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LIVING TO RIDE:
A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF FREERIDERS
IN MISSOULA, MONTANA

by

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Professional Paper

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for the degree of

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Living to Ride: A Sociological Study of Freeriders in Missoula Montana

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This paper is an ethnographic description of The Safety Team, a group of freeriders frequenting the Bike Doctor in Missoula Montana. Information about this faction of freeriding's social world is revealed using the members' own words and experiences as data. This study is meant to explore the significance of bike riding to the members of Missoula's freeride "scene," including its effect on their beliefs, values, and ethics. Qualitative methods are used including participant-observation structured within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Relationships within freeriding are explored, as are associations between this group and members of the larger society such as land managers. The history of mountain biking and freeriding are explored and issues within Missoula's local backdrop are described. The riders' perspectives on their sport and its image is described while the future of freeriding is speculated upon using extreme sport predecessors with commonalities such as skateboarding and snowboarding.

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This paper would not have been possible if it weren't for three very important and incredible people. I would like to thank Eric, who encouraged me to ride my bicycle even when it would have been easier not to. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Rob, who somehow never gave up on me completing my thesis throughout the purchase of a business, multiple knee surgeries, one forced evacuation, renovation of a 1937 gas station, and over a decade time lapse. To finish, I would like to dedicate this project to "JJ," who died tragically during a climbing expedition in Kyrgyzstan. Thank you for opening my eyes to a new kind of freedom on my bicycle. You will not be forgotten.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“It has more to do with living to ride than it has to do with the style of riding you’re doing.” –Evan, a 31-year-old rider

As you walk into downtown Missoula, Montana, it is apparent that bike culture has saturated this University town. People on funky retro cruisers and bikes of every ilk zip past in every direction. Bike racks are packed with road bikes, fully suspended downhill rigs and commuter bikes of every color. There are bike lanes painted bright white down the sides of Higgins Avenue, and for a town of 57,053 people,¹ the five bike shops present here make Missoula seem like a bike shop rests on every corner. Biking is an important part of daily life and affects the very texture of this Montana town.

One of the many bike shops here has been called the “epicenter of Missoula’s freeride scene” by *Bike Magazine*’s editor-at-large, Mitchell Scott. It’s a small service-based shop called the Bike Doctor. Numerous bike industry and bike magazine aficionados, including Scott who stopped at the Bike Doctor on his “Mountain Biking Adventure Along a Road Less Traveled,” have explored freeriding as the “new face of mountain biking.” (Scott 2004, p.1) Scott begins his first article for a website sponsored by Honda Element (www.elementroadtrip.com/np/p/log.asp) saying that as he steps into the bike shop at 420 North Higgins Avenue, “...everything just feels right. This is the Zion we have been looking for. Our ten-day long collective freeride search has finally discovered a significant scene” (Scott 2004, p.1).

¹ 2000 U.S. Census.

Pictures of bruises, cuts, scrapes, stitches, missing teeth, swollen ankles and knees fill the shop walls, as x-rays of broken clavicles, separated shoulders and a plethora of pins and other various hardware inserted into ankles and legs cover the windows. Next to these gruesome images are photos of grinning, armor-clad and full-faced helmet-wearing folks, some of them airborne on their bicycles above huge wooden or dirt jumps, teeter-totters, rock outcroppings and elevated bridges. Groups of riders, arms around each other, smile grittily for the camera as the backdrop of a lush forest covered in bikes lying on their sides frames the scene. A slogan from a bike magazine is cut out and taped up among the images, “Ride Safely! Always wear your helmet.” A photographer accompanying Scott during the Honda Element Northern Passage Tour, Derek Frankowski, took a picture of this wall and posted on their website. The caption reads, “Tales of carnage, tales of joy. The infamous (and sometimes gory) photo wall at the Bike Doctor.”



While the Bike Doctor caters to a wide variety of customers, the team that is sponsored through the shop and is the focus of this paper, the Safety Team, is not the

traditional lycra-clad race team. They are a bevy of individuals that made the images and x-rays on the shop walls possible. Team members don't represent the shop by competing, but instead ride in exhibitions and festivals, support the shop or otherwise warrant the help. Watching the team ride at events, people have called Missoula's Safety Team a freeride team, but it is unclear if such a thing can even exist. The term freeriding is at best indistinct, and carries with it a juxtaposition of ideas. This makes defining freeriding a dicey subject that many bike magazine editors and riders prefer to ignore due to its dubious nature, yet the wall in the Bike Doctor is undoubtedly a collage embodying, at least in part, the quintessence of freeriding. The International Mountain Biking Association, commonly referred to as IMBA, discovered the difficulty of pinning down precisely what freeriding is as they attempted to define it for a copy of their newsletter called The Freeride Guide

http://www.imba.com/news/trail_news/17_1/itn_17_1_freeriding_intro.html).

...because freeriding means different things to different people... several years and countless meetings later... IMBA has defined freeriding as "a style of mountain biking that celebrates the challenges and spirit of technical riding and downhill." (Blumenthal 2004, p.1)

This definition is extremely vague and creates as many questions as it answers. What does it mean to *celebrate* a challenge, and what is the spirit of technical riding?

According to Tim Blumenthal of IMBA, "at the end of the day, freeriding is basically just advanced-level mountain biking" (Blumenthal 2004, p.1). Freeriding accordingly, represents the progression of the sport of mountain biking. As the skills of the riders and bicycle manufacturers have improved, the sport has naturally developed. Freeriding may include riding on trails, jumps, bridges and natural obstacles such as rocks and logs (see

Photo Exhibit 1), but seems to have more to do with the mentality of the rider than the terrain. Although the word “freeride” was developed to attempt to distinguish this type of mountain biking from other types of cycling, there was an immediate backlash against the term. Riders especially were divided in its usage. Some riders embraced the term while others made fun of it, calling it “fun riding,” or donning 1970s afro wigs and referring to themselves as “froriders.” There was an observable resistance to being labeled which did more to define freeriding than did the term itself.

Exhibit 1: Freeriding Photos

			
Jumps	Bridges	Rocks	Logs

Missoula’s Safety Team, a group of advanced-level mountain bikers, or freeriders, constitutes what sociologists call a social world. According to Farnsworth: “A social world is a loose, fluctuating network of individuals bound together by social relationships, shared understandings and interests” (Farnsworth 1980, p. 4).

Social worlds may include athletes, restaurant workers, poker players, or countless other loosely knit collections of individuals whose common interests and understandings provide a taken-for-granted basis for social interaction. Herbert Blumer, who coined the term symbolic interactionism in his 1937 article, "Social Psychology," defined the social world as "the actual group life of human beings" and asserts that very few research scientists will have much direct, firsthand knowledge of the social worlds they choose to study. He asserts that any conception a researcher forms of that world prior to conducting a study of it will be limited and that stereotypical images will automatically enter into any model subsequently used as the basis of that study. As a member and promoter of Missoula's Safety Team, I have enjoyed an insider's view of this social world of freeriders, and as a graduate student in sociology, I will attempt to step back and analyze the scene from a sociological perspective. This paper presents the results of that analysis.

This paper begins with a brief history of mountain biking, how it gave birth to freeriding, and how this history has shaped the current image of the sport. Subsequently, the local group of mountain bikers is introduced, and secondary involvement within as well as outside the sport is examined by looking at relationships between freeriders and others involved in shaping mountain bike culture such as promoters, spectators and perhaps most importantly, land managers. The external environment surrounding mountain biking in Missoula is described, and some of the local issues currently surrounding the sport are discussed. Finally, I will speculate on the future of the sport of

freeriding by comparing freeriding with some of its extreme sport predecessors, namely snowboarding and skateboarding.

Chapter 2

The Roots: A Brief History of Mountain Biking

Creation myths exist to explain everything from where life began to why the sky is blue. No two stories are alike, and in fact, many contradict each other. In searching for the roots of the sport of mountain biking, the predecessor to freeriding, one finds as many stories as there are stories to explain the beginning of the world. Different renditions of where, when and with whom mountain biking began include different places, different times and different people.

The truth is, there is not really a single beginning to mountain biking. Many people were doing many similar things at the same time. The idea caught on, and communication then sped the process of evolution. (Partland and Gibson 2003, p.16)

The most common story shared among cyclists credits the infamous “Repack” with the roots of the sport. The legend states that three free-spirits (most commonly thought to be Gary Fisher, Tom Ritchey and Joe Breeze) who lived in Marin County, California, took the initiative to push their modified cruiser bikes to the top of Mt. Tam (Mt. Tamalpais), and tear down the fire roads as fast as they could to the bottom of the mountain. These bikes were single-speed, coaster brake-style “beach cruisers” that resembled the bicycles that first appeared in the 1930s with balloon tires and wide handle bars, easily weighing in at forty or more pounds each.

The term “coaster brake” refers to the kind of braking mechanism that engages as you pedal backwards and is the same brake that many kids’ bikes use today. Coaster brakes were critical in the naming of the Repack. The overheating that occurred in the

hubs (the center of the wheel) from constant braking would liquefy the grease inside and cause it to run out, leaving the hub bone dry. After each run down Mt. Tam, the trio would have to repack their rear hubs with grease in order to have functioning brakes and moving rear wheels for the next trip down the mountain. These three “wise men,” as they are often called, told their friends about their new pastime, who in turn told their friends. The idea got so popular that the first Repack Race was held on Mt. Tam in 1976. From this point these three men along with others, began creating and producing bikes that would more efficiently allow for this type of rugged bicycling, and mountain biking was born.

Although the Mt. Tam Repack is the most common rendition of the creation story, other versions name the three men as Gary Fisher, Tom Ritchey and Charles Kelly; some say it was Joe Breeze, Otis Guy and Marc Vendetti; and certain versions even say that the first Repack was on Pine Mountain, not Mt. Tam at all. While no one may know for sure the exact history of this legendary race, some people claim that they were doing this type of riding well before the Repack, including a rider named Vendetti, who lived in Larkspur, just north of Mt. Tam. He claims that he and his friends had been riding cruiser bikes on dirt roads since 1970 or earlier.

Much like the invention of mountain biking itself, the beginning of freeriding has no single creation story, but many different versions. The most common rendition similarly includes three men, usually agreed to be Richie Schley, Brett Tippie and Craig Olsson. Many people would argue, of course, that the beginning definitely included Wade Simmons. Others would state that these guys are just the ones that got on the

videos and magazine pages, but that this type of riding was evolving organically for years before it made the attention of the press. Nevertheless, Schley was featured on the February, 1997, cover of *Bike Magazine* riding down what seemed like an unmanageable Canadian slope in Kamloops, B.C., with the cover line, “Drop Everything!” This was one of the general public’s first views of freeriding.

The aforementioned trio was also featured in Greg Stump’s freeride movie, *Pulp Traction*, riding sections of mountain that before this film seemed impossible due to extreme pitch and technicality. This seemingly impossible, highly technical type of riding had been going on for some time in British Columbia, Canada, and many were familiar with it already. “Extreme trail building and riding on the North Shore of Vancouver” (Gibson 2005, p.55), was happening before 1997, and many of the first “extreme trails,” which later became known as “North Shore trails,” were already built by legends such as Todd Fiander (“The Digger”) and “Dangerous Dan” Cowan. The original intention behind these trails was resource conservation.

Because the North Shore of Vancouver is a lush rainforest environment, early mountain bikers noticed the need for bridges to gap water crossings and marshes created from heavy rainfall. Soft soil would wash into deep mud bogs unsuitable for biking or walking. The first bridges built in order to protect trails from erosion became the foundation of today’s modern day “stunts” (see Photo Exhibit 2). As one rider in Digger’s 1999 bike video “North Shore Extreme Volume 3: Dirty Dreams” points out, “If you’re going to build a bridge, why not make it high...make it skinny.”

Exhibit 2: Stunts

		
Bridge with Drop	High Bridge	Teeter Totter

North Shore style bridges vary in width and height, and may include teeter-totters or large drops. These bridges or stunts began to pop up all over British Columbia before making their way to the United States. One *Bike Magazine* editor calls this spreading out of North Shore style riding the “North Shore Virus” (Scott 2004, p.45), and claims that it is being seen all over the world. The North Shore is indisputably the core of where freeriding began, and in this everyone seems to agree.

Chapter 3

Studying Freeriders: Procedures

My interest in studying freeriders was prompted by my personal pursuits in cycling and sociology, but also by the uniqueness of this Missoula group of riders. Procedures for this study included participant-observation during rides, public events and at the Bike Doctor, as well as open-ended interviews with ten riders from the area.² As co-owner of the Bike Doctor since 1997, and member of the Safety Team since 2000, this study is presented with interesting and difficult challenges as well as some unique benefits. While my position within the group allows access to a bevy of information that an outsider may not see, it also provides more opportunities to lose objectivity as an ethnographer. This will be my challenge throughout the study: include rich details while excluding subjectivity.

The thousands of hours of participant-observation cannot easily be tallied as I have spent a great deal of time with the group being described. The Bike Doctor, where I have worked for the last ten years, has seen each of the Safety Team members' bikes coming through the doors several times. The shop has also been the location of a Happy Hour every Friday night since the year 2000, with the intention of allowing people on the team and their friends to hang out and catch up. We get together, drink a beer, plan rides for the week or watch the new bike movies together on DVD. These opportunities have allowed me several hours per week to observe and participate in this social world. I have also gone on many bike trips with several of the riders, including numerous expeditions to Vancouver, Fernie, Whistler, and Squamish, British Columbia, countless trips to Moab

² See Table 1 for demographic information of the riders.

and Virgin, Utah, at least three trips to Hood River, Oregon, three trips to Boulder City, Nevada, as well as trips to Flagstaff Arizona, Durango Colorado, and various far away and local spots around Missoula, Hamilton, Florence, Butte and Rock Creek, Montana. Some trips last a few days and some last up to two weeks. Additionally, scheduled Safety Team events and festivals over the last eight years, such as the [New Belgium Brewing Company's Tour de Fat](#), Montana NORML's [HempFest](#), [Adventure Cycling's Cycle Montana](#), [Free Cycles Missoula's](#) Festival of Cycles, Rock Creek's Summer Olympics, Winter Olympics, Spring Training, and Tikki Torcher as well as the Watson's Children Shelter's [Ride for Shelter](#) have provided a world rich in participant-observation data. I have seen at least one of these riders every day for the last eight years since the team was founded.

I also experienced a variety of situations, attitudes and behaviors from riders and secondary figures within the freeriders' world, in my capacity as a Montana State IMBA Representative and as a board member of Missoula's non-profit bicycling trail advocacy group, Mountain Bike Missoula (MTB Missoula) formerly LIMB (Low Impact Mountain Bicyclists). I had the opportunity to interact with government officials from the United States Forest Service, The Bureau of Land Management in Montana, Utah and New Hampshire, the Missoula Office of Parks and Recreation, and several officials of the Canadian Provincial Park system. I was able to travel to an International conference concerning mountain biking in both 2004 and 2005, [The World Mountain Bike Conference](#) held in Vancouver, B.C., that included representatives from Scotland, Africa, Nepal, Netherlands, Israel, United Kingdom, Australia and Switzerland as well as Canada and the United States. Speaking to riders and land management agency officials from all

over the world gave a multidimensional view of mountain biking and freeriding from differing points of view. “The opportunity for riding enthusiasts and land managers to come together to discuss the future of mountain biking is a logical and significant next step in the development of the sport.” said Richard Juryn, Event Producer.

