



Mountain Bike Racing - Dirt Culture

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the rovaniemi 150

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This is a story about a race that started as an adventure, which turned into a race being actually raced.

Like many adventures, this one started in the pub. One night, my friend Brant, a bike designer for On-One, announced "I'm going to race in the Arctic Circle on a fat bike." I replied, "That sounds brilliant." After a quick exchange of competing dares, and a few more pints, I decided to also enter the Rovaniemi 150.

The Rovaniemi 150 is a 150 km ultra-endurance race in the Finnish Lapland around the city of Rovaniemi, located within the Arctic Circle. The course consists of snowmobile trails, frozen roads and snowshoeing paths. Competitors race on fat bikes, on foot and on skis through the frozen rivers, lakes and forests of the area. The 2013 event would be only the second year for the race.


For my job, I ran mountain bike skills courses in the UK and lead riding holidays in France and Spain. From early spring to late autumn, I'm pretty busy and don't get to participate in many mountain bike events. The winter months are much quieter, so I tend to go riding more, just for me, at that time. This schedule would allow me ample time to train for the Rovaniemi 150.

How does someone who doesn't race go about training? I asked my friend Shaggy, who placed second in last year's inaugural Rovaniemi 150, for training advice. Shaggy said I should ride as much as possible, that I should practice pushing my bike, and that I should do some running. The riding bit sounded like fun rather than training, so I focused on that. As for bike pushing, I live on the Pennines, a ridge of hills known as "the backbone of England," where I like to go on "paw storming" rides to access the more exciting trails. Doing so requires a lot of bike carrying and pushing, so that aspect of my training would also be covered. I struggled with running, I have the shoes, but found that I developed knee pain after 15 minutes and never really managed to progress beyond that time. Oh well, never mind.

My goal for the event was simply to complete the course without stopping to sleep. I hoped I wouldn't finish last, but didn't have any further aspirations. I was happy for the opportunity to ride my bike in the snowy Lapland forests. If I also saw the Northern Lights, that would be a bonus.

The moment you start preparing for an adventure is the moment you start the adventure. An Arctic biking trip requires specialized equipment, not all of which was in my gear collection. I obtained an On One Jitty fat bike and started riding it frequently as detailed in my "training plan." It was actually more fun than I expected. I rode out in different directions to the usual steep-sided valley trails that I normally ride. I explored gravel tracks and boggy hills that I would normally ignore, but which became more fun and accessible when on four-inch tyres. Fat tyres are not the holy grail, but it is remarkable how they can float over different surfaces. With gravity on my side, I could surf over peat bog that would normally swallow me up. When conditions were right, I planned my first proper fat bike ride in the snow. The tyres built up a platform of solid snow, like the spread of a snowshoe, and rode up on it instead of dropping through. They really worked!

Towards the end of my training period I set out on a final big ride that was an adventure in itself. I mapped an off-road route that started 100 kilometers away from my house. I could ride the train from home and get off at the start of the route. I figured that if I could do this distance in the snow with more elevation than the race



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Photo: Ed Osley

“I aimed to keep moving, whether by pedaling or walking quickly. I thought of nothing except wondering if someone would catch me. I was determined that they would not, because I wanted that trophy. The last prize I had ever won was for poetry recitation in 1979.”