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Phil Hall interview transcript

Peter

Hello and welcome, my name is Peter Downs from the inclusion club and it is a great pleasure to introduce to you today Phil Hall from Rough Riderz in the UK. Hi Phil

Phil

Hi

Peter

How are you going there?

Phil

It's all good - very cold and very wet, but that is England for you!

Peter

I think Phil is going to do a much better job than me in describing Rough Riderz, and you can also see in this episode about Rough Riderz and what they do - but Phil, can you give us a very quick snapshot - can you describe what you do?

Phil

Rough Riderz was started by myself after I went to America to try what we call in the UK 'gravity biking' which is a form of downhill mountain biking that was devised in America as an ideal form of mountain biking for disabled people. So we ride a four-wheel mountain bike but they are based on a normal conventional mountain bike so it's full suspension, hydraulic disc brakes. They are really capable machines the only difference being that we don't have any pedals, hence we coined the phrase 'gravity bike' so we rely totally on the downhill experience to get us to the bottom. And then it's just a question of riding it as fast as you dare and obviously if you brake then you'll wash some of your speed and some of the excitement and if you go too fast you might end up in a tree like I have done before now. So it's a case of gauging your speed and getting an adrenaline fix like other riders do. We're promoting it as a fully inclusive sport because there is no reason why an able-bodied person wouldn't want to have a go. We get quite a lot of people in the UK saying they'd like to have a go – we've had quite a few people doing taster days with us, able-bodied guys that I used to ride the normal downhill bikes and just fancy the experience of riding four wheels instead of two. It's like a cross between rallying and downhill mountain biking, so it's really great fun.

Peter

It certainly looks it. Correct me if I'm wrong but I'm guessing the mountain bike community are generally an inclusive and have pretty open minded attitudes towards inclusion generally speaking, is that right?

Phil

Yes, very much so. The people that actually right are just fascinated with the bikes when we

turn up with our bikes and we are constantly being asked questions, how long have we been riding and where do we ride?. There's a look of amazement on some people's faces, but not in a patronising way, they just pleased that we are out there on the trails with them. People are so nice too. We seem to have this reputation, especially downhill bikers, because it's an extreme sport, I think we are all labeled as a bit nuts and people tend to avoid you, but they are the nicest bunch of people and the amount of times that we have had a bit of a hiccup on a trail and maybe had a bit of a crash or whatever - as soon as somebody rides past and just ride past - they will stop and ask if you need assistance. Again not in a patronising way, if they can offer help they will. Yes, they are very accepting and very pleased to see disabled riders out there and riding with them because they understand the importance of getting out in the mountains and experiencing the terrain and the adrenaline and everything else that the sport offers.

Peter

It's something to do with the nature of the sport, that it lends itself to an open attitude and acceptance, I'm guessing?

Phil

Yes, I think so. Because people have this attitude about downhill - it is all a bit mad so we'll stick together. Because it is a slightly extreme sport and it can be dangerous. I ridden trails in the past and I've gone past somebody who's come off on two wheels - so I stop and say 'do you need any assistance' - from our point of view because obviously I can't give them assistance - but I can get to the bottom and alert somebody that there is somebody on the trail with an injury. It's very much like that, a very close knit community although they don't seem to refuse anybody either – it's not one of these clicky tight communities that if you're not extreme enough and you're not welcome. If you like Mountain biking then you are just part of the family, that's basically it. It's fantastic.

Peter

So has your major challenge then been mainly a technical one. The mountain bike itself and the terrain and trails that you do stuff on. Tell us a bit about the bike?

Phil

Yes, I guess there are two elements to it. One of the challenging parts for us in the UK has been to try and get recognition from outside of the sport with regards to things like funding and sports organisations accepting the fact that it should be okay for disabled people to do extreme sports because it is almost like a knee-jerk reaction that 'oh, you are going downhill mountain biking in a wheelchair, what are you doing?' I've even had people ask me 'are you not afraid of injuring yourself', I just say aren't normal mountain bikers afraid of injuring themselves – you've just got to gauge that can go as fast as you dare go - you just don't go silly all the time or you might have an accident.