As a promoter for new bike videos such as the Kranked video series in Missoula, and through being responsible for placing orders and talking to sales representatives who visit the bike shop, I was able to have several communications with other bike industry promoters, manufacturers, distributors, bike shop owners and employees, all of whom are important secondary figures within the freeriders’ world. The more I experienced the different aspects of freeriding and people’s reactions to it, the more I realized that there was indeed something sociologically significant here.

My theoretical framework is symbolic interactionism. This framework allows members of this social world to explain their social world in their own terms. There is a significant amount of argot (jargon) within this social world which may be unfamiliar to the outside observer, so I have included a glossary of terms at the end of the paper in order for the symbolic interaction that is being presented by this study may be better understood.

Herbert Blumer describes the discipline of symbolic interactionism as:

...a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. Its empirical world is the natural world of such group life and conduct. It lodges its problems in this natural world, conducts its studies in it, and derives its interpretations from such naturalistic studies. (Blumer 1969, p.24)

He warns social scientists, however, not to view this world through an array of stereotypes and pre-established images. Blumer believes that as a sociologist engaging in

empirical research, it is imperative to avoid viewing people as finished products or as mere relationships between dependent and independent variables, but instead to view them as pragmatic actors who continually adjust their behavior to the actions of other actors. He believed that humans could adjust to these actions only because they are able to interpret them, i.e., to denote them symbolically and treat the actions and those who perform them as symbolic objects. This process of adjustment is aided by the ability to imaginatively rehearse alternative lines of action before we act and by our ability to think about and to react to our own actions and even ourselves as symbolic objects. Thus, the interactionist theorist sees humans as active, creative participants who construct their social world, not as passive, conforming objects of socialization. This principle, seeing humans as active participants in constructing their social worlds, leads directly to the three premises of symbolic interactionism, which are: 1) the way people view objects depends on the meaning these things have for them (Meaning), 2) this meaning comes about as a result of a process of interaction with others (Language), 3) the meaning of an object can change over time (Thought).

Social constructionism, developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, reinforces the interactionist view that individuals create their social world and that this world is indeed a dynamic process being constantly re-produced as people act on their interpretations and their knowledge of the world and people around them. In Berger and Luckmann's 1966 book, The Social Construction of Reality, they argue that it is social interactions themselves that maintain and even create the most basic, taken for granted "common sense" knowledge as well as the very institutions, typifications and

significations of everyday human life. What we call common sense, as well as the institutions and significance we apply to them therefore are all transient and in a state of constant flux.

As a participant observer in the Safety Team over a period of eight years, I have seen that the social world indeed has changed over time. Characters moved in and out, some attitudes changed and the Bike Doctor acquired a new physical location. My involvement in this group, originally as “complete participant” and then moving to participant-as-observer (Gold 1958, p.218) while attempting to write this paper, made me recognize some of the innate dangers of attempting to study a world one inhabits. When I decided to use this group as a topic for study, I wondered if I would be able to be objective, if I would be able to convey the smallest idiosyncrasies of the group, and if I would be able to effectively provide a “thick description” (Geertz 1973, p.5) to outsiders without selling out the Safety Team. I believed, however, that the detail and diverse types of information available to me considering my position within the group would override these hazards. I read through my Qualitative Research Methods notes and re-read Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss’, *Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology* and Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, several times while conducting my research in order to constantly remind myself of the sociological perspective I must try to maintain and the objectivity I was seeking in my description of this social world. While all descriptions are inevitably partial and selective given that they include some traits, features, or aspects and exclude others, Glaser and Strauss reminded me that what is included or excluded

within ethnographic research is “not determined randomly.” It is presented to the ethnographer through repeated observation, also called “saturation” or “concordance analysis” (1967). I employed these methods in order to determine if what I was observing was actually a significant and real thing in this social scene. I also used an ethnographic technique throughout the study that was reinforced constantly by Professor Jon Driessen, called “deliberate wonder.” This effectively means acting as a stranger within the setting at times in order to treat the situation as though it was being met for the first time. In this way, the taken for granted assumptions that were held and the normal routine activities could be made visible within a full emic view of the scene. Furthermore, asking three specific members of the Safety Team if what I found seemed true and relevant from their perspectives periodically checked my view as these three members acted as key informants and sounding boards within the study.

Another issue I encountered during this study was the question of generalizability of any conclusions I may achieve while writing this paper. While generalizability is often thought to be a weakness within ethnography, I found it largely depends on how you operationalize this term. Within ethnographic research, what is discovered in the world is *situated* in time and place. Instead of viewing generalizability as something that allows the social scientist to predict that what was found within a specific social world is also what would be found in the rest of society, it can be said that what was found in this social world generally says something about the society that would allow such a thing to exist within it. By attempting to generalize about what is being studied, qualitative sociologists often believe the “thing” is reduced to nothing more than a typecast, which is

exactly what Blumer warned against. In order to be faithful to the world, the social scientist must attempt to “re-present” it accurately. The society we study is more than the mere adding up of its parts; therefore this reductionalism can be detrimental to the very thing we are trying to present. Dr. Jon Driessen, a qualitative sociologist at the University of Montana, would often recount about Dr. Rose during his lectures. Dr. Rose would teach his classes carrying with him a blue, plastic rose in one hand. He would often smell the rose and ask students to do the same, and then continue with his lecture. He would ask students, “Can you say that this is a rose? Does it represent a rose?” Dr. Driessen would ask us, “What good is a representation of a rose...especially a bad representation of one? What purpose does it serve in our lives? What good is a bad representation of the world? What does it reveal about the world itself?” Clifford Geertz writes in his work, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* that ethnographers, “don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods...) they study *in* villages.” With this lesson in my mind, the “procedures” I chose to use in this study were those that would allow the world to present itself to me, in its own words, in greater detail, situated in time and place.

Lastly, the issue of confidentiality and violating my informants’ privacy was an utmost concern of mine during my research and subsequent writing. After reading Gwen Farnsworth’s thesis on poker players at the Oxford, another ethnography based in our small town, I was reinforced in my decision to not use real names for any of the Safety Team members cited or referred to in this thesis. Because the group I was studying was well-known and living in a small town, it was necessary to change their names and use

pseudonyms when referring to them throughout the text. These pseudonyms are presented with some general demographic information about each rider in the appendix of this paper. Farnsworth was a participant observer within the Oxford poker scene and struggled with many of the same issues I struggled with in reproducing the social world she was such an ingrained part of. She described being “burdened with the demands of analyzing that world sociologically yet retaining its integrity” (1989, p.33), and just as I found comfort in Farnsworth’s study, she found solace in Hayano’s study of poker players which reinforces the depth and three-dimensionality which can be seen only from an insider’s perspective:

I felt many times a profound self-doubt about fieldwork since I had spent so much time playing and absorbing information on an informal level rather than conducting conventional inquiries as a stranger and unenlightened outsider. Almost any tact I took could not adequately portray the powerful personal feelings of frustration and elation and the many moods in between that I had experienced in the thousands of long, hard hours in the cardroom (Hayano 1982, p.151).

Chapter 4

The Safety Team

Visibly this group of riders was unlike traditional cyclists. They wore baggy shorts and jerseys or even T-shirts instead of standard tight-fitting lycra bike garb. Since the mantra of, “Cotton is Rotten” is common among fitness athletes, T-shirts are virtually unheard of among avid cyclists. Rather than small, hard-soled clipless bicycle shoes, they wore skate shoes, tennis shoes or hiking boots. Many had tattoos, or long, shaggy hair and looked more like skaters or snowboarders than their traditional cyclist counterparts. Over the last ten years, this newly emerging subculture within cycling has been gaining attention. Magazines publishers, editors and writers, video makers, bike manufacturers, clothing makers, trail users and land managers paid attention to this group. A media frenzy seemed to follow them around like a swarm of bees; honey in one hand, stinger in the other. This increased media attention solidified that his group was being noticed, affecting their world and being affected by it.

As I began to look at freeriders in the Missoula area as a group, the largest single concentration of freeriders were those involved with Missoula’s Safety Team (see Cycling World diagram below). This “team” is a group of approximately one hundred riders, mostly male between the ages of 15-40, who are sponsored by the Bike Doctor (see Table 1). They perform in an abbreviated form during several festivals in town such as those mentioned earlier in this paper as well as, Marshall Mountain’s Outdoor Gear Swap and The “Turner Burner” on Turner Mountain in Libby, Montana. The team does not enter races or cycling competitions, but rather performs exhibitions for the public a

few times a year and rides together (in some form) every day. Their exhibitions include North Shore-style stunts such as tall, skinny ladder bridges (skinnies) to drops, large wooden jumps with landings, and teeter-totters of many varieties, but no exhibition is ever the same. Depending on which team members show up to build and ride, the festivals can range from high-flying, trick-pulling jump fests, to acrobatic, precision-balance, high-wire acts on tall skinnies. While reading one of the first drafts of my paper, my advisor created a diagram to help better understand the Safety Team's position in Missoula's Cycling World.



Missoula's Safety Team was born to the world in the summer of 2000, when the first annual Tour de Fat Bike Festival came to town. Like other creation stories, however, there are a few renditions of this creation legend, but the following is the most commonly heard. A representative from New Belgium Brewing Company, called the Bike Doctor early in the year 2000 asking if there were any non-profit trail advocacy groups in the Missoula area. New Belgium was looking for eight to ten towns across the United States where they could hold a traveling bike festival. They wanted to

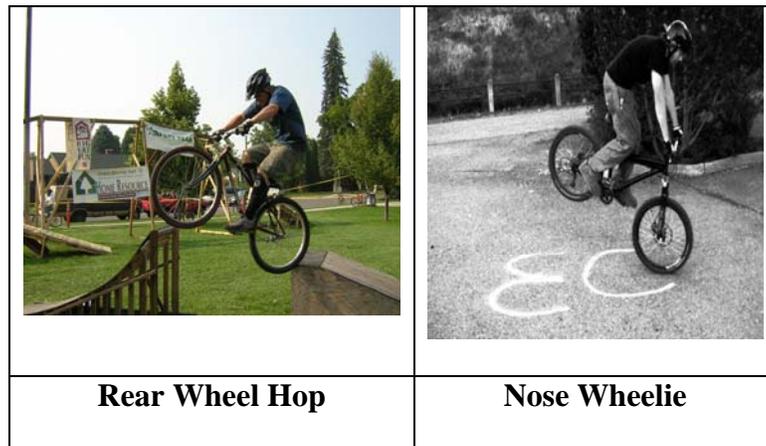
simultaneously raise money for local non-profit groups, while raising awareness (and sales) of New Belgium beer. [Mountain Bike Missoula](#) (MTB Missoula), which was called Low Impact Mountain Bicyclists (LIMB) at the time, was recommended as the only non-profit trail advocacy group in town, and from there, the first Tour de Fat was created.

While looking into different forms of entertainment for the Tour de Fat event, LIMB members decided to contact a local rider, “Jermaine”, who was renowned for his “trials” riding skills. Trials is a specialized type of bike riding that includes technical skill and exceptional balance. Riders hop on their front or rear wheels with pin-point precision, landing on the tops of small platforms or columns, spinning 180 or 360 degrees at times and never putting down a foot. If a foot is put down, this is called a “dab”, and dabs are indisputably bad, to be avoided at all costs. Trials riders are renowned for being able to ride obstacles once considered impossible for bicycles. Large boulder fields with car-sized rocks piled on top of each other, or one-inch wide hand railings, narrower than a bike tire, suddenly became the trials rider’s playground (see Photo Exhibit 3). With three months until the Tour de Fat event, Jermaine had the responsibility to round up other talented local riders and build the trials course they were to use as their exhibition “stage.”

With one day until the event Jermaine came into the Bike Doctor and divulged that he had no one lined up to ride in the event and no obstacles built. He asked “Evan,” a freerider and part owner of the shop, if he would ride and help build for the event. Evan agreed, letting Jermaine know that the exhibition would be more “freeride” than

“trials” if he were involved. While freeriding and trials riding may have started as different disciplines within the cycling world, they have begun to mesh over the last

Exhibit 3: Examples of Trials



few years. Skills used within trials, like rear wheel hops, have been incorporated into the freeride genre and added to freeriding relatively seamlessly. This is evidenced by the fact that a well-known trials rider of the past, [Jeff Lenosky](#), now calls himself a “professional freerider,” according to a recent Zest Soap advertisement found in *Outside Magazine* (2007, p.50). As trials has been engulfed in the freeride machine, so have other cycling disciplines such as [BMX racing](#), dirt jumping, [dual slalom](#) and “vert ramps.”

With the inaugural Tour de Fat drawing close, Jermaine asked Evan if he would line up other riders who might be interested in helping to build or to participate in the event, and the connectedness of Missoula’s riding world soon became apparent. With a few hours notice, freeriders from around Missoula came together at McCormick Park with hammers, screw guns, nails, screws, pallets and spools that they had collected at local businesses. A large brown passenger van named “Rosie” became the centerpiece of

a Dr. Seuss-like contraption that sprang up in the middle of a section of blacktop at the park. A log being used as a parking divider was propped up on one side of the van so a bike could climb up to the roof. Pallets were laid across the roof and a skinny bridge to the ground was built off the backside of the van. The festival was about to begin.

By the end of the day, more than 15 riders came to help build and ride in the exhibition. Riders were spinning “180s” off the skinny bridge, and jumping their bikes off the van’s roof 9 feet onto the ground. More than 300 spectators showed up for the first year’s event, and when the riders were asked the name of their group, Missoula’s Safety Team was introduced to the public.³ All riders wore helmets and protective gear also known as “armor.” All riders rode within their limits and made good choices without getting hurt, and all riders held riding “safely” in very high regard. Many of these riders had ridden together in other areas around town and were friends and riding partners already, but after this first event, the Safety Team gained more attention and grew in numbers very rapidly.

Because there were no areas to ride North Shore-style stunts in town (especially none that were sanctioned by local land managers whom we will discuss more later), two Safety Team members who had land they or their families owned, offered their land for building stunts to ride and practice on. Word of these “secret stashes” got around the Missoula freeriding community, and everyone interested in this type of riding wanted a piece of the action. Soon, people would walk in off the street in front of the bike shop and ask, “So where’s the stunts up Rock Creek/The Bitterroot/Miller Creek/Pattee Canyon/(insert area here). I heard there was some great riding up there.” Others would

³ Although the name “Missoula’s Safety Team” was a term batted around by many of the riders before this event, the event solidified the name with the public.

come in after having gone out looking for the supposed trails and finding nothing.

Because this North Shore-style riding was on private property, in-groups and out-groups started forming around whether a person was invited to ride in these areas. If you brought a new person to either help build or to ride, you were responsible for them and it was understood that you were also vouching for them.

