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Riding to Improve

The weekend had arrived and the big race had arrived for Enzo Sapojnikoff. Nervousness and anxiety had set in. “Will I do alright? Am I going to be stuck in the back on my first varsity race,” As the morning passed, Enzo’s race approached in the afternoon. He was unable to refuel his body for the day, a terrible action as he would need the coal in order to finish the race. A sandwich and some coffee cake would have to do since he was unable to down anything else. Around two hours before his race began, it was time to warm up. Enzo hopped on a static trainer, spinning the pedals around until his legs felt like Jello. He heard some shouting from over a megaphone. “Can all varsity racers please line up?” He inched his way into the back of the group lining up at the start line, then boom, the race had begun.

Over the last several years the rate of obesity in the United States has been steadily climbing. As a means to combat this issue in children, physical education teachers have been pushing for kids to spend more time exercising. Yet the same sports are always recommended like soccer and basketball, even though according to an article posted in *Frontiers in Physiology*, mountain biking shares a similar level of physical activity. Why is it that extreme sports are not recommended to children as an alternative? Is it due to the risk of injury being much greater? After speaking with three avid high school mountain bikers, there are misconceptions that the general public may have about the sport, including risk of getting

injured. The highschoolers stated that many physiological and mental benefits can be had by participating in mountain biking.

As a relatively new sport, mountain biking has its origins in Marin County, CA, where groups of teenagers would ride their bikes on Mt. Tamalpais. Soon many disciplines would begin to appear including cross-country, downhill, and endurance. Eventually the teenagers began to compete in downhill races against each other, increasing the popularity of their actions, as spectators would flock to come see the teens. For a select few individuals who were willing to place their lives at risk, as the safety technology was not up to par, they enjoyed the adrenaline rush of the wind blowing past their faces. It wouldn't be until the late 1990s that the sport would evolve into a mainstream activity, with the 1996 Atlanta Olympics debuting it as a discipline in both mens and womens categories. It's now the 21st century and technology has come a long way, allowing for more strenuous courses, previously lethal, to be ridden safely, without the risk of death. With an increase in safety, high school leagues like the National Interscholastic Cycling Association have risen, giving highschoolers like Austin Jewett, Enzo Sapojnikoff, and Tony Nardeli opportunities to compete in races across the nation, proving their dedication to the sport. For many of the competitors, their parents start their journey in mountain biking at a young age. For Austin and Tony, their dad's introduced them to the sport as a means to keep them in shape. Austin would go on to enjoy the sport to such an extent that he would join a team called the Woodside Beast. While Tony never joined a team, he continued with the sport stating many health benefits that have come along with continued participation. Though Enzo is the newest of the three riders, only starting a couple of years ago, he has already joined a team and is beginning to train for a chance to become a professional, a job many only dream of.

In fact, for Austin he already seems to have made it to the professional level at 17 years old, being sponsored by Santa Cruz bikes. “I met a guy who worked there at an enduro race” tells Austin. During one of the races that he attends every year on a trip to Canada, he’d been doing particularly well this year. Maneuvering through the thick pine trees of the Canadian alpiners, Jewett had been on a good pace due to some excellent pre planning work the day prior. This race was split up into several stages, each one becoming slightly more difficult than the previous one. Yet he only seemed to become quicker with each stage that he completed. By the midway point, he was setting down times that were competitive with some of the better riders. Talking to the employee “he seemed to be checking out my times and asked me to send him my resume,” says Austin. After completing his race, he would continue to ride for Santa Cruz, even during the global health crisis that we are currently experiencing, stating that it was the only way he would leave his house. Even through stay at home order, he will complete 20 hours of riding a week to stay in physical shape, a perk that all three of the riders unanimously agree upon. “My dad. Told me it was a great way to stay in shape,” says Tony. “...it’s a harder sport... And that’s what really gives you that adrenaline rush,” A study analyzing the physiological requirements to mountain bike found that the sport had a similar acyclical respiratory pattern to that of soccer and basketball, where an athlete is at their maximal aerobic power. They found that mountain biking, unlike most classical cycling events, is closer to that of some high intensity sports, yet it is not recommended to children at a young age by medical professionals as an alternative. Even though there is an inherent risk of blazing down a hill on a bike, which can cause harm to a person, it’s the adrenaline that causes people to appreciate the sport more.