But yes, I suppose the biggest challenge of all is the terrain, where can we ride. We've got to accept that not all trails are suitable for us to ride at and they never will be. That's part and parcel of this sport. There are single track trails all over the place in the UK that would probably be good for us to ride if they were wider but we don't want to spoil the scene. We deal with the Forestry Commission who own lot of the land where these trails are on and we don't want to go to the Forestry Commission every time we discover a new trail and say we want to make it slightly wider and make it slightly less extreme and can we make the jump a bit smaller. Because then all the regular guys will say 'thanks you just ruined my regular trail'.

So we only ever ask for adaptations that are not going to infringe the experience of ordinary riders. And that has worked really well because there are a lot of trails. People think that we've had a Q&A quite a lot of times with the Forestry Commission staff who say we don't think you are going to be able to ride here - we might say 'look, we've looked at videos and it looks pretty suitable, let's taste test it and see what the problems are' and we actually do that we might find a trail that is over a 1 km long or 2 or 3 km long and has five minutes of run downhill, and there might be only two changes to make on the entire trail and a lot of the time - if it sounded like a really extreme trail feature, like there might be a really big jump and our bikes can't just cope with and it would be dangerous to even attempt - then we just generally say can we build a 'ride around' so that it gives people an option and an alternative route around the obstacle. The Forestry Commission have done that and then it doesn't affect all riders and they have also given us feedback to say this is brilliant - what

you've done because this new feature loads of people having accidents and now we have a 'ride around' so people that not so confident or maybe less experienced on two wheels have the option to ride around it as well until they build up their confidence and experience a little bit more.

Peter

No, it wouldn't do you any good to go in there saying that you must provide for us. I like the way that you compromise and negotiate around that.

Phil

You've got to yes, because you don't want to upset normal mountain bikers because we have to be realistic with the Forestry Commission. They haven't got bottomless pockets and why should they accommodate us above anybody else – we've got to fit in with the things that are already there.

Peter

I'm interested in how you negotiate that. You have a great expression on your website that says 'gravity mountain bike friendly venues'. Tell me, isn't it an expensive sport to get into?

Phil

Yes, that was one of the reasons that I set up the club. I wanted to experience it myself and there was nowhere in the UK that even offered the experience, which shocked me. The way I found out about it was that I just saw a poster in an activity centre one-day, which was just a big picture on a poster on a wall of a guy kicking up a load of dust, half in the air, and half about to land on this weird four wheeled go-kart bike contraption thing, and I thought 'what is that?'. I used to downhill mountain bike before my accident and as soon as I saw the picture I thought 'wow, I want to try that'. So I spoke to a lot of people in the disabled community in the UK and the different contacts I had, which include people in chairs and organizations, and half of them said they had never heard of it, the other half said I think you just made this up or dreamt it.

Because they didn't know anything about it. So after a lot of research I found the place in

America where you could go and try it but of course that was very expensive - it meant three flights to a very small town in Colorado to try it. I spent a week out there and absolutely loved it. So I thought 'well I've loved it' - there's got to be other wheelchair users in the UK that hanker for the same sort of adrenaline. I have always been looking for a sport that could give me a thrill post my accident - I never found anything that really hit the spot until I did downhill and I thought and that's where I've come from prior to my accident and the fact that I can get back on a bike and do downhill again - it was such a thrill and also the adrenaline fix that it gives you was really important to me - and I thought I had this brainwave on the way home on the flight that I could start my own club, 'that'll be easy', and then spent the next two or three years trying to get established and get all the relevant checks done with British Cycling and all the papers in order - and it turned out to be a real hassle but still worth it.

I kept pushing forward - so we can now offer 'taster days' to other people. One of the biggest barriers to people is getting the equipment. We've had a lot of people come on taster days and saying 'I want my bike, can I buy my own bike' - well at the time, the only bike that was available was built in Canada, so it have to explain to them that you must buy one from Canada which isn't cheap and then of course you have the shipping on top. In the UK the equivalent in our currency was about £8000 to buy the bike and then you're talking about another £600 or £700 to ship it over from Canada. And it's just all that hassle and the amount of costs involved. A lot of people even said to me I can buy a small car for that and I said 'yes well, I know but fortunately I am not in control of the cost of these machines and we don't make any' so you're stuck with the supplier that makes them although they do make very good bikes, I'm not criticising the bikes at all, I think the bikes are brilliant as the bikes we use at the moment were built in Canada and that absolutely bullet-proof, fantastic machines and they have been tested by somebody who rides them over the past seven or eight years and where he's found a weak spot he's addressed it and then done something about it - so as time has gone on the model has been modified ever so slightly as times progressed to make it better and better and better.