Those hoping to ride the stunts were expected to put in time building or maintaining them in order to show commitment to the areas. Since these North Shore trail areas were built by Safety Team labor, which included many hours with a hammer, drill, shovel or saw instead of their (much preferred) bike, these areas and trails were highly valued and protected by the members. Anyone seen as a threat to these trails was not invited to ride them, and their locations were kept secret. Safety Team members had to gauge whether those they were bringing along would ride within their own skill level because it became extremely important to limit the likelihood that anyone would get hurt on the undisclosed trails. An injury could result in an evacuation from one of these secret areas by local officials, which could threaten the trails' continued existence due to possible lawsuits, covenant infractions, etc. Safety Teamers had to determine if the new people brought to ride were going to be hard workers while building and maintaining trails and stunts, if they were honest and able to keep a secret, and if they would put time and effort into building and maintaining trails instead of just riding them without giving back. The new people invited to ride would invariably want to invite other friends to ride the trails in the future, so this also had to be taken into consideration when deciding whether or not to invite these people in the first place. Would the new people's friends use good judgment with the people they would subsequently want to invite to ride? This

was a subject that was taken very seriously by the riders. It only takes one person who is not invested enough in the trails and does not really care if they continue or not to have the potential to destroy the entire infrastructure. In the same vein, if anyone approaches a team member at a structured Safety Team appearance during an event and asks how they can ride the stunts there (which has happened at every event to date), they are told that they have to help build or tear down at this event, and that this will get their foot in the door. Everyone is welcome, as long as they show they are willing to give back for their later permission to ride.

Sometimes the Safety Team is paid for its performances, and sometimes they ride for the charity and the fun involved in the event. Even if the team is paid, however, the Safety Team bank account is used to buy materials for the events in hopes that the stunts, will end up in a riding area that the Safety Team can enjoy after the event is over. They do not ride for the money. None of them has ever been paid aside from their shop sponsorship and their ability to ride stunts that they would otherwise not be able to find in this area. Being involved with Safety Team members during festivals, riding with team members, and being involved in keeping their bikes running at the shop, has taught me a lot about what is valued by these riders. Using their words as data, gleaned from years of participant observation, and reinforced by the media within the sport including bike videos, web sites and magazines, four focal points emerged as essential, significant and central to the Safety Team's social world. These four main themes were seen in this social world so regularly that they could not be ignored. These themes are "values" shared by the Safety Team that reveal what was important to them. Rodney Stark defines values as "Ideals or ultimate aims; general evaluative standards about what is desirable"

(1994, p.690). These themes seen time and again throughout the Safety Team study were: 1) non-competitive mutual support 2) resistance to being labeled 3) fun through creativity and self-expression, and 4) pushing the limits on their bikes. These themes comprise essential values that, in part, give this group its unique personality. They will be developed more within the next section.

Chapter 5

Core Values of the Safety Team

Non-Competitive Support

While participants in the style of riding called freeriding may resist using this word to describe what they do, they are not resistant to describing their riding as being different from other types of riding. It became clear to me during the interview process that those who freeride know that they are doing something different than mainstream cycling and are fervent to explain the differences or at least point them out.

The main differentiation between freeriding and mainstream cross-country mountain biking is that freeriding is *not* a race, and has nothing to do with training for a race or other competition. While cross-country mountain biking emphasizes speed, freeriding has a different focus. This is something emphatically pointed out by many riders during the interviews, and is seen as well in the magazine articles surrounding the sport. When Daina Charmichael, marketing director of Rocky Mountain Bicycles (a popular maker of freeride and other types of bikes), was asked what freeriding was, his response was: “Freeriding is mountain biking. Anytime you are on a trail, trying to push your riding limits, without the organization of a race per se, you are freeriding” (Blumethal 2004, p.1). The emphasis on racing within the bike industry was becoming so overwhelming that by the late 1990s, it was reaching a point of backlash. Many bike manufacturers throughout the early and mid nineties were making everything lighter and faster, from bike frames to components, with this emphasis on racing in mind. A gram was shaved off every conceivable part of the bike in order to “optimize” it for racing in an attempt to make it faster. The word “optimize” within cycling came to mean drilling

extra holes in chain rings, saddles, seat posts, or any part of the bike to scrape off another gram of weight. Even recreational riders coming into bike shops were becoming weight conscious, and were developing into what was later referred to within the industry as “weight weenies.”

It seemed that every article in every bike magazine was talking about race results and how or why one rider was so much faster than another. The heroes of the day were super fit, lycra-wearing, leg-shaving cross-country and downhill racers. Even the men shaved their legs (as many racers and road riders still do today), and many reasons from increased aerodynamics to ease in cleaning leg scrapes and cuts acquired during rides, were given as explanations. There were even articles in bike magazines about this widespread leg-shaving phenomenon. When I first started working at the Bike Doctor early in 1997, there were seven employees, five men and two women, this group of Bike Doctor employees would plan group rides for after work, and the common theme in conversations throughout the workday was who would be kicking whose ass to the top of which climb. Being fast was important, but being faster than your friends was even more critical. Recreational rides become races, and everyone knew who was victorious the following day.

From the time I started working at the shop, many rapid and drastic changes within the industry became clear. Some people were not having fun competing with their friends during rides, and missed the pure enjoyment of the experience of being outdoors on their mountain bikes. Emphasis on “playing” on your bike began to emerge as riders began jumping and exploring new (and usually slower) routes up and down the mountain, which were usually more technically challenging. This new emphasis on playing was

reiterated by local Safety Team member, “Lance,” a tall and super-fit 18-year old ex-racer and current freerider. He has raced every type of bike and every type of race, from the long-distance, endurance road races to the adrenaline producing downhill, but thinks all races are more similar than different. None allowed him the possibility to play on his bike, which is what attracted him to freeriding and drew him away from racing.

...downhill and dual slalom I think that’s just the same as road racing and all that... you’ve gotta go down the trail, down the whatever, and you can’t hit all the little jumps on the side of the trail because you’re trying to go as fast as you can... which I mean... I don’t know... is not as fun.

As the emphasis on playing began to emerge, the lightest equipment no longer held up under this new type of use and the industry quickly felt pressure to make things more durable, which effectively meant *heavier*, or as we call it at the shop, “burlier.” While some riders continued to enjoy traditional cross-country riding with its emphasis on speed and racing, there was a faction of riders that began breaking away from this. Many racers themselves split from the NORBA⁴ circuit and started to make films, which is very reminiscent of what happened within the ski industry 10 to 20 years earlier. Mountain bike racers however, were not the only bike racers hoping to bring the fun back into biking. Some riders with a BMX race background were equally eager to get away from competition and the pressure that came with it. Freeriding legend and ex-BMX racer, [Wade Simmons](#) was interviewed as saying: “To be a racer you have to want to win...Being number one wasn’t exciting any more... All this pressure and all this stress to be number one for what?” (Hauser 2003, p.34).

⁴ The National Off Road Bicycling Association, is the main governing body of the mountain bike race scene, providing race licenses to riders and sanctioning certain racing events within a national point system used to determine the National Champion at the end of the race year.

According to those I interviewed, there was a major difference in values between racing and freeriding. There was the lack of “competitiveness,” or feeling like you had to be faster or better than the people you went riding with that obviously did not exist within racing. Although the bicycling industry has developed several “freeride competitions”⁵ over the last three years, most freeriders would agree that the nature of freeriding is non-competitive, and that is what sets freeriding apart from racing in addition to other types of riding.

Because the thing about freeriding is that it is not about Joe Blow being three seconds faster than you on this course—that’s what racing is about. Freeride’s about your personal goals. It’s like, ‘Oh man, I aired those stairs that I have been looking at for years.’ So have a hundred people that may have aired them better than him but that doesn’t matter. It’s just that’s what he wanted to do on his bike and that’s what he did. –Wade Simmons (Hauser 2003, p.38)

“Simon,” a 42-year-old rider who may be the oldest person in the Missoula area that rides with the Safety Team, is far from the feeblest. He has changed many things about his life over the years in order to make it more satisfying to him, which to him means, less stressful. As a lawyer from New Jersey, he came to Missoula on vacation to enjoy fishing trips every year, and one day decided that he would rather enjoy life as he did on his trips than make money in the corporate world. He moved to Missoula and took a drastic reduction in pay to do so. While it was on the East Coast where he rode his bike cross-country and emphasized racing, it was in the West where he made the switch to freeriding and really started to enjoy the rides. About his swap, Simon says,

Ya. I always felt like people were trying to out do me on my mountain bike when I was cross-country racing...well riding...I wasn’t even racing, but that word just came out! I never really raced, but I always felt like I was! I never feel like that when I’m freeriding...

⁵ This is an oxymoron to many freeriders and will be mentioned more later.

Interviewees continually discussed a more “mellow,” “supportive” and “non-competitive” atmosphere with freeriding as compared to racing. These qualities were the very things that attracted them to this form of riding. As Wade Simmons mentioned in his *Flow* magazine interview cited earlier, riding became more about personal goals that the riders set for themselves than it was about beating or outperforming another rider. Because of this non-competitive attitude, many riders mentioned that friendships and bonds were created within the riding group as people supported each other in reaching their own goals. If someone has been looking at a [rock drop](#) in the middle of a trail, for example, but has never done it before, riding partners will stop in the middle of a ride, wait, and watch in support as the rider struggles with his personal demons. They may offer words of support, small pieces of advice, or just their presence in case an injury requires help getting back to the truck, but after an attempt, success or failure, the rider is met with praise for even trying. This is a far cry from coworkers at the shop bragging about “not even seeing” a fellow rider on the climb because they were so far ahead of them. Instead of trying to create as much space between yourself and your fellow riders, as has become the case on many cross-country rides, when you’re freeriding, you stay close to each other so you don’t miss anything.

“Chad,” a 15-year-old freerider, newly sponsored by [Banshee Bikes](#), a well-known maker of freeride and “urban” frames, speaks about his experience with this difference between the racing attitude and the non-competitive support within freeriding,

I don’t know, I think that with a lot of people that started out racing or still race cross-country or downhill, they seem like they’re a little more competitive to ride with, and it’s all about, they don’t really know the culture...like...they just do lap after lap after lap after lap. People that I like to ride with a lot are like, hit the jump, then you watch somebody hit the jump, to see if they did a cool trick or

something. Some people that I ride with that race cross-country too, they're like thinking more about themselves and not really anyone else. They like hit the jump, hit the jump, hit the jump and not really watch anyone else. They're not like watching anybody jump, and I think that's an important part of riding, just cause like...it's not really fun for you if you don't have anybody watching, cause you can't try something new and it's not very fun for them because they don't have anybody watching them.

“Aidan,” a super friendly bike mechanic in town explains that this difference drew him to freeriding and away from his traditional cross-country roots. When explaining the Missoula freeriding atmosphere, he had this to say:

...it seems really personable and mellow where the cross-country scene to me never seemed that way...never seemed like a person like a cross-country racer, would ever be approachable. And that made me want to do it [freeriding] even more... because it was really supportive and cool.

Although Simon (the 42-year-old freerider) claimed in his earlier quote not to have raced in his cross-country days in New Jersey, he remembered one moment where it became clear that he might not fit in with the racing culture. While he was working on achieving a personal goal during a race, one that had nothing to do with the clock, his competitors did not like that he was holding them up and costing them valuable seconds on their lap time.

So when I raced I was never really trying to beat anybody I was just trying to be like, “Wow this is cool terrain!” There was this one rock garden... nobody... I mean no one rode it! Everybody would pick up and carry, and I thought, “Wow that must be kind of cool to try and ride that!” In the race I was just treating it as if I was out on a trail ride and I would dab and I would go back to the start... and here I am in the middle of a race trying to do that and people were like getting pissed at me and I was like, “I don't care man. I'm having fun!” You know and that's when I knew I was going to be heading toward more technical riding and I just rode myself out of the way. The people that tend to gravitate toward freeriding...are interested in the same kind of thing that had me trying to do that rock garden over and over...I don't think a freeride-oriented person is going to look at somebody trying something like that and think, “You're holding me up!” They're gunna look at you and think, “Ya! Look at that! He's trying! He's not picking up his bike!” And that's kind of what I've experienced too. It's what I

think it should be and it's what I've seen. Everybody's really open and friendly and supportive....

Although it is undoubtedly false that every person who chooses to ride cross-country, or even race, is *unsupportive* of fellow riders and is therefore overly competitive, it can be said that for freeriders the characteristic of non-competitive support is part of their core value system.

Over the years, as freeriding has become more and more popular, and parts of the bike industry itself have seen it's marketability, "freeride competitions" have been created to sell the sport, and therefore more products, to the public. Competitions like the RedBull Rampage have invited corporate sponsorship into freeriding exhibitions with the purpose of advertising specific merchandise by creating a relationship between freeriding and their product. This serves the dual function of giving their commodity a reputation of being united with this up-and-coming sports phenomenon while in turn providing the sport itself a wider audience. While these competitions are becoming very popular in the freeride scene, and professional freeriders are lining up to partake in the events, they inherently go against the very core of how and why freeriding started to begin with. Many riders have commented on how this oxymoronic state of affairs has come to exist, but still agree that freeriding at its most basic is not about the competition, but instead about its very opposite.

Resistance to Labeling

Another core value within the Safety Team freeriding community is the common feeling of being labeled by others who are trying to understand, categorize, or perhaps segregate the riding style from other types of riding. As with many attempts to label any group of people comes a strong resistance to it. According to Partland and Gibson in

their book, *Mountain Bike Madness* (2003), “Freeride is a somewhat nebulous term. It is pretty much everything that cross-country riding and downhill riding aren’t.” The term freeriding seems to be borrowed from the ski term “freeriding” which was coined to explain the more extreme, non-competitive, non-race-oriented type of skiing that was emerging in the late eighties and early nineties, and made its way into many ski films of the era.

The term freeriding itself, as was previously mentioned, has been a point of controversy within bicycling circles. Bike videos, magazines, as well as my interviews, are swarming with examples of how this term has made its mark in the cycling world. Many of the riders interviewed expressed an aversion to the term freeriding, for reasons including: feeling labeled, segregated, marketed to as a demographic, and believing that the term has lost its original meaning because of this marketing and labeling. Many riders feel that their faction of riding is misunderstood by the outside world, and that this world is trying to label them in order to feel more comfortable with them as a group. The opinion of *180 Magazine* editor, Joey Hayes, was this:

Freeriders, Froriders, flowriders, streetriders, stuntriders, shoriders, trialsiners, slackers, hoppers, droppers, coasters, jumpers: give us any label you feel necessary to separate our baggy-clothes-wearing, untucked-jersey-selves from you, if that is what you feel you must do. We’ll always have camaraderie amongst ourselves, which is all we really need. (Hayes 2003, p.7)

Although the term freeride itself may have negative connotations for those who participate in the activity that it was created for, they understand that it is the only term they have to describe what they do in order to differentiate it from other types of riding. Distinguishing this fusion of several riding disciplines from the race scene seems most important to Safety Team members. The connotation of an “extreme sports” edge with

all of the preconceived notions of extreme sports that come along with it is much less important. Aidan, who is seen in several local bike videos, was invited to participate in the inaugural FreezRide⁶ in Whitefish, Montana and was Mr. December in a 2004 national bike calendar sold to benefit rider [Johnny Waddell](#) (who was paralyzed during a crash). Aidan has this to say about the word freeride:

It seems kind of cheesy. Just like the whole “*Mountain Dew Extreeeeeme... [Red Bull FreezRide](#)*” (he says in his best monster truck announcer voice) ...ya know. I don’t know. You’ve gotta call it something I guess.

“Mitch,” a 21-year-old, “deceptively muscular”⁷ interviewee that has been working at the same bike shop and outdoor gear store with Aidan for three years, agrees but also mentions the labeling and the marketing uses of the term:

I don’t know... I guess the first thing that comes to mind is like, they gotta slap a label on something so someone gets paid for it. You know? I don’t know... “freeriding” (he makes the quotation fingers above his head, rolls his eyes and shrugs).