Causing harm to oneself is not a rare occurrence when mountain biking, as “you can just flip over...but it’s your choice to get back up,” Tony told me as he described a fall he had recently acquired. It was a regular ride, commuting through the hills, until his bike began to wobble. The grip of his tires on the ground began to loosen as he skidded around the trail, going at frightening speeds. He found his body aching, then a burning sensation arose. Looking around green shrubbery surrounded him, then he saw a little purple. The burn soon switched to an uncontrollable itch, and his vision began to worsen. Tony realised that he had fallen into Poison Oak, to which he had a bad reaction to the oils of the plant, but to him this was nothing new. He had taken falls in the past, but he accepted that sooner or later he was going to fall. It’s an attitude that Tony incorporated into his like, stating “ it’s a great mentality to have... even though you fail at something, it doesn’t mean it’s over,” Not giving up when a challenge approaches you is a great skill to have in life, even if in the moment it can seem as if there is no recovering from the situation. Mountain biking can lead to better decision making and risk management skills in children. They’ll have to learn how to deal with flat tires, falling, and choosing a good line or path to take while descending the mountain, otherwise they’ll have to face the repercussions.

Riding out in nature can bring more benefits than one might think. Being outside can give a person to relax, not worrying about the small events in their lives. It can be so effective that some therapists use mountain biking as a means to help their struggling patients. “I think mountain biking can be a way to remove yourself from the reality of the world,” said Tony. “Not being able to think about work or school is a great way to destress yourself,” “A lot of times when I’m feeling down...I feel better every time I’m done riding,” added Austin. He explained that being out in the forest lets him forget any issues he is experiencing and focus

solely on reaching the end of his ride. Not only did he give himself an opportunity to set his mind at ease, but he helped his own health, completing a workout which vigorously affects the entire body. Yet for Enzo, who had only recently started riding, had a profound effect on his life.

Normally an upbeat and happy man, had recently gone through a bad breakup, causing him to face “a whole bunch of gnarly emotions,” He was blaming himself for a lot of things. “I was pretty depressed, man,” said Enzo. Unlike his brash self he didn’t have the spark of motivation to move on, until a group of friends invited him out on a casual ride through the local hills. Soon they persuaded him to attend and compete in one of their team’s races. “It rekindled something in me,” Finishing the race, seeing his teammates stoked on getting out there and supporting each other, including other racers, truly brought back a passion that he had lost. Enzo admits that it “sounds cliché as hell... But that’s the damn truth,” Without his mountain bike, he doesn’t know where he would be right now. All three riders wholeheartedly agreed that enjoying themselves while riding their bikes brought tangible health benefits to them, and the general community agrees with their statements. A survey, conducted in study submitted to the journal *Frontier in Psychology*, found most responders reported “copious benefits to mental health and well-being related to their engagement,”

All of the interviewees are at different stages in mountain biking; all wanting to improve and hope to see the sport continue to grow in popularity. With the sport being in its relative infancy, there is always space for more people to join. “Our community is really friendly, they’ll help you out,” said Austin without hesitation. Instead of competing against each other, which is still the case, the community tries to support everyone. Enzo commented on who he felt completing his first varsity race. “It was an amazing feeling seeing everyone who attended the

race at the finish line, cheering you on as you pushed to cross the line,” Afraid of disappointing his teammates, he was surprised to find that they were only cheering for him. They were there to build him up, and give him the opportunity to improve. Maybe even get a chance to achieve his dream, and become a professional. “I could definitely see myself with a couple of brands and sponsors getting behind me,” In addition to going pro, Enzo would love to see more people join the sport. “You don't have to have the best equipment,” In his opinion it doesn't matter, just give it a try. “Go to one race. Practice with a team and see where that takes you because... it might sweep you off your feet,”