So it's really capable of some pretty extreme stuff now once the person has the experience and the ability to match the bike. I been riding now for close to 6 1/2 years and I don't think

I've found the bikes limit yet, I've crushed quite a few times when I found my own limits, but the bike is more than capable of handling far more than I can throw at it at the moment. So part of the process of setting up the club was to make it more accessible for people to try it initially and that's now developed in the last 12 months as he gone through the process of wanting to build the UK bike because we see is a situation here now where we think we can make it a cheaper bike without having a detrimental effect on the quality of the machine.

This is ideally what we want to do. To make it more accessible for people so that when somebody does try and says to me 'I want my own bike' we can say 'look, you can buy one in the UK and you can go and look at them before you buy them' and honestly, you already ridden with us anyway but you can go and look at them and choose your colour scheme and go and visit the factory that makes them. This will obviously cost a lot less an overseas model and a no shipping issues. We are also looking at now a project that has got so far down the line, which started with research and development for a prototype to build - so we are hoping that by summer next year will be finished and will actually be testing it.

Peter

What is the future of Rough Riderz gravity mountain biking? Maybe a Paralympic games in the future?

At the moment downhill isn't recognised as an Olympic sport so it would be difficult. What we've found is that, if the sport has to be accepted into the Olympics usually as a test sport, it's the first year and then when it comes round in another four years, if they decide, if successful, it gets adopted as a new sport and then it becomes a test for the Paralympics. But that's quite a long way off in the future if it ever happens. But downhill mountain biking is a community where we look after each other, so downhill events still go on in the world championships which happen every year, so it's a well-established sport that looks after it's self - I hope it will be accepted and adopted to all these conventional events that already exist, whether it be the British downhill serious where the keen amateurs are people who can step up to a more professional level.

So it could be initially introduced at events like that. Some amateurs could get involved so

people will surely start to shine - they could maybe go on to take it on as a professional sport and promote themselves, get sponsors, and who knows, eventually maybe there would be a section of the World Cup, but we always have to be a section - we couldn't race against two wheels because the guys on two wheels have got pedals and they can go faster at the end of the day.

But there is no reason why we can't ride the same tracks as them at some events, just have different qualifications, 'who won on two wheels' and 'who won on four wheels'. And that would be an amazing achievement if we got there in five or six years time - showcasing at events like that, it would be awesome.

Peter

Well I reckon you might get there one day Phil. I certainly hope you do. For Inclusion Club people who are watching in the future - if you have any inkling of interest at all - I really encourage you to have a look at the Rough Riderz website and I'm sure Phil would be more than happy to answer questions - so if you are interested, no matter where you are around the world, I would really encourage you if possible to talk to Phil as I am sure he will answer any questions you might have - I think it's a fantastic initiative. Never know how it might turnout in terms of being integrated into regular mountain bike events in the future.

Phil

Yes, that's what you want, one big family of downhill mountain bikers as we all look after each other and there's no reason why we can't get to the stage where we have established events over here and then who knows, in a few years time, you might be competing against other teams in Europe and right across the world. That would be really my dream to be honest. Initially, to get other Rough Riderz clubs set up around the UK, so it's more accessible for people in different areas of the UK and then in other countries. I can advise people who want to set up their own clubs in other countries once this project gravity X - about the new bike, when that's got to the point where a new bike is ready - we can even organise supply of machines to people and advise them as to training for the new people and it could really snowball and take off from there.

Peter

That's great Phil, there is more information in this episode about Rough Riderz - like I say do take a look at the website. I'll say thanks there Phil, just hold the line while I finish this interview, thanks very much for your time – I appreciate it and hope you get some really good feedback over time from this episode of The Inclusion Club.

Phil

Okay cheers

END