“Brandon,” a 29-year-old, smiley, redheaded rider who works at an independently owned pizzeria, believes the term to be over simplistic at best. When asked what he thought of the term freeride he had this to say:

⁶ The RedBull FreezRide was a winter, freeride, slope-style event held on Big Mountain in Whitefish, Montana in February, 2002 and February, 2003. Many professional riders were invited to compete alongside local riders from our area. The event was judged by five professional freeriders (most of which were injured at the time and could not compete themselves) who looked at the rider’s 1) Flow, 2) Line Difficulty, 3) Amplitude and 4) Style. The event included large snow jumps and gaps measuring 20-90 feet, tall North Shore-style skinnies and teeter-totters, a bus parked on the slope used as a step-up and drop, wall rides and (one year) a loop de loop. Aidan was one of the local riders invited to compete both years. More about this event appears later in this paper.

⁷ This description makes reference to a comment made by an ER doctor Mitch saw when he crashed on his bike and separated his shoulder. As he was taking off his oversized shirt in the exam room, Jonah (another interviewee you’ll meet later) filmed with his home video camera. The doctor was surprised at how athletic and strong Mitch was. He usually wears clothes that are loose and non-restrictive while riding, which does not bring attention his muscular frame. Most of the people that engage in this type of riding are very strong and athletic. They are indeed athletes. After the doctor’s comment about Mitch’s frame were made on film, “Wow! You’re deceptively muscular!”, Mitch heard this phrase again and again from fellow Safety Teamers.

It sucks. It's like, "Hey you jocks!", or like something like that. Give me a break! It's a label and people who...you can't just...all the people that we ride with, or I ride with... there's full suspension bikes, rigid bikes, just front suspension and even going through the people, I mean everybody's so different and so individualistic... well, not individualistic, but individuals definitely! And to just say that, "Oh... these are the freeriders", it just doesn't feel right.

When asked what he would call it if he had to call it something he said, "I'd call it riding!

Hey would you like to go for a *riiide*? Sure I'd like to go for a *riiide*. You know. Ya. I don't know. I've never heard...well I don't think I've ever heard anyone of *us* call it freeriding."

It is a prominent theme among those that participate in this sport that the word most people use to describe it is unacceptable to the ones doing it. The term did not originate within the members themselves, and has not been embraced by them. Often if another rider asks where the freeriding is, or calls themselves a freerider it is a clear indication that they are not indoctrinated into the culture that is encompassed by this term. Evan, a 31-year-old rider mentioned earlier in this paper, sums it up by saying:

It is definitely a marketing tool used to uh, label... differentiate a certain type of riding from regular riding I guess. It's interesting because it came about to describe the difference between somebody who was competitive about bicycling and someone who just rode for fun. And... like any good thing, you know, it was easily turned into a marketing thing and as the sport evolved, what non-competitive mountain biking meant, uh changed. So the word came about to mean something other than it has come to mean over time.

Similarly to freestyle skiing, which has also used the term freeriding in its history, the term freeriding in cycling was created to attempt to describe riding without the race aspect involved. Those called freeriders were not training for a race or competition; they were just riding for fun. Throughout the interviews and the hours of participant observation, I was made very aware of the stigma attached to the word freeriding,

especially among the people that are said to freeride. However, I (and many of the riders as well) was also struck by the dilemma of wanting to call it *something*. Freeriding is the only term that has been coined to describe this type of riding. Although those who freeride are resistant to call themselves freeriders, it is the general public and the media around the sport that have readily used this term and have branded them as such.

Having Fun through Creativity and Self-Expression

One of the most basic themes within freeriding that arose repeatedly throughout the interviews, as well as through my personal observations was the importance of having fun. Although the idea of having fun may seem like an obvious theme when talking about riding bikes, it is not always the fundamental reason people choose to ride. Many people ride for exercise or training, others for transportation, and still others for environmental or economic reasons, but consistent among freeriders, the main reason they ride is for fun. The way in which fun is created includes the camaraderie and support among fellow riders, as was mentioned in a previous section, but also in the choice of “line”⁸ as Simon’s last quote about his race experience implies. It was fun for him to go back and try to ride the boulder field again and again until he conquered it successfully without dabbing (putting his foot down). In racing, cross-country riding and road riding the foremost emphasis is on speed, while in freeriding the key emphasis is on having fun by choosing expressive, creative lines. The “godfather of freeriding” explains this creativity, or expressing yourself through your riding, Wade Simmons, in his definition of the term freeriding:

⁸ The riding route chosen whether it be over a jump, on a trail or through a rock garden, etc.

A creative interpretation of the landscape that is original and fits into the ability of the rider. Breaking out of the obvious where someone might say, “Why didn’t I think of that?” Finding lines that express talent that are original...and most importantly that flow and are fun to ride. (Lorence 2003, p. 45)

He follows up in this train of thought in another magazine interview as he adds,

I mean we’re really creating a new sport in the eyes of the media because it’s getting all the attention and everything. It’s a new sector of mountain biking and I’m happy to be a part of that and to see that people get excited...Just to see people excited to ride bikes and have fun. (Hauser 2003, p.38)

When Wade was asked in the same interview who he thought the best up-and-coming-freerider was, he passed the torch to an 18-year-old prodigy, Thomas Vanderham. Vanderham was known (in his earlier days) throughout the freeriding world as “Vanderchild” since he has been riding professionally since the age of 16, and keeping up with, or even setting the bar for, many of the older more experienced riders. He has amazing flow (fluidity) in his riding and is known for very creative and unique line choices. Vanderham had this to say about his creativity in freeriding:

You can’t go into the field expecting to find and shoot step-ups, wall-rides, hips or road gaps...It’s more about going into a quality landscape with an open mind, interpreting the lay of the land and using what it offers in the most creative, progressive way possible. (Lorence 2003, p.34)

The ability to create something new and express yourself through your own style and originality is nothing new. Skateboarders, snowboarders, skiers as well as athletes from traditional sports such as gymnastics or ice skating have been creating new tricks and using their unique style within their disciplines for years in order to advance the sport or carve out their niche within it. This freedom of expression is fun and liberating for many people and draws them to these sports. Aidan brings together the values of

camaraderie and support with line choice and having fun in one inclusive comment, as he describes his transition from cross-country riding into freeriding,

I had more fun riding off little loading docks or pedaling around, or riding down stairs or hitting little jumps and stuff like that, you know...ya, well jumping and screwing around and being like more fun. I mean I had fun on my cross-country bike in a more pain oriented kind of way.... When I got on my new bike...my freeride bike, then I had more fun like just screwing around like hanging out more almost. Like going on big group rides and everyone's just screwing around and just bouncing off things and jumping on whatever. Not all going in a straight line like super fast up some hill (he says laughing).

Although speed can be part of the fun, it is not the main focus of freeriding as was mentioned earlier. Chad, the youngest rider I interviewed at age 15, articulates this point well: "There's some trails that I like to go fast, but ...I like it better, if you just kinda like, just like relax on it and just ride and have a good time." Simon hit on both points of having fun and exploring lines in his definition of freeriding:

I kind of think about it as riding in a way that emphasizes having fun and playing with the terrain. Umm. All the other things that non-freeride oriented people consider part of mountain biking also would be included. People that I consider to be focused on freeriding don't really care about ultimate fitness whether it be heart rate or whatever. But it doesn't really matter what style of bike you ride it's just a matter of the area you're riding or how you do your riding. It's just more... fun.

Within the freeriding community there is a strong value placed on enjoying the time on your bike. Having fun is a goal that is second to none. I have heard it said by members of this group that, "If you're not having fun on your bike, you're doing something wrong." I have also heard it said among this group that "A bad day of riding is better than a good day of doing anything else." They value the time on their bikes and give up many other things in order to make this time a priority. Freeriders often hit on

the point that they “live to ride” and have a pure love for what they are doing. A well-known figure within freeriding, [Josh Bender](#), has been called “a pioneering mountain biker” and a “radical freerider... changing the sport of mountain biking” (Felton 2001, p.46). This 30-year-old, five foot five inch powerhouse and professional freerider, like many Missoula freeriders, has made choices in his life that allow him to spend as much time on his bike, enjoying his life and having fun, as he possibly can. Because he chooses his bike and the fulfillment that it brings him instead of monetary or physical luxuries that others may hold in high regard, he lives a lifestyle that some may say lacks a sense of security. He doesn’t have a regular paycheck and sometimes does not know where the next money will come from. He does not own a home or a new car and does not want either. “I love what I’m doing. I’m not in it for greed or power... just for the purity of freedom of expression. In a sense, I’m an artist and the mountainside is my canvas” (Felton 2001, p.101). In a follow up interview Bender, who often refers to himself in the third person, says, “Bender’s a vagabond... I don’t care about money. I’ll eat peanut butter sandwiches every day as long as I can ride” (Mazzante 2005, p. 31).

From my personal experience with this one of a kind spirit, I can attest that what he said within the last quote is unquestionably true. Josh, as a good friend and riding partner for the past 4 years (when I’m lucky enough to spend time in southern Utah), has always been true to his convictions and suffered certain stresses by making the (sometimes unpopular) choice *not* to have a 9 to 5 job. He is a working-class hero to many in the freeriding world, having never made more than \$25,000 a year, and making no apologies for who he is or where he places his priorities in life. He is having fun and he is, more than anyone I know, living to ride.

Pushing the Limits

Josh Bender offers a perfect segue into the next prominent focal point among freeriders: pushing your limits. Having broken more bones in his body than anyone I have ever heard of, Bender would still not give up his lifestyle or riding style. Since freeriding has advanced the sport of mountain biking to places people would never have imagined during the days of Mt. Tam, the crashes have advanced past anyone's expectations as well. Although the "impacts" may be prevalent in reality as well as in the minds of the riders, there is an emphasis on mentally transcending the danger, and a value in taking risks. The fear of broken bikes and body parts, or perhaps the excitement of skirting the dangerously thin edge between "sticking it" (successfully completing a maneuver) and "wiping out" (not) is one of the many things that gives freeriding its romantic and dangerous image. In his book, *Sport, Culture and Society* (1969:424), Marvin Scott writes that this dangerous line is critical in a certain "rite of passage" into the sport as a member of a team or group:

Attributes of moral character [in sports] are established only in risk-taking situations: Before we are ready to impute to a person the quality of strong character, he must be seen as voluntarily putting something on the line.

Throughout this study, I saw evidence of the value placed on risk taking and how this perceived or real risk added to the allure of freeriding. Injuries are not believed to be a shameful experience, but more of a badge of honor and an inevitability if you are truly pushing your limits. A common mantra I have heard among freeriders is, "If you ain't bleedin', you ain't ridin'." Although, unquestionably, people like to avoid injuries whenever possible, they are spoken about in a matter-of-fact manner as a well-established byproduct of choosing this lifestyle. As was mentioned in the introduction of this paper,

the Bike Doctor shop walls and windows are covered with evidence of injury. Riders encourage each other to share pictures or x-rays of their latest impairment, and happily bring evidence into the shop of a jump gone bad with a great story to go along with it. As Lance was telling me what kind of bike he was riding, he added, “ I ride a [Balfa](#) that I just barely got. I’ve only ridden it twice on my street... because of the broken arm.” In a very understated way, Lance alludes to another subtle nuance about the value of pushing the limits in this group, and that is getting back on the bike as soon as possible after an injury. In doing so, it shows that you were not scared away by the experience and still give riding a high priority in your life.

When talking to a magazine reporter about Josh Bender, another freeriding “phenom” and crossover from the BMX world, [Darren Berrecloth](#) said, “He has taken his hits, but he’s still pushing it...” (Mazzante 2005, p.31). Almost as if in response, Josh was quoted as saying, “I break bones like normal people. What makes me different is that I get back up and go for it again” (Felton 2001, p.100).

The progression of the sport of freeriding is pushing the limits of what is thought possible on a bicycle. Riders are breaking bike parts and they are at times, breaking themselves. Some riders, Josh Bender included, believe that a rider will eventually die in pursuit of the “sickest line” or “gnarliest drop.”

Maybe it sounds kind of crazy, but I’m waiting for the first fatality. That could be me, that could be somebody famous like Brett Tippie or Richie Schley or just some kid who thought he could do what we do. Somebody’s going to end up seriously injured and it’s going to shock the world because they’re not ready for it. Extreme skiers went through this same thing, rock climbers die all the time, motorcyclists, big wave surfers...it’s a natural evolution of the sport.
(Felton 2001, p.50)

In the last three years alone, the number and severity of injuries in the freeride scene has increased dramatically. From the “Godfather” himself, Wade Simmons and his broken femur in 2002, through Gareth Dyer’s arm-shattering fall in last year’s JoyRide in Whistler, to an entire segment of Thor Wixom’s last film called, “Russ Morrell’s Dirt Naps” (a film segment showing Russ riding and crashing three different rock drops, all resulting in him being knocked unconscious), crashes are becoming a well-accepted part of bicycling’s most “extreme” facet, freeriding. Even the legends (usually referring to riders thirty years old or older) of the sport agree. Downhill racer and crossover freerider, [Shaums March](#), knows about pushing the edge. He built a reputation for riding injured and even won a NORBA national with a cracked vertebra. He has entered several freeride competitions although he spends most of his time now coaching the new generation of racers at his Mad March Racing camps. His opinion on injury is:

With the amount of filming being shot these days, we’re going to see somebody die on film soon...I’ve had a lot of injuries and now I tell myself there’s no need to push it like I used to. I guess that’s why some people are saying that I’m washed up. But, you know, I think I’m just getting smart. I’ve had too many surgeries. (Felton 2001, p. 50)

The number of videos available today in the freeride genre has categorically increased freeriding’s exposure to the masses, and many people feel they can (and should) emulate what they see these athletes doing on film. What seems to be misunderstood by many viewers is the tremendous athletic skill and dedication of time, forethought, and aptitude that it takes to successfully pull off many of the “segments” (video clips often called “seggies”) they see in the videos. Riders essentially make things look much easier than they are. That is part of their underlying and undeniable skill. Some viewers forget to watch the crash segments, or ignore the reality that at times these

riders truly have to “pay to play,” as I’ve heard them articulate. There have been injuries among riders attempting to mimic what they’ve seen, there have been fingers pointed in order to not assume responsibility for *chosen* actions, and there have been opinions regarding both. As Josh Bender put it: “When people get hurt doing what I do, I just shake my head and think, ‘That’s just natural selection,’ because it takes brains to do this...” (Felton 2001, p.48).

Or as Missoula rider Mitch said,

Ya...and that goes straight into the 15-year-old kid thinking he’s [Super T](#)⁹ and Mom is just like, ‘What? You rode what?’, when he comes home with like three teeth missing...you know...Guarantee he’s not hitting it next time. You know it only takes once.

Making things look easy is half of the interesting dichotomy of risk and injury within the sport of freeriding. It is the meshing of difficulty, true risk of injury, pushing the limits and non-competitive support while attempting such inherently dangerous activities, that makes succeeding in achieving personal riding goals enjoyable and fun for those involved within freeriding.

Albeit injuries are ostensibly becoming more common because of the large number of people picking up this discipline of riding, an even more common occurrence within freeriding is broken bike parts. The increased occurrence of product failure has been something both riders and the bike industry have had to get used to, and in a hurry. Riders are choosing burlier bikes and parts, while manufacturers are doing their best at making products that can take the abuse that freeriders dish out. Freeriders are pushing bike part engineering to its limits. Take it from a life-long product tester, Josh Bender, as

⁹Referring to Tyler “Super T” Klaussen, a professional freerider

he comments on a drop gone bad in Deer Valley, Utah: “Look, if the shock hadn’t blown and I’d rolled out of that jump OK, I’d have been a hero. Instead, I crash and half the world thinks I’m a schmuck” (Felton 2001, 50).

