took racers out and around the primary trails of the bike park.

Chris Johnston (The Nomads) travelled from Vancouver to race the Big Mountain Enduro Series events. Talking about his strategy when tackling the varied terrain in Angel Fire/Taos, he said, "You had to pedal hard, but conserve some energy for the following long stages, charge the burly downhill sections, but bear in mind you're still on a trail bike."

It was obvious from the beginning that Ross Schnell (Trek/POC/Bontrager/Shimano) and Kelli Emmet (Giant Factory Off-Road Team) would take a commanding and consistent lead. Schnell took a 27-second lead off the bat for Stage 1, which carried him through to win the first stop of the Big Mountain Enduro Series over Joey Schusler (Yeti Cycles), West, Johnston and Hills. Emmett won all five stages by large margins over Krista Park (Cannondale), Heather Irmiger (Trek Factory Racing), Jill Behlen (Tokyo Joes) and Sarah Rawley (Yeti Cycles/POC).

Fast-forward two weeks to Crested Butte Mountain Resort for BME #2. Amid the heart of wildflower season,



Proof that enduro is burly.

racers were treated to two days at Evolution Bike Park. Jeremy Horgan-Kobelski (Trek Factory Racing) has decided to focus on enduro racing after many years racing the World Cup cross-country circuit. When asked about the change he said, "The unpredictability is one of the great things about enduro. The events and courses have such different character that one weekend a downhill specialist will win, another week it may be a racer with a cross-country background. The only thing that we all have in common is a love of great trail riding at high speed, and you never know who will come out on top. It speaks to the balance of courses thus far."

BME #2 in Crested Butte was the weekend for Horgan-Kobelski to transcend his competition. As an Olympian, National Champion, and 13-year veteran of World Cup cross-country racing, JHK set the pace for the first day of racing with a ten-second lead over second and third place Nate Hills and Mike West, respectively, both of whom have consistently stayed within seconds

of each other throughout the entire season. While the first two stages were led by Chris Johnston and local talent Kain Leonard, respectively, stage 3 led riders down meandering singletrack where the absence of gravity-assisted features slingshotted Horgan-Kobelski to the front of the pack in a twelve-minute effort.

On the second day, racers faced three more stages, pedaling through handlebar-height skunk cabbage and even racing down the 2011 Pro GRT downhill track. Horgan-Kobelski maintained his lead, but saw it chipped down to eight seconds ahead of Hills and Schnell, who were separated by only .002 second. When asked about the battle for second, Schnell said, "The level of competition in enduro these days is really high. That is evidenced by the fact that the final result at the end of the weekend can and does come down to hundredths of a second. You can't tell me that doesn't motivate each rider to give 110% on every track. It also gives legitimacy to the timing systems that are being used, incredibly precise pieces of equipment."



Team Geronimo's Michael Buell enjoys the BME racing in Crested Butte.

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On the women's side, Irmiger put the hammer down to take the win on Stage 3, putting a respectable 22-second gap into second place after Day 1. Irmiger rode consistently to take the win for the weekend over Park, Behlen, Janæ Pritchett (Griggs Orthopaedic) and Evelyn Dong (White Pine Touring).

BME #3 in Keystone doubled up as the second stop of the North American Enduro Tour on June 6-7. The lucky competitors who call the Rocky Mountains home were visited by an onslaught of competitors from all over the country, all vying for the coveted points that will determine the top riders in North America at the finals on September 28-29 in Moab, Utah.

Ross Schnell is hoping to be at the top of that short list. "That's why the N.A.E.T. series is so great," Schnell said. "You get to try your hand at locations and venues around the country. The terrain and racing is so different when you go from an Oregon Enduro Series in Bend to a Big

Mountain Enduro venue like Keystone. You couldn't pick a more dichotomous comparison, and it just goes to show you how diverse enduro can be."

With 2,300 feet in vertical drop per stage to sort out the categories, it was a testament to the bike and the body to make it to the end of the weekend in one piece. From Day 1, young-gun Joey Schusler took a commanding lead. He continued winning throughout the weekend, winning five out of the six stages, claiming top points for the second stop of N.A.E.T. Schnell, Hills, Mason Bond (Yeti Cycles) and Horgan-Kobleski rounded out the podium for Keystone, with Bond the only non-Coloradoan to claim a step.

In the women's competition, Irmiger took the overall lead in the Big Mountain Enduro Series after winning two weekends in a row. "Keystone [was] the most challenging enduro of the season [thus far]," Irmiger said. "The trails had elements that were as burly or burlier



Jonathan Kohn



Cait Dmitriev racing the Keystone course.

than Angel Fire, and the length of the stages pushed all aspects of fitness, strength, endurance and focus of the athletes to the max - not to mention the equipment. It was an excellent proving ground for the bike technology, as well as the all-around skill of the rider."

With 18 total stages under their belts, competitors have two more events to make their mark on the domestic enduro scene. Mike Day, operations manager for the Big Mountain Enduro Series, said, "We cover a broad spectrum of terrain at each venue. So far we have had a lot of bike park stages, where technical ability goes a long way. Our next few events will be much more physically demanding, with longer backcountry transfers, and true big-mountain descents."

BME #4 in Durango, running August 31st and September 1st, has long been on the radar as one of the most physically demanding venues of the

series. According to Horgan-Kobleski, who raced the event last year and came in second behind Schnell, "Racers can expect huge untimed climbs, spectacular scenery, and long challenging singletrack descents that are too long to memorize, so you just let it all out and are barely hanging on at the end."

The series will culminate at BME #5 in Moab at the end of September. It will include the Whole Enchilada, where the top racers of the Big Mountain Enduro Series and the North American Enduro Tour will be crowned after two days of racing. The racing in Moab will be full of technical rock-strewn terrain, breath-taking vistas, and sweat. If you're able to pack up for a weekend, we highly recommend making the trip.

Stay tuned for an end of season update. 📺

For more info, bigmountainenduro.com

