

## INTO THE RIDE #100

### Trail Building 101

by Randy Schlitter

Building a good bike trail must be something that comes with practice, because the first attempts for our company "test track" were less than wonderful. That first trail was a work out, about a mile long and requiring a strong heart. Those who rode it tried to be nice and say it was a great cardio workout, but what I think they really meant was the trail lacked fun factor.

Having ridden the trails along the creek in Hays, the stubby-hilled trails at Lake Wilson, and various mountain bike courses in Colorado, I knew a certain fun factor was possible.

The trails in Colorado were exhilarating, but the elevation changes and scenery cannot be duplicated out back of the RANS factory. The Wilson Lake trails are gaining in popularity and winning acclaim among experienced mountain bikers from all over the USA, and the humble trail along Big Creek in Hays has its attraction. So why not the RANS trail? We all knew a more fun trail could be built, but first understanding what made other trails exciting would help. I have listed below, and not in any order of importance, what I think are key elements of trail building.

#### 1. Distance

This can be a deal breaker for some. A long trail with no way out, other than to complete the loop, can cause some to opt out. A trail with some options on the distance seems ideal. Such trails appeal to all skill levels. The trails at Wilson Lake are like this; the total distance is 22 miles, but in four distinct segments that you can either lace together or not. Our trail currently is 1.3 miles, but with new segments, we plan to surpass 2.5 miles. Already we have an inner and outer trail. The inner "Ravine" segment is short and exciting, and sometimes on break employees will do a lap or two; being a ten minute break, this small loop works out great.



#### 2. Elevation changes

A flat trail is less interesting than one with lots of ups and downs. In our current trail there is about 350 feet of ups and downs. Not bad for such a short distance, but the ground is far from flat. Lucky for us, the only really

flat part is the runway! A lot of elevation changes keeps it interesting and ties into the next topic...

### 3. Rhythm: Climbs, Dives, and Recovery

Any long climb deserves recovery and exciting downhill sections. We tried to make the climbs and dives alternate between some being steep, others gradual, and some fairly equal grade up and down. Riding the trail either direction depending on the wind will offer up a completely different ride. Rhythm is that well timed-out combination of climbing, diving, and recovery, and in my opinion is the hardest thing to build into a trail. When I first laid out a trail I used a push mower and figured if I could push a mower through, I could ride it. After riding such a trail it became apparent push mowers and bikes are not alike in turning radius and cruise speeds. Our current trail is maintained by a riding mower, and has yielded a much more bike-worthy trail. There are some challenging parts for this ancient John Deere to pass through, but each pass grooms out the bumps. We run the blade low as possible and in some spots seem to actually mow the dirt!

### 4. Smooth Factor

As mentioned above, the riding mower is helping with making the ride smooth. A smooth trail is joy to ride, but hold on! This is a mountain bike trail where we want to test our bikes. There is a need to leave some rough element; in fact we are introducing just such elements as per Features below.

### 5. Features

These are those things about a trail riders will talk about later. In our trail we have a set of wooden steps and a sky bridge. These are two prominent features that should attract riders, and make it challenging and fun, and more importantly are optional to enjoying the trail. Other features we plan on introducing are some twisting bowl sections, a teeter-totter, some moguls, and drops. A new segment of a couple of hairpin turns climbs up from the bottom of the ravine and then has a fast smooth, steep return into the ravine. The climb up is challenging with our longer bikes, but hey, it is a test track for both the rider and bike.



### 6. Scenery

On the factory trail there are no breathtaking vistas overlooking a valley below, or ocean, or severe erosion (read Grand Canyon). There are, however, a few trees, some grass, and gentle swells to the land. What makes this trail visually exciting is the compact "test track" nature and man-made features.

## 7. Others' Input

Listed last, but most important! Our current trail is not the simple act of me pushing a mower this way and that. Involved was both our engineer, and long time employee Dean Schultz. They managed to bring to the trail all the points covered above, and do so in a way that makes me proud every time I make a loop. Thanks guys, you are the best! We also had the input of locally famous trail builder Bob Nichols. He indirectly contributed by doing such a fine job on the Wilson Lake trails. Bob's work inspired me to demand more from our track. He somehow finds the natural rhythm to land and keeps the ride challenging and interesting.

Building and riding the trail has been a very rewarding task, but also a great investment. It is a convenient and safe way to check out a new design or continue to torture-test a current model. It is a great asset to our employees and family members who love to get in some PT during breaks or off hours. And by invitation we allow local riders. The trail is gaining in favor among the locals, and that is perhaps the sweetest reward for me, since our first attempts were not popular. This fall during the RANS Rally we plan to stage a lap race on the trail. If you are planning to attend, bring your RANS MTB-CF, or whatever mount you have for the off road. It will be a fun event for both riders and spectators. Thanks for stopping by, and please ride safe and until next time... stay into the ride!







*INTO THE RIDE*