Broken parts in freeriding have significance in many different ways. Much as videos make talented athletic feats look easy, some think that if they just had the right bike, they would be able to do what they see others are doing on film. At many Safety Team exhibitions, I have listened to someone in the crowd saying something very similar to a quote I heard at the last Tour de Fat, “I could do that too if I had a \$3000 bike. If I tried that on my piece of shit, it would break in half and I’d kill myself.” Half of this statement might be true or none of this statement might be true, but the risk of injury due to product failure is inherently on the minds of freeriders as they choose new components. Weight of these parts, as was stressed earlier in this paper, is much less of an issue than it has been in biking’s race-obsessed past. When asked why he chose his present bike, which is known to be one of the heaviest “hardtails” around the shop, “Morgan” had this to say:

Actually I just got the bike because I thought this is gunna be something that is not gunna break on me for a long time. That was it. I didn’t think that it was going to make me better or anything... or think better or... I just thought it probably won’t break on me and I won’t hurt myself on it. That’s my idea of the whole thing.

Equipment choice is very important to freeriders, their very health could be on the line if they choose poorly, but the bike does not make the man. Many Safety Team members have ridden exhibitions on bikes I would not even take on a trail ride: everything from BMX bikes with yellow, plastic “mag wheels” to five-year-old cross-country hardtails with eighty millimeter travel forks. Skill is earned, it is not purchased,

and even with the best equipment, freeriders know that breaking parts of their bike is part of what they signed up for when they chose this type of high impact riding. Aidan, 25-year-old rider comments: “If on my cross-country bike I broke something, I was like, “Ohhh, man!” But now it kind of just comes with the territory. When I started freeriding I wasn’t so concerned with like broken spokes and stuff, you know.” At times breaking something on your bike is not only expected, but also revered. Much like an injury may be a badge of honor, so might the catastrophic breakage of a heavy-duty bike part. Much akin to the idea that if you do not occasionally hurt yourself, you are not pushing your limits, it is thought that if you don’t occasionally break something on your bike, you are riding too conservatively. Mitch, 21-year-old rider recollects, “... you see that fork come up in like three pieces and like, “Ha, ha!” No words exchanged we jumped some more and just smiled you know like nice job....”

While risk-taking is an important attribute in freeriding, and this is seen in the value placed on occasional injury and product failure, equally important is using your head and riding within your abilities while understanding that this sport “takes brains”, hard work and dedication. While occasional injury or product failure is seen as coming with the territory, constant injury and bike breakage is looked at as careless and thoughtless ignorance and irreverence. Freeriding is an intense athletic event and not one that can be easily mimicked by attempting to copy what is accomplished by more talented fellow riders, or on a TV or movie screen. What is revered is not the injury or the product failure, but the ability to skirt the line as close to the edge as possible while pushing your own personal limits.

Chapter 6

Secondary Involvement in the Sport of Freeriding

While structuring this study of freeriding, it became clear that although the riders themselves were my primary focus, telling their story did not completely encapsulate the Missoula freeride picture. Secondary involvement within the Missoula freeride community takes many shapes including: spectators at events or of media of the sport (i.e., magazines, bike videos, newscasts, etc.), promoters and manufacturers of bikes and parts (both local and non-local), and bike shops. These secondary rings of involvement are important in shaping as well as being shaped by freeriding as a sport.

Spectators

Spectators include those who observe freeriding when it appears in the media, at a festival or exhibition, or during a visit to one of the freeriding hot spots or “Meccas”¹⁰ of the world like the aforementioned [North Shore B.C.](#), or Virgin, Utah, former home to Josh Bender and location of the first freeride competition, the [RedBull Rampage](#). According to Stephen Hull (1976, p.44) in his study of the surfing subculture in Santa Cruz, California, these spectators are the “uneducated masses, the uninitiated...the contrast that helps make surfing special, that make it an ‘in’ activity.” While I agree that the spectators of the sport lend to a certain contrast between themselves and those they are watching, I would hesitate to call them “uneducated” , as spectators are very much a part of the overall environment of freeriding.

¹⁰ These areas are often called Meccas to make the commonly heard connection that riding may resemble a religious practice, and these places are traveled to for the pilgrimage.

Although many different types of people watch and appreciate freeriding, the most frequent spectators of freeriding are riders themselves; sometimes injured at the time. Many spectators, if they are *not* a rider at the time, may shortly become one after being influenced positively by what they see. Freeriders spend countless hours watching others ride, or simply looking at interesting terrain, mentally riding it themselves. They watch because they know the intensity of feeling that the rider and the terrain offer. They also watch to learn from the skills and mistakes of other riders, and to offer support. In addition to direct participation, riders are the main patrons at any spectator-oriented freeriding event such as freeride competitions, or festivals.

For the freerider there is something very important about watching others ride. There is a strong sense of empathy, of identifying with what the other rider is doing, or projecting oneself into the other rider's position. It is something all freeriders do. I have found it curious to suddenly catch another rider as spectator unconsciously straining their body, pulling up on imaginary handlebars, getting back over an imaginary seat or shifting their balance with the movement of the rider they have been watching. In many ways, watching and appreciating riding is as much a part of the sport as the actual performance. Like Chad said in a previous section, watching is "an important part of riding."

Promoters

Perhaps the most influential institutionalized entities in riding are the bike magazines and riding videos. In a qualitative study of windsurfers from the United Kingdom and skateboarders from the United States, [Belinda Wheaton](#) and Becky Beal found that:

...magazines played an important role in providing and circulating cultural knowledges, but also were an avenue for the participants to display their subcultural capital. We map the interpretive frameworks used by both groups to discuss “authentic” discourses of their sports. These centered on action photos of people “doing it” and their associated lifestyles and social worlds. Inauthentic images included those that portrayed equipment simply as commodities, or brands that could not demonstrate long-term commitment to the sports and lifestyles, or were targeting outsiders/beginners. (2003, p. 155)

Bike magazines and videos, therefore have a direct impact on indoctrinating new riders and in reinforcing what is considered “authentic” within the already established group of riders.

There are several internationally distributed bike magazines that are available by subscription or on magazine racks wherever biking is popular. One of the oldest and not surprisingly, the most widely read bike magazines in the industry is cleverly named, [*Bike Magazine*](#). However, there are many new competitors in the zine world, such as *Flow*, [*decline*](#), *180 Magazine* and *Launch MTB*, that are aiming their focus directly at the freeride genre (when they are available¹¹). These magazines offer hundreds of color pictures of excellent riding areas, popular bike riding personalities, and all of the latest technology in the sport. Their articles focus on famous and “secret” riding spots from around the world, the lifestyles, attitudes of current riding “super duper”¹² stars, and recent contest results or video releases. Although bike magazines undoubtedly reflect bike culture, the bike magazines are also acting as a socializing agent, spreading and teaching the rider’s language, traditions, values and norms. In the bike shop, when a new

¹¹ Magazine like *Launch MTB*, and *180 Magazine*, are distributed by small groups and are harder to regularly print and therefore receive.

¹² Refers to an inside joke regarding professional freerider Tyler “Super T” Klaussen, whose riding buddies started calling him “Super Duper T” after magazines and videos everywhere inundated spectators with his image for months. He was named Race Face’s Ultimate Freeride Challenge Winner and The 2nd RedBull Rampage Winner within a very short period of time.

issue comes out, it seems that whoever reads about something first has some kind of inside knowledge that others hurry to acquire. Magazines not only provide information, but also encourage the purchase of riding gear. From product testing to technical question-and-answer forums, manufacturers of bike products are getting their names out there, sometimes even in a subliminal way through subtle product placement. From having a popular rider on their bikes during photo shoots to in their sunglasses during an interview.

The bike magazines' impact on riding is unmistakable, yet perhaps even more influential in the freeriding aspect of mountain biking, are the bike videos within the sport. These videos focus on the newest, coolest places to ride and the very best as well as the sometimes unheard of new riders. If no one knows your name at [InterBike](#)¹³ one year, and a video comes out with you in a segment the next year, chances are that by the following InterBike, you may be sponsored by several bike related companies, sitting in one of their booths, with your very own autograph signing. Lifestyle segments are interlaced within these videos with intense and awe inspiring big hits, drops, stunts and tricks. What is being done right now on the other side of the world can be relayed to you on DVD or VHS format and often through downloads over the internet within seconds. Although video series' such as "[North Shore Extreme](#)," "[Kranked](#)" and "[MPF Productions](#)" have been pivotal in the movement and progression of this sport, the Internet is pushing the progression forward at lightning speed.

Downloadable versions of riding clips, such as [Drop In TV](#), are found readily on web sites devoted exclusively to the freeride/dirt jump/urban assault genre, including

¹³ InterBike is the main industry trade show held in Los Vegas every year where retailers and producers within the bike industry can get together and talk shop.

[Pinkbike.com](#), [MTBR.com](#), [NSMB.com](#) (North Shore Mountain Biking), and more.

Anyone can post pictures of themselves or their friends riding anywhere in the world. They can talk to other people about certain riding spots, events, and technology or buy and sell their used biking equipment in seconds. “No-names” become household names on PinkBike.com within the freeride world. The interconnectedness of freeriding is intensified by the speed in which the Internet brings together the professionals, consumers, promoters and manufacturers in one easily accessible forum. A perfect example of this interconnectedness is the [Race Face Ultimate Freeride Challenge](#) (UFC).

Manufacturers

In the Race Face UFC, a parts manufacturer that makes bicycle components such as cranks, bottom brackets and stems, hosts a riding contest over the Internet. Riders from around the world submit video clips of themselves, and the public votes on who they believe is the best new freerider. The winner of this contest receives a hefty check from Race Face and the privilege of being the Race Face poster boy¹⁴ for the next year, promoting their products by posing for photo shoots in bike magazines, and riding their gear at competitions and video shoots. A member of the Safety Team made it to the final sixteen in 2006 and was featured on the Race Face UFC website with two videos he rode in and edited himself. Events like this can bring every facet of the freeride world together in one place at one time. This continually available access exaggerates the “it’s a small world after all” feeling that is already prevalent within freeriding.

Another example of the interface between the consumer, the promoter/manufacturer and the professional is at freeride competitions such as the

¹⁴ There has never been a female entry to the author’s knowledge.

RedBull Rampage in Virgin, Utah, the [Boston Bike Battle](#) or the FreezRide mentioned earlier. Here, professionals and locals alike compete on a freeride course where the media and the general public watch and learn. Aidan, as we mentioned earlier, rode alongside many professional freeriders at the RedBull FreezRide event, and has accompanied me on riding trips to Canada and Utah where he has met and ridden with Josh Bender as well as others he had only previously seen in pictures. He commented that:

... after meeting like Bender and meeting Kinraid¹⁵ and being able to see the Rampages¹⁶ and the FreezRides and stuff like that, like the people that are in the magazines that we are looking at and the videos that we are watching are just like people that ride! Just like anybody else that rides anywhere. And it seems really personable and mellow where the cross-country scene to me never seemed that way.

This common ground atmosphere is widespread in freeriding and tends to create a commonality between all of the participants involved, whether they are primary or secondary. Photos and stories from these events build a sense of camaraderie among those that were there to watch, those who competed, and those who simply saw pictures of, or heard about the event from someone they knew. The shots may show up in magazines and commercials, as well as video clips available commercially or over the Internet. Although there is still a debate as to whether a “freeride competition” is still freeriding since it goes against the very foundation of this sport, the sense of community within freeriding is still undeniably reinforced there. When “Jonah,” a 21-year-old

¹⁵ Aidan is referring to Mike Kinraid, professional freerider and creator of MPF Productions, a video production and distribution company. He has been a favorite “famous” freerider to many in Missoula that have met him due to his truly approachable and good-hearted nature as well as his amazing riding skill and creativity.

¹⁶ He is referring to a freeride competition similar to the FreezRide, also sponsored by RedBull, which will be mentioned more later.

Missoula freerider, spoke of the camaraderie and connectedness between professional freeriders and locals at such events, he spoke in his trademark slow and calm voice about what he had experienced at the FreezRide.

It seems like it's kind of close...Aidan and Mitch and Evan being able to ride a lot of lines that Bender shows them, and like they can go out and ride with him and have him like support them or whatever...or like drink a beer with Mike Kinraid you know...That was my first exposure to a big competition of any sort...I just loved it! I was happier just to have a media pass and be able to run all around the course and be right there and sit there and making rounds with Wade Simmons like, "How's it going?", just shaking his hand like, "All right!", you know... You know meeting tons of guys...meeting [Chris Duncan](#)¹⁷ in the hot tub with Mitch and totally didn't know who he was just like, "How's it going?", you know. Just totally had the friendliest conversation for like half an hour/forty-five minutes or whatever and he was just the coolest guy....

Because freeriding has a non-competitive spirit in its origin, the new subject of freeride competitions has fueled an interesting debate. While RedBull, as a promoter in the sport of freeriding, has made a difference in the face of the sport, there are differing opinions as to whether this face is improved or disfigured when compared to its original self. Some say freeride competitions are still true to the spirit of freeriding, and others would beg to differ. Evan had this to say about it:

Well... you know... it... there's an ongoing debate about it, um whether it is freeriding any more, and you know to a certain extent, it's not freeriding anymore and you know perhaps out of respect they should... need to... not only come up with a word, but perhaps successfully coin a phrase that differentiates between freeriding in it's roots and what today freeriding has become... which is really more like "extreme mountain biking" or you know "crazy biking"¹⁸.

¹⁷ Duncan at this time was a relatively new professional freerider who was known for his constant smile and positive attitude, with the FreezRide being his first freeride competition. His popularity later explodes with sponsorships, video segments and magazine interviews. He was everywhere.

¹⁸ Making reference here to an article in last year's Missoulian that interviews and has pictures of Evan. A caption under a picture describes what he does as "crazy biking", which spurred on this sarcastic comment.

When Wade Simmons was asked if freeride competitions were bringing freeriding closer to competitions like racing, or if they're staying true to the origin of freeriding, he remarked:

Oh, it's freeriding. It's like you're hanging out with your buddies and you're in an area in new search of freeriding. You're just picking out new lines, it's like, "Hey, what's that? Oh, that looks cool, that was pretty rad. What was this? Oh shit, never saw that." There's no pressure against time or anything like that. It's guys who have skills and who apply them differently to the terrain and that opens up to other people that go, "Yeah, I never really realized that you could go over there and jump off that and land on that." That's wonderful. (Hauser 2003, p.36)

Whether freeriding competitions are still freeriding or not, they are undoubtedly an important part of the current manifestation of freeriding. They are bringing the big names together with the no-names. They are providing a venue for professional freeriders to congregate and show off their skills. They are providing a place for the media in the form of magazine photographers and videographers to capture well-known freeride athletes in amazing surroundings. They are providing a structure and in a sense, a pecking order in the world of freeriding that they themselves are creating. This is evident in that the riders that win the RedBull freeriding events are the media darlings, and therefore very well known, until the next big event. Ask anyone in the freeriding world who sponsors most of the freeriding competitions, and they will know that the big names in professional freeriding can all be seen at The RedBull Rampage, The RedBull FreezRide, The RedBull Ride in Australia, The RedBull JoyRide in Whistler or maybe The RedBull Boston Bike Battle. In this way, promoters of the sport are becoming integral within its evolution.

Bike Shops

Among all those in the secondary ring of participation encircling freeriding, the ones “who have the most personal contact with riders from every level of involvement, are those who own or work in the shops” (Hull 1976, p.29). Bike shops are the retail and service outlets for all the rider’s needs. One surf shop salesman told Stephen Hull, in his study on the surfing subculture in Santa Cruz, that, “We are here to sell surfers all the stuff they see in the [surfing] magazines” (Hull 1976, p.29). Since the bike shop I work in is a service-based shop, I cannot agree completely with this statement, but generally speaking, that is indeed one of the bike shop’s roles in the culture of riding. They sell bikes, components, gear, magazines, videos, chain lube and anything that is particularly symbolic of riding. The more important role in the shop, however, may be of keeping the rider riding.

In addition to providing riders with all the material needs of riding, the bike shop supplies a few intangible ones as well. The local bike shop owner will often hire riders from the local area to work in his or her shop, or sponsor a team consisting of the better riders in the local area. The bike shop becomes a place where riders can come together and share stories and experiences, a communication hub. This is the case with Bike Doctor’s “Happy Hour” every Friday, but the shop itself (every day of the week) gives riders a social setting to talk about their latest accomplishment or bike trip. There are couches and bar stools scattered around the shop and riders are encouraged to hang out. When looking at the local bike shop in comparison to the local surf shop, another parallel between Hull’s study of surfing and this look at freeriding becomes apparent. Hull found that:

In return for discounts...and high status in the surfing community, the surf team member promotes the surf shop. With these well known surfers working and hanging out at the 'shop' when they are not surfing, the surf shop becomes a place to meet 'celebrities' and talk about the latest surfboard designs, the last surfing contest, and current surf conditions. (Hull 1976, p.30)

As this quote conveys, the bike shop creates an atmosphere of solidarity for the riders and distributors within the sport on a local level. The relationship between the shop and riders is mutually beneficial. As the shop sponsors the riders, the riders promote the shop. The team grows as sponsored riders bring in their friends or as local riders approach the shop for sponsorship. The Bike Doctor has always been lucky enough to have a great group of riders to support locally, including a large (and growing) number of younger riders. The future of our sport is definitely with the youth.

As I was completing this section of the paper, a customer of the shop approached me at a grocery store to talk about a recent bike festival, and made a coincidental remark that ties together many previous subjects:

You guys seem to be filling the same niche that surf shops do in other areas. It seems like the same kind of thing. My cousin owns a surf shop in California and I was thinking about that when I was watching the Tour de Fat and looking at all the riders. I mean it's getting bigger and bigger every year. You guys have a lot more riders all the time, and young guys too. It's pretty cool.
Bike Doctor Customer, at the Good Food Store, Monday 1/5/04

The bike shop undoubtedly would not be the same without the group of riders that support it, and the group of riders would not be the same without the support of their local shop. The Bike Doctor during a recent move to a new shop location realized just how much support there is from the local riders. Evan and myself have called our new space "the shop the Safety Team built" due to the overwhelming amount of help we have had in our renovations. A friend and sponsored rider who does tile for a living tiled our

floors in two rooms for a fraction of the true cost. Morgan, a roofer interviewed for this paper, did our roofs for the cost of materials alone. Another Safety Teamer and fourth generation logger contributed his skill of timber framing in our front showroom area at a huge discount for materials and with no labor cost. A third sponsored rider who helps run [Home Resource](#) in town has traded bike parts for a furnace, windows and doors. A plumber we ride with and sponsor asked his boss if they could do our plumbing work for us and donated his time to install our natural gas line. That same plumber also put together a fundraiser for part owner of the shop, Evan, after he injured his knee during a ride on Blue Mountain. ECPalooza (as it was called) raised \$1000 to go towards Evan's medical bills by selling raffle tickets that sold chances at winning a wide array of prizes donated from Jonah's mom's bookstore and Mitch and Aidan's outdoor store at their request. These are clear examples of how those in the secondary rings of involvement, in this case the bike shops, can affect and be affected by the riders themselves and are an important part of the bike culture itself.

Chapter 7

Land Managers: United States Forest Service

The exchanges between freeriders and those who are not directly involved with the sport are some of the most attention-grabbing interactions. This is definitely the case within the Missoula freeride community, and their interactions with the United States Forest Service (USFS). Although the freeride movement has been gaining momentum since the late nineties, a recent increase in media attention has brought this group of riders into the crosshairs. Local events in Missoula have coincided to bring the freeriding phenomenon into the forefront of many debates between land managers, trail users and riders. Whether they want to be there or not, local land managers are in a very important outer ring that effects the freeride community in Missoula. They are having a marked effect on freeriders as well as mountain bikers in general with how they are choosing to regulate trail use on our public lands.

The communication from in-group member to in-group member maintains a very different dialectic than the in-group to out-group exchange. We act toward others based on the meaning that those other people have for us. Therefore, depending on how those on the outside view freeriders and in turn how they are perceived by freeriders, the interactions between them can be altered. This is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of human behavior. (Blumer 1969, p. 180)

In July 2004, as the Lolo National Forest Missoula Ranger District finished its three-year-long inventory of trails in the Blue Mountain, Pattee Canyon and Rattlesnake

Recreation areas, they sent out a scoping letter in order to gain public comment about their proposed plan for these three popular Missoula riding spots. Their letter included this statement about freeriders:

...the sport of mountain biking is developing a significant component of “free riders”, extreme riders and riders who are mostly interested in the technical challenges and physical tests of the sport.... Unfortunately, as use has increased and mountain biking evolved, some riders have become more aggressive and some conflicts have escalated to incidents of insults, profanity, and, in some cases, even collisions.

The letter goes on to say that they believe that the user-created, non-inventoried trails the USFS has been finding on Forest Service land have been created by this group of riders.

Over the past few years, we’ve noticed a proliferation of user-created trails in Pattee Canyon, Blue Mountain and the Rattlesnake. Some develop passively; others have built sections or features. This seems to be due to Missoula’s growing population and to the desire particular types of users have for trails that suit their specialized needs. The increase of user-created trails has corresponded with an increase in mountain bike use and popularity.... Some user-created mountain-bike trails are steep, erosive, and include technical features like elevated treads, jumps or teeter-totters.

What makes these statements within the Forest Service letter interesting, and to some freeriders even inflammatory is that many of the local riders were working with the Forest Service to create technical riding spots legally within the Recreation Areas. This scoping letter insinuated that there was no such cooperative effort. In the summer of 2003, Jed Little, the president of Missoula’s trail advocacy group, *MTB Missoula* rode [Deadman’s Ridge](#), a popular downhill trail on Blue Mountain, with then District Ranger for the Missoula District, Don Carroll. Both men were concerned with some of the user-created trails appearing on Forest Service land and were hoping to proactively put an end to poorly built, user-created trails by beginning a cooperative effort between land

managers, advocacy group and riders. Many other trail advocacy groups have had great success with this kind of effort including the [Central Oregon Trail Alliance](#) (COTA), a trail group working with their Forest Service and BLM, building and maintaining trails with stunts. The Forest Service calls North Shore style stunts as well as natural terrain features like rock drops, “Technical Trail Features” or TTFs.

Jed Little and Don Carroll agreed that there was an obvious need for more designated locations for technical riding in the Missoula area, which was evidenced by users creating these features for themselves. Jed Little showed Don Carroll “an example of a log ride that had been built just off the main trail,” according to an *MTB Missoula* newsletter, “and both of them felt it was a smart example of technical trail features that were needed in our area.” During their ride that day, the District Ranger approved the creation of similar options on “Deadman’s.” Shortly afterward, in the early fall of 2003, nearly twenty people contributed to a trail maintenance day on Deadman’s Ridge to start the first cooperative endeavor between the Forest Service and freeriders in Missoula. With Don Carroll’s blessing and his key to the gate, MTB Missoula and a group of enthusiastic freeriders, created a few short technical spurs using existing features such as naturally fallen trees and rock outcroppings. The International Mountain Biking Association’s (IMBA) trail building standards were used, and every technical feature was designed as to allow a beginner to “roll over” a feature, while an advanced rider might be able to “launch it.” Sustainability of the trail, as well as rider safety, was taken into account before the first shovel hit the dirt.

During the winter of 2003, much to the Deadman’s Ridge project’s demise, Don Carroll was promoted to another position within the Forest Service, and was transferred

out of Missoula. When the new, Acting District Ranger, Maggie Pittman, learned of the trail work being done on Blue Mountain while reading the newspaper one day, she was surprised that she hadn't heard of it previously. She did some research back at her office and discovered that the normal Forest Service procedures for creating new trails were not followed properly for the new technical options. She called Jed Little that week to arrange a meeting to discuss this conundrum further.

After meeting with the new Forest Service officials, MTB Missoula was told to stop all work on Deadman's Ridge until after the Forest Service had completed its trail inventory and subsequent public comment process. While the cooperative trail project was under construction, Jed Little reported a decrease in the number of phone calls that he received from the Forest Service office reporting illegally built trails in the Pattee Canyon, Blue Mountain and Rattlesnake areas (PBR¹⁹). Jed credited this decrease to the constructive use of energy freeriders were putting into sanctioned freeride trail opportunities that the Forest Service was providing for them on Deadman's Ridge.

On July 15, 2004, a KECI News story aired, and reporter Danielle Dellerson interviewed several members of the Safety Team. The main focus of her piece was freeriding, and how this "daring cousin of mountain biking," was growing nationally as well as in the Western Montana area. She commented during the report, that there currently was not a *place* in Missoula for riders to enjoy their type of recreation. Several teenagers, and adults alike, were interviewed saying that their bikes were a large part of their daily lives, and that "every day is a good day mountain biking." The proposed Forest Service plan was outlined in the story as the camera crew showed five or six riders

¹⁹ This name was given to the three main Recreation Areas by Forest Service employee, Andy Kulla, during one of the meetings between USFS and MTB Missoula.

jumping over obstacles²⁰ and pulling tricks with style. The news spot gave viewers the address of the Missoula Ranger District in order to make comments on the new Forest Service plan, and gave the Missoula community another look at freeriding. Evan, who is also an MTB Missoula member, was interviewed in the piece saying that riders were looking forward to sharing the trails with other users, using the trails responsibly and working with the Forest Service to give this type of riding a place.

In a *Missoulian* article, from March 30, 2005 titled “[Trails around Missoula to be added, subtracted](#),” nearly a year after Deadman’s trail work was ceased, the U.S. Forest Service made public it’s decision to obliterate 15.1 miles of non-system trails, with the technical riding options on Deadman’s Ridge being among them. In her written statement, newly appointed, now permanent District Ranger, Maggie Pittman said: “The technical features that have been built next to Deadman’s Ridge... will be removed, revegetated and naturalized.” And in the official Decision Memo on the Forest Service web site Pittman added, “Although technical riding features exist on national forest land in other western states and in Canada, they are not without conflict and resource concerns.” She mentioned that her preference would be for freeriding to move to the ski areas outside of town and that there was no need for technical riding access in the three main Recreation Areas.

Even though an activity may be less expensive to the user on public land, such activity may take away business potential for the private sector... [therefore] there was... interest in pursuing the technical riding features at our local ski areas.

²⁰ Because there was nowhere for riders to take the camera crew on public land to show this type of riding, these shots were taken in Chad’s backyard (one of the rider and interviewees of this paper).

The Forest Service had decided not to allow freeriding trails to exist on public land, and pressed MTB Missoula to work with Marshall Mountain or Snowbowl to create pay-to-ride areas instead.

Every new development in this local drama was passed around from bike shop to bike shop and from group ride to group ride, with none of the riders in the area knowing how it would end. When the final decision was made, it was as if air had been let out of every freerider's balloon. Mitchell Scott, started his story about the Missoula freeride scene with a small five hundred word web site article, but ended with Missoula being featured in a ten-page full-color spread in the nationally distributed, *Bike Magazine*. Within the article, Scott is quoted as saying that in Missoula the "freeride flower's in full bloom." When he came through Missoula to write his articles, MTB Missoula was successfully working with the Forest Service, so within the *Bike Magazine* article he touts that "Deadman's is an area set aside by land managers as a place for the burgeoning 300-rider-strong Missoula freeride movement to manifest."

While that may no longer be true, Missoula freeriders are being recognized as an important, emerging user group that is growing in numbers; by local trail advocacy groups, local newscasters, *Bike Magazine* editors-at-large and previous District Rangers, although perhaps not completely by their own present guard within the Forest Service. My description of Missoula freeriders may differ drastically from the picture painted by the present Forest Service regime in their scooping letter as that of "extreme riders" that have "become more aggressive" and caused "some conflicts that have escalated to incidents of insults, profanity, and, in some cases, even collisions". With trails closing around them and "trail work" being done by USFS employees that has drastically

changed the face of the trails the Safety Team once loved, freeriders are being confronted with some hard decisions. Continue to attempt a working relationship with the Forest Service after being served several blows, or do their own thing... whatever that may be. There is an emerging feeling among freeriders that if mountain bikers want to have the type of trails that challenge them, they may have to build them illegally. A lack of local trails to ride that offer technical challenges to these “advanced mountain bikers”, and a strained relationship with the officials that hold the key to this public resource undeniably shapes who the freerider is, or who they may become.

As has been shown throughout this section on land managers and the previous section on secondary involvement in the sport of freeriding, every aspect from land manager to bike shop, from spectator to participant, has an important and vital role in shaping the subculture that is freeriding. Every aspect sculpts it and is wrought by it. Without someone there to see it (spectator), would Wade Simmons (freerider) need to jump over the Moreno Valley Road Gap and the Marzocchi Bomber (manufacturer) diesel truck 45 feet below?²¹ Without the riders would there be bike shops, or without bike shops would there be these types of riders? There is interconnectedness. There is fuel from one area of riding participation into another. Which came first, or which is more important to the other is unknown, and perhaps, unimportant. All aspects are part of the complete, three-dimensional picture that is freeriding in Missoula.

²¹ This refers to an advertisement for a popular bicycle suspension company, Marzocchi, which set up one of their trucks to shoot a picture for bike magazine ad purposes.

Chapter 7

Conclusions and the Future of the Sport

“What you start out studying is not your topic...it is yet to be revealed.”

-Jon Driessen, Qualitative Methods class, 1995

This study's basic intent at its onset was to describe the Safety Team, a small faction within the sport of freeriding, using the member's own words and experiences as data. I wanted the group to reveal itself to me instead of imposing my own sociological view upon them. The concept of “emic” and “etic” descriptions reinforces the importance of group member's accounts:

The linguist Kenneth Pike (1954:8-28)...pointed out a contrast between the procedures and presuppositions of *phonetics*, the classification of sound bits according to their acoustic properties, and *phonemics*, the classification of sounds on the basis of their internal function in the language in question. In a parallel way, anthropologists have come to term “etic” those descriptions that use categories from outside the culture studied, and “emic” those accounts based on concepts that come from within the culture that would be used or recognized by its members. (Geertz 1973, p.39)

Thick, detailed descriptions impart in marked detail the context and meanings of events and scenes that are relevant to those involved in them. Their descriptions, therefore, are not merely *about* some social world, but are also *part* of that world. In this sense descriptions are *reflexive* in character.

As was seen in the section on secondary involvement within the sport of freeriding, most of those involved in the freeride movement are there because they are part of the bike culture itself: bike shops, spectators, manufacturers and promoters. These groups are able to give “emic” descriptions of freeriders because their opinions of them are based on concepts that come from within the culture. Contrarily, the Forest

Service is involved with this group from the outside looking in and is consequently only able to give “etic” accounts and descriptions.

After considering the Forest Service’s decision to close the technical features on Deadman’s Ridge, and reading their descriptions of freeriders within their documentation, it became clear that their view of who these riders are and what is important to them was very different from the opinions of the riders themselves. From the insider’s perspective freeriding is “advanced level mountain biking,” a legitimate means of recreating while pushing the limits of an existing sport, being supportive of each other and being creative in the line being ridden. Contrarily, the USFS explained freeriders within their scoping letter as “aggressive” and having caused “conflicts” that ranged from startling pedestrians by passing them close at very high speed, to forcing hikers off the trail, using insults, profanity and even causing collisions. The Forest Service also saw freeriders’ affinity for creativity in line choice as having caused “user-created mountain bike trails” that were “steep, erosive...and a concern for resource damage and user safety” (Kulla 2004, p.1). This difference in perspective between users and regulatory agencies is nothing new. Freeriding, much like other “extreme sports” such as skateboarding and snowboarding, may not always be greeted by the “outside world” and local officials with open arms. All three of these sports have struggles in common, not only in the way the public perceives them or their “public image,” but also in their inability to gain access from local authorities to an area in which to recreate.

Skateboarding, when it began gaining popularity in the early seventies, was “looked down on by most of society because of most skateboarders perceived affinity for crime and delinquency” ([Wikipedia](#), 2006). Skateboarding has long ridden a tension line

between its athleticism and its reputation as an outsider sport. Perhaps it's because of this reputation that skateboarding has struggled with legal access to streets and sidewalks on which to recreate. In 1996, Mayor Giuliani signed a bill restricting the use of skateboards on all public sidewalks in New York City stating,

...reckless operation has become an enormous problem in many of our communities. Many pedestrians, particularly seniors, have been afraid to walk our streets for fear of being injured by careless skaters. In addition, skaters have frequently contributed to automobile accidents involving pedestrians and skaters themselves. ([Roche 1996, p.1](#))

In Madison, Wisconsin, a city ordinance prevents skateboarders from traveling on public streets and sidewalks and has become a heated issue between skateboarders and law-enforcement officials in the area. The ordinance is part of a state law allowing rollerblading on public streets, but preventing skateboards. "Skateboarding can be very dangerous. It is rude to skateboard in public," says Brandon Blaschka, a Madison Area Technical College junior interviewed by the University of Wisconsin's Badger Herald (Woodworth 2002 p.1).

Despite small setbacks and occasional reminders in local periodicals of skaters' bad-boy image, major headway has been made by these "street punks" in acquiring a place to play within recent years (*Wikipedia*, 2006). After numerous conflicts between local authorities and skaters, this form of recreation has cleared many obstacles. To some it seems to have, almost "morphed into the mainstream" ([Bergquist 2004, p.1](#)). The familiar mantra, "Skateboarding is not a crime" has come to ring true in many towns and cities across the globe. A growing number of communities, including Missoula, have allowed community skate parks to be built on public land, usually within public parks, which lends tremendous credibility to the sport. According to Wisconsin based "4

Seasons Skateboard Park” owner, Neal Levin, “The public parks are a recognition that kids need a place to skate, and with the money going into them, the parents are supporting it. It’s definitely gone mainstream” (Bergquist 2004, p.2). While skaters are gaining national acceptance and public land in which to recreate, bikers are still fighting for access. Although many skate parks across the U.S. are multi-use “ride parks,” the local skate park in Missoula (named Mobash), which was started by a group of skaters, has decided not to allow bikes to use the park. This led me to a very interesting question. Is banning bikes from the Missoula skate park proof that skateboarding is widely considered a legitimate use of public land, and biking is not? In the opinion of an online encyclopedia, *Wikipedia*:

The former image of the skateboarder as a rebellious, nonconforming youth has come in direct conflict with the modern image of skateboarding in recent years. Now that skateboarding has become an international sport and many have made their livings out of professional skateboarding, the sport is no longer considered meaningless and is considered by many to be a legitimate sport.

Skateboarding, however, is not the only example of a sport that was once considered meaningless that has become accepted by mainstream society. Snowboarding has seen some of the same struggles regarding image and access as skateboarding and freeriding and has managed to transcend many of them. Perhaps this is hope for the freeriders.

Snowboarding got its start in the late seventies, and popularity soon followed in the mid-eighties, but mainstream acceptance didn’t come easily for this snow sport (Loose 2004, p.4-6). Snowboarding was struggling with access at its onset and was thought to be a fad that would eventually fade away. Snowboarding was not allowed on many ski resorts during the first years after its inception, with liability concerns being stated as one of the main stumbling blocks.

The different styles were a safety concern when snowboarding first started to get popular...many resort operators weren't sure if the two could mix, and banned boarders from riding. ([Loose 2004, p.7](#))

In a classic [CBC News reel from 1985](#), reporter Kelly McClughan interviewed many local ski resort owners and managers about their opinions of snowboarding as a new form of recreation on snow. "We don't want them at all! They're missiles. They cause nothing but problems!" was one owner's response. When McClughan asked the unnamed owner if he could see a compromise in sight for this new recreationist, his answer was:

No! No! Skiing is getting more and more popular and if these boards get more and more popular it's just going to be more hassles, more confrontations and we just want to say we don't want them at all! (McClughan 1985, p.1)

Luckily for snowboarders, this view of excluding them from the mountain soon fizzled out and most resorts now allow snowboarding. In fact, while only 7% of the U.S. ski resorts allowed snowboarding as late as 1995, by 2004 94% of resorts permitted snowboarding on their slopes. "Once thought of as only for the tattooed and purple-haired set, today it's not uncommon to see a family of four sliding down a slope together" (Loose 2004, p.7).

Much like skateboarding, the outlaw image associated with snowboarding may be morphing into the conventional. Even as it is lucrative for the snowboard industry to sell their sometimes-radical image to consumers, the numbers of sales within the industry scream mainstream acceptance. According to Loose's article, "Falling for Snowboarding", in the 1998/99 season, an estimated 300,000 snowboards were sold, a full third of the amount of skis. This \$600 million-a-year apparel and equipment industry has been predicted to overtake skiing in popularity within a decade. Top professional

snowboarders now make six figure incomes and unlike the sport that is credited with inspiring it, snowboarding has qualified for the Olympic games, unlike surfers who still do not have the chance to bring home the gold. With snowboarding being embraced by the Olympic Committee, there seems to no longer be any question as to the legitimacy of this sport. What was once thought of as a “hassle” or a “fad” by ski resort operators is now part of mainstream society and is accepted, following the model laid out before it by skateboarding.

Has society determined through constant media attention, increased sales of freeride bikes, and user-created trails with more technical features popping up all over the country that freeriding is also a legitimate recreational activity? Or are local Missoula land managers correct in their assumptions that it is best if freeriders are not allowed to use public land for their form of recreation? According to a 1991 Utah State University paper entitled, “A New Perspectives Approach in National Forest Recreation and its Application to Mountain Bike Management,” by Lolo National Forest Ranger District employee, Andy Kulla:

There was a time when agency managers could determine the legitimacy and appropriateness of new uses. But that time has past. In today’s world, society determines the legitimacy of recreational uses, and the manager’s role has shifted from telling the public if it’s OK to accommodate what people want to do and taking measures to integrate new uses with existing ones. (Kulla 1991, p.2)

New forms of recreation cause local officials and land managers to think outside their previously established box in order to create a place for these novel modes of play to exist. This was the case with skateboarding, a sport that was on one hand restricted from using public streets and sidewalks in some areas around the U.S., but on the other hand, given public land in numerous cities and towns in which to build skate parks. It was also

shown to be the case with snowboarding, which was once only allowed on seven percent of ski hills within the United States and is now an Olympic Sport. Will it also be the case with freeriding?

It might be possible to make Missoula and the Lolo National Forest a positive example of fostering mountain bike ethics, care for the land, and respect and consideration among folks who like to play in the woods. (Kulla 1991, p. 16)

Freeriders are definitely the new kids on the block and they, like skaters and snowboarders before them, are looking for a place to play. Missoula, as with many areas in our country, has a new type of recreational use to incorporate. Although our Lolo Ranger District originally removed technical trail features built during a cooperative effort between freeriders and the Lolo Ranger District, then issued warnings to freeriders seen riding in that area after the features were removed, perhaps freeriders in Missoula will still successfully find their place on public land.

Conflicts between recreationists and land managers are nothing new to IMBA, who has been the liaison between many cyclist and land manager disputes since its inception in 1988. According to IMBA, there are several policies that can be set in place to allow user groups and land managers to get what they want:

Public land managers who seek to provide high-quality recreation experiences on trails face the challenge of increasing user conflicts. Successful resolution of this problem depends on the management approach. The International Mountain Bicycling Association recommends that managers adopt the 'minimum tool rule': Use the least intrusive measures that will solve the problem. Some managers, unaware of this principle, have fallen into a more simple and less successful approach. Andy Kulla, a recreation manager in the Lolo National Forest of Montana, calls it 'Ignore or Restrict: ... New uses are ignored until they conflict with a traditional established use and then are managed by prohibition or restriction... The manager then tries to resolve a conflict between two or more often very angry and alienated user groups. By then it's often too late... Positions are taken, heels are dug in, and emotions rather than rational thought dominate the negotiations.' (IMBA 2004, p.1)

The policy recommendation I am making to the USFS in dealing with freeriding on public lands in and around Missoula is the use of The Minimum Tool Rule (MTR), referenced by IMBA (2004) and Andy Kulla (1994). With The Minimum Tool Rule, non-confrontational management methods are employed first and only after these tools have proven ineffective are more restrictive management practices used. The first tool within the MTR hierarchy is the use of **signs** within the trail systems which urge cyclists to stay on routes, slow down, limit party size, and consider other users voluntarily. The use of signs helps to ensure that cyclists who care, but don't know proper etiquette, have enough information to monitor themselves. Within this step in the hierarchy, signs can also be used to present maps of the trails, depicting areas that are open or closed to the user.

The second level of the MTR hierarchy also encourages users to police themselves through use of **peer pressure**. Asking users to encourage their friends and other cyclists to patrol their own ranks in a positive way. If these first two methods don't work, more active management methods can be employed such as a formal **education** program formed in conjunction with local bike shops, universities and trail advocacy groups. The purpose of the education program would be to teach users about low impact use, etiquette, and consideration for other users. The program could develop posters, brochures, and a logo or trademark to become a recognized reminder or symbol of considerate cycling to be posted at bike shops and trail heads. If there are still more than the usual number of complaints from other recreationists, and integrating the new user into the existing trail system is problematic, the next option is the **use of closed roads**. This method effectively segregates the new user into an area that is not presently being

used by other recreationists. It emphasizes and encourages the use of closed roads by the new user as a bike route, since single-track trails can become congested quickly and have a high potential for conflict as compared to more wide-open routes.

The next management tool in the MTR hierarchy is called a **soft-cycling training program**. This tool encourages the development of training programs on low impact cycling for adults and school children to be presented by clubs, organizations and bike shops. Although it is my opinion that this step in the hierarchy could be combined with the education tool above, it may have its own place here in order to try this technique again with a more concerted and proactive effort. Only after this second attempt at educating users has failed does the MTR recommend moving to the next tool of management, which is use of innovative **trail design**. This technique encourages new trails or trails that can be reconstructed, to include design features that restrict speed and enhance sight distance. Trails can include wide segments, or pull-out sections to facilitate safe passing of cyclists, horses, and hikers. This trail design step moves almost seamlessly into the new step of the MTR ladder: **barriers to control speed**. While this technique is also a trail design technique, it uses specific design options that are specifically intended to slow a rider down. Building trails to control speed may include leaving or installing barriers in the trail, like protruding rocks, roots, bumps, sharp curves, downed trees and waterbars.

Requested walking zones are the next management step where cyclists are requested or required to walk their bikes in certain areas where speed, recklessness, or congestion are potential problems. **One-way only** routes designate the direction of travel on trails with very heavy use to avoid the potential for head on collisions, while **posting**

speed limits set maximum allowable or recommended speeds for cyclists. This encourages cyclist to maintain a speed that allows them to stop in less than half the distance they can see. The next MTR management technique is **patrolling** these speed limits and other established trail rules by use of properly trained volunteer groups whose job it is to talk with cyclists. Only after all of the above eleven options have proven unsuccessful is it recommended that any restriction of riding occur.

The first level of riding restriction is to **restrict cyclists by time**. This management technique allows for mountain bike use only at certain times of day, while the next tool **restricts cyclists by day**. Most day restrictions imposed on mountain bikes that I have seen around the country use an odd/even day restriction. Bikes can be on the trails during every odd numbered day of the month for example, but must not use the trails on even days. If this type of restriction is not sufficient, **separate sections** of trail may need to be used by different trail users, especially in areas where there is the greatest congestion (like at trailheads). If the user conflicts are occurring at several different locations, and not just at bottlenecks such as trailheads, the MTR encourages the **construction of separate routes**. With this management tool, the USFS and local trail advocacy groups construct separate trails for mountain bikes where there is strong user support (like money and/or labor) and where no other solutions are feasible.

Zoning is a very interesting management technique, especially when looking at freeriders and their needs as a user. This technique closes certain areas to cycling and then allows and encourages that use in other designated areas. This method is dependent on having other areas available and usable, and is what was started with the Deadman's Ridge TTFs. The last and most restrictive management technique that can be used by

forest officials is to **close an area to cyclists** altogether. This should be only used as a last resort after other efforts have proven ineffective.

Using the least restrictive method of management on Forest Service land will have a much more positive effect on the user groups being managed than restricting access to public lands altogether. Public land should be able to be used by the community for its recreational pursuits while keeping resource conservation in mind. While these pursuits will inevitably change over time, which will undoubtedly bring about some challenges for land managers, use and conservation do not need to be diametrically opposed. Because North Shore Style stunts developed originally with resource conservation being at the forefront of trail builders' minds, this new user group has shown that their resources on their public lands are important to them. It becomes the job of the land manager then, to find a way to work with this group for everyone's needs to be met. As Andy Kulla puts it:

Traditional recreation management has evolved by default to a series of regulations, restrictions and exclusionary designations. In simpler times past, Federal and State managers were trained to be in control and designate themselves into the 'I know best' position. The lead responsibility for management and leadership on recreation issues was held closely by the manager with only limited and structured public involvement. The Psychological Reactance Theory (as reported by Stutman, 1990) indicates that this regulatory approach to management actually contributes to further polarization and alienation. This theory states that people respond to regulatory management by either 1) reaction to reassert a freedom if that freedom is directly threatened, or 2) wanting to do what they are told not to do. (Kulla 1991, p. 2)

The possibility for increased polarization and alienation of freeriders by the USFS is a reality. By skipping many of the first steps of the Minimum Tool Rule and moving directly to closing areas to cyclists, it has sent a message to freeriders that their use of

public land is unacceptable. A USFS Pacific Southwest Research Station employee, [Deborah J. Chavez](#), wrote a research paper on mountain bike issues and actions in which she interviewed USFS and National Park Service (NPS) employees to gain a better perspective of mountain biking on federal land. According to one of her respondents:

It is obvious that the use of mountain bikes will continue to increase and there will be continuing conflicts on forest lands. There may be a remedy in the future by increasing the opportunities available to these users. One option is developing additional trails for bikes only. A major increase in the existing budget is necessary to provide these opportunities and to provide the educational materials that will be necessary to the public.

-Intermountain Region respondent

The idea of providing more riding opportunities instead of restricting riding opportunities is reiterated by another respondent who says:

There is a tremendous difference in the level of experience that users are seeking. Some want to ride on very primitive trails with a high level of risk and some folks prefer the very easy trails that are hard surfaced where there is little or no risk. Some folks want to ride and prefer roads through the forest. Some of our trail managers would like to dictate to our users where and when they should ride. Managers would like to make the decision for the users what is safe and what is not. As many trails as possible should be open to users, and let them make the decision of whether to use it or not.

-Pacific Northwest Region respondent

The freeriders that I interviewed are not asking to be let loose to ride on or off trail at their whim. The term freeriding does not imply riding off trail as some believe. It simply means advanced mountain bike riding without the constraints imposed on it by a race regimen. Freeriders, from what I have learned in this study, have a desire to work with those around them, and this could include USFS if it were believed that such a cooperative endeavor could be possible. The riders involved in the trail work on Blue

Mountain that included TTFs on Deadman's Ridge were self-policing and happy to work with their land managers. However, since this cooperation has been taken away, it has left a state of confusion within the community as to where they should go next. The alternative to a productive working relationship between these groups according to Kulla and The Psychological Reactance Theory is for freeriders to either reassert a freedom that is being directly threatened, or do what they are told not to do. Neither of these reactions will help resolve the conflict we have at hand.

Missoula freeriders do not show any evidence of going away as a user group. They may however be following in the footsteps lay out before them by their alternative sport brethren: skaters and snowboarders. They are a group with a sincere passion for their sport and I don't see any of them giving it up any time soon. Riding has become a way of life for many of them and they will find a place to play. This new form of recreating is very similar to new uses seen throughout our past. One reason I was interested in this group was because of the perceived caring that they seemed to have for one another. This is a group of riders that bands together because they *live to ride*. They have a *passion* for it. They value it more than many other things in their lives because it allows them to express themselves as the unique individuals and group they are. They learn from each other, they *support* each other, they try not to be *competitive* with one another. They are always courageously *pushing their own limits* because they want to have *fun* through being *creative*. When asked why they ride, respondents had this to say:

It's a *passion*. In the summer *I live to ride*. It's what I wake up for.
It's *fun*! I love trying to learn a new trick and showing my friends.
I like to *push myself* and it makes me feel good. It's a good way to relieve stress.
Why do you breathe? Also because it's *fun*.

To smile!
Enjoyment. Challenge. Fitness. *Passion*.
To feel...free, alive, joy.

The riders within this group are cohesive in their love for the ride. They may be different in many other ways, but in this passion for riding, they will agree. Darren Berrecloth, a professional freerider (Ige 2003, p.86), sums it up with, "I'll always be involved with bikes. It's my passion. To me they stand for one thing...freedom."

Appendix A:

Author's Autobiography

My first introduction to freeriding was in the year 2000, when I saw Digger's third film, North Sore Extreme (NSX) Vol. III: Dirty Dreams. Although I had been riding mountain bikes for years before I saw this film, I had no idea that bikes could be ridden in this way. I was awe struck and completely fascinated by this style of riding. I had ridden mountain bikes traditionally (cross-country) in Salt Lake City, Moab, Arizona and Missoula, but seeing skinny log rides, big rock drops and various stunts being ridden on two wheels was an eye-opening experience.

I got a job at the Bike Doctor, a bike shop in Missoula, while I was attending graduate school in 1997. I had brought my bike to this shop for repairs and upgrades since I moved into town 2 years earlier, and was offered a job by the owner as I was dropping off an application for the local bike couriers that shared a business address with the shop.

Nine months later, the owner took the Bike Doctor Crew to lunch and told us he was selling the shop, but he wanted it to stay "in the family". Before I knew it, my long-term boyfriend and I owned a bike shop. We had been recreationally involved in bikes since 1991, and now we were working and playing bicycles 24 hours a day 7 days a week. We moved the shop 3 years later to our present location in downtown Missoula, and became an active member of Missoula's local trail group LIMB (Low Impact Mountain Bicyclists and local affiliate of IMBA mentioned earlier). Their name has since changed to MTB Missoula (Mountain Bike Missoula), but their focus on trail access and maintenance has remained the same.

During the first year of involvement in the group, I received a call from a representative at New Belgium Brewing Company. As I mentioned in the paper, they were putting on a festival called the Tour de Fat and were looking for a non-profit cycling group that could benefit from some of the funds raised by a bike and beer festival event like this. I immediately offered LIMB as a perfect beneficiary and partner in the festival, and the first Tour de Fat was on its way.

For the event, it was suggested by New Belgium and MTB Missoula Board Members, that we have a bike exhibition, showcasing some of the trials skills in the area. The person L.I.M.B. chose to spearhead the demonstration was having problems coming up with riders willing to ride and build obstacles for the exhibition, and he eventually asked my boyfriend, "Evan," for help. One thing led to another and a configuration of skinnies and drops were built. Evan and many of our friends (and customers) built and rode that day at McCormick Park, inspired by North Shore Extreme and a new video called Kranked. The Safety Team was born.

Although our shop had sponsored a team before, the previous sponsorship was of a cross-country, road-racing and triathlete team that was transferred with the ownership change of the shop. When this team went to another shop for a more lucrative sponsorship, Evan and I decided we did not want to sponsor another racing oriented team. The Safety Team just fell in our lap. Here we had the opportunity to support a group of talented local riders that were not competing in races, and the idea just stuck.

After the first Tour de Fat, people began to approach Evan and I about having The Safety Team perform at other functions around town. Suddenly the Safety Team was performing at The Outdoor Expo and Gear Swap at Marshall Mountain, The Festival of

Cycles at Bonner Park, The Hemp Fest at Caras Park, Adventure Cycling's Cycle Montana in Darby and Hot Springs, The Turner Burner Race Series in Libby Montana and The Bike for Shelter Benefit for the Watson's Children's Shelter. As the exposure grew, the team member numbers grew, and a whole new kind of riding began to take over.

As the festivals continued, so did our recreational trips with our bikes. Now, however, we were going to different places with a different type of riding in mind. Our first stop in Fernie, British Columbia, was quickly followed by Nelson, then Vancouver, Whistler, Squamish, Rossland, etc. We began attending the RedBull Rampages in Virgin, Utah, and riding while we were there. We met people from all over the world that were into the same kind of riding we were.

It was at this time that I started to relate many of the sociological ideas I had learned in graduate school at the University of Montana, to freeriding. My experience at the shop and with the Safety Team, as well as my own recreational ties to riding have given me ample opportunities to learn about and attempt to describe the culture around freeriding.

Appendix B:

Glossary

Argot- The specialized vocabulary and idioms of those in the same work, way of life, etc.

Freestyling has its own “rad” language. Riders are called “deck monkeys” and a “faceplant” is a head first fall. -David Perry, *Bike Cult*, p. 448, 1995.

Freeriding indeed also has it’s own language, although it borrows from many things around it. Words have been taken from popular culture, BMX riding, skateboarding, snowboarding, skiing, trials riding, surfing and moto-cross just to name a few. Here is a list of some of the words mentioned in this paper and their approximate definitions.

180s- A one hundred and eighty degree turn done in mid air in many sports such as biking, skateboarding and snowboarding

Adrenaline Sports- A term used to denote aggressive sports such as skateboarding, moto-cross and freeriding. It is assumed that those involved in these activities are addicted to the adrenaline rush they achieve from participating in such activities.

Bottom Bracket- The bearing mechanism inside the frame that attaches the cranks to the bike.

Clean- To clear an obstacle without dabs or crashing.

Crank- The part of a bike that attaches the pedals to the bike. Also a term used to hit something with speed (e.g. “He really cranked through that section.”).

Dab- Originating in trials, this term is used when a rider takes their foot off the pedal during a trick or technical section and puts in on the ground. It is seen as a small mistake.

Drop- Riding off an elevated cliff or ledge onto a lower landing. Can be a “wheelie drop” where you land rear wheel first.

Dual Slalom- Dual Slalom mountain bike racing is a great head to head competition down a man made course usually with gated turns (much like ski racing). The course usually has man made obstacles such as berms, jumps, bumps and the occasional drop or rock pile.

Extreme- Although the literal translation of this word according to Webster is: in or to the greatest degree, to an excessive degree, immoderate or far from what is usual or conventional, the word has a slightly negative slant in the freeriding world. Because of modern ads for everything from Mountain Dew to Chocolate Milk are using this word to sell an image, freeriders tend to use it in jest more than literally.

FlowRiders- A group of freeriders spearheaded by “Dangerous” Dan Cowan in B.C., Canada. This group toured bike events with a set of hand built stunts, especially including high skinnies to large drops.

FreezRide- A RedBull freeride competition held at Big Mountain Resort in Whitefish Montana for 2 years. It was a slope-style competition where riders were judges on style, fluidity, and line choice among other things.

FroRiders- A term given to the Rocky Mountain Bicycles Freeride Team including Wade Simmons, Brett Tippie and Richie Schley. They couldn’t call themselves “freeriders” because Cannondale (a bike manufacturing company) copyrighted the term that year. These three wore 70’s style afros in many pictures at the time.

Gnarly- Another word for sick. It usually has the connotation of scary or dangerous.

Hardtail- A bicycle that has front suspension only, no rear suspension, thus giving it a hard tail.

Hip- A jump that lands at a different angle than you took off from. Usually in a tabletop format.

JoyRide- A RedBull freeride event held at Whistler Ski Resort in the Freeride Park in B.C., Canada.

Kicker- A jump, usually a smaller one.

Line- The riding route chosen whether it be over a jump, on a trail or through a rock garden, etc.

Mag Wheel- A vehicle wheel using larger diameter, solid spokes usually cast from composite or metal material that decreases the number of spokes to 3 or 5.

Mountain Dew- A carbonated soda-drink known to use the word “extreme” in their ads. It is often made fun of for this reason by freeriders.

No-names- Unknown riders that no one knows the name of...yet.

Rampage- RedBull freeride event held in Virgin, Utah. Often called the “superbowl of freeriding”.

RedBull- Producer of an “energy drink” containing taurine (a synthesized hormone said to be found in bulls), carbonated water and high fructose corn syrup among other things. They also sponsor most of the freeride competitions that have been held in the last three years. This term has also come to mean “extreme” in a jesting way for some in the freeride community (e.g. “That heel-clicker was RedBull!”). Can be loosely translated to mean, “Right on.”

Road Gap- Jumping over a road by taking off on one side and landing on the transition of the other side.

Rock Garden- A large area filled with rocks that is ridden through/over as a technical feature.

Shore Riders- This refers to anyone who rides the North Shore in British Columbia, Canada. Areas include Whistler, Squamish and Vancouver among others.

Sick- Another word for cool or awesome. If someone does a sick trick, it’s pretty damn good.

Slackers- Someone who does not apply him or herself, is considered lazy or worthless.

Stem- The part of a bicycle that attaches the handlebar to the fork.

Step-Up- A jump that lands at a higher point than it takes off from. For example, you could “step-up” from a kicker to the top of a parked van.

Stick it- Rode something clean, smooth and without crashing.

Street Riders- Also called “jibbers” or “urban” riders. Many freeriders and BMX riders alike practice this aspect of riding, which includes finding urban terrain to ride in original ways. Loading docks, stairs, wall-rides and handrails are used among other things.

Stunt Riders- Anyone who rides a human-made “stunt” such as a teeter-totter, skinny, boardwalk, etc.

Tabletop- A jump that is shaped like a table. Instead of the take-off and landing being separated by a gap, they are filled in like a mesa.

Transition- The downwardly sloped part of the landing that makes the landing feel more smooth.

Trialsiners- I have to admit, I have never heard this one before, but I'm sure it refers to riding "trials" which is a form of riding which includes hopping on the rear wheel while gapping or dropping large distances to only land on the rear wheel in a "wheelie-drop" style. They pride themselves on being able to ride up and over anything, and tend to have amazing balance.

Urban Assault/Urban Riding- Another term for streetriding where riders go out into an urban area and find cool lines to ride.

Vert ramp- A vert ramp is a form of half pipe used in "extreme sports" such as skateboarding.

Wall-Ride- Riding on a wall with both tires.

Weight Weenie- A person obsessed with counting grams of components or complete bikes.

Wiping it- Also known as "wiping out". It's a crash.

Zine- Short for magazine.

Appendix C:

Copy of Introduction Letter and Follow-up Questions

Dear Cyclist,

Thank you for taking the time to be a part of my interviews for my final graduate paper in Sociology. I am interested in describing different groups of cyclists (people that ride) and their interpretations of different aspects of cycling. That means I will be asking you questions about your experiences with your bike and the people around you that also ride them. I may ask you questions about things you have seen in magazines and videos, or about your last bike trip. These interviews are very informal and open ended. There are no set questions and there are no right or wrong answers. I just want to know what you think and the words you use to express those thoughts. Since my study is primarily qualitative (trying to describe instead of explain), your *words* are the data I am gathering in my research.

I want to assure you that any information gathered during these interviews will not be shared with anyone else, and your name will not be used in the paper itself. Your interview will be given a number, and only general characteristics (such as your age or number of years riding) will be attached to your responses. What you say will remain completely anonymous, and only I will know who said what. I encourage you to be yourself and say anything that comes to mind. Anything and everything you say is valuable.

At the end of our interview, I will give you a short questionnaire that asks some very general questions about yourself and your bike(s). It concludes with an area to sign if you grant me permission to use your responses from the questionnaire and interview in my final paper.

Thanks for your help,

Marlana Kosky
Sociology Graduate Student
University of Montana

Name:

This is for my reference only

Date:

Age:

Number of years riding:

Type of bike(s) you have/ride:

Be as specific as you want to be

Why do you ride?

What do you think of the people that ride bikes?

What generally happens if you see someone you don't know riding a bike like yours?
Do you talk? Wave? Ride by? Something else?

What's your favorite experience on or around a bike? Why?

I give Marlana Kosky permission to use my responses from this questionnaire and interview in her final paper for Sociology at the University of Montana.

Signature of Cyclist (or parent/guardian if under 18)

Appendix D:

Bibliography

“...man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”²²
– Max Weber

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Table 1:

Supplies demographic information about the respondents and pseudonyms for each rider.

TABLE 1. Description of Respondents							
Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Race²³	Education (years)	Occupation	Marital Status	Years Riding
Aidan	M	25	W	13	Bike Mechanic	S	21
Brandon	M	29	W	12	Trail Crew Leader	S	23
Simon	M	42	W	18	Self-Employed Frame Builder	S	35
Mitch	M	21	W	10	Bike Mechanic	S	17
Jonah	M	22	IA	13	Outdoor Store Sales	S	22
Morgan	M	26	W	12	Roofer	S	23
Lance	M	18	W	11	Student/Bike Shop Employee	S	14
Chad	M	15	W	10	Student	S	11
Evan	M	31	MA	16	Self-employed Bike Shop Owner	SP ²⁴	28
Jared	M	16	W	10	Student	S	12

²³ W=White, IA=East Indian born in America, MA=Half Mexican born in America

²⁴ Single-Partnered