

A full-page photograph of a mountain biker riding down a steep, grassy slope. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong lens flare and casting long shadows. The grass is golden-brown, and the sky is a mix of blue and orange. In the background, more mountain peaks are visible under the sunset sky.

PEAK SEASON

*Prize alpine singletrack awaits in Breckenridge, Colorado,
where liberal land-use policies prioritize trails*

BY DEVON O'NEIL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIAM DORAN

THE SWITCHBACKING CLIMB UP BALD MOUN-

tain on the east side of Breckenridge, Colorado, makes you want to stop and throw your bike off the side of the road. It is rocky, loose and steep enough for long enough that it sucks the life from your legs like water being wrung out of a sponge. But as with every trail and dirt road that delivers people to the alpine splendor around Breckenridge, it is worth it. If getting there weren't so hard, you would see hundreds of tourists gaping at the view from the sprawling green plateau at the top.

On a midweek morning in late July, there are just six of us: five guys ranging in age from 27 to 47, and a 49-year-old female friend we bumped into on the trail. This lap is our second of three today on 13,684-foot 'Baldy,' whose intricate web of trails and roads resembles veins on a leaf. We met this morning in a parking lot near town, riding up with fat grins for the adventure to come.

The youngest members of our group, brothers and brewery workers Jake and Pete Larue, are still bleary-eyed from celebrating a friend's birthday until 2:30 a.m. But neither they nor the other three guys who complete the crew were going to miss a big day above treeline—especially not one of the perfect-weather variety that makes the rest of the world melt away. If you love mountain biking, these are the days you schedule your life around.

Our first lap topped out at 12,100 feet, just below the 118-year-old Carbonate gold mine, then proceeded down an unmarked, rarely ridden, momentarily petrifying singletrack into Black Gulch. I had ridden the trail a handful of times, but never in a group of six, and certainly not after watching someone hold a wheelie for 20 yards over uneven tundra, as Drew Van Gorder, the ski-shop owner, had just done. I dropped second to last and narrowly saved two endos down a steep scree field before catching up to the boys at the bottom, elated to be through the gauntlet. Then we turned and watched Dave Gelhaar, the 47-going-on-25 backcountry guru/bartender who brought us together today, thread Black Gulch's needle same as he has dozens of times before. We saluted from afar, our cheers ringing off the basin rim high above.

A 1,500-foot descent down a zippy doubletrack and past another crumbling mine brought us to Sallie Barber Road on the north flank of Baldy, where our second climb began. Ellen Hollinshead, one of the early mountain bikers in Breckenridge and a longtime open-space and trails advocate, happened to be headed in the same direction: up. We chatted for a few hundred yards before separating to experience the switchbacks alone, then reconvened at the top, just above another faded singletrack that drops into Weber Gulch—our second descent.

Hollinshead is on her way to check out the wildflowers in Black Gulch, she says, taking a seat in the grass. She and the boys introduce themselves and we all lounge under the bluebird sky, admiring the Tenmile Range across the valley with its own singletrack bounty, unhurried but for the gradual tug of the descent to come.

I tell Hollinshead that we just rode Black Gulch and that the dirt is firmer than I can remember it. She recoils. Six people rode that trail? In one day?

"Think it's still worth going over there?" she asks.



*Leland Turner
cuts through a sea
of green on the
Orange Dot trail.*



Longtime Breckenridge local Ellen Hollinshead was a key driver behind a sales-tax increase to fund trails; Tony Overlock runs Breck's trail crew, which is paid in part by that tax; Trailbuilder Troy Heflin out on quality control duty; Breckenridge is just as charming below the alpine as it is above.



When you are used to seeing nobody on the high trail network, six people sounds like an army.

“Yes, I think it’s still worth it.”

A moment later she saddles up and continues on her way—to the wildflowers in Black Gulch. We do the same into Weber, bombing down the mountain one by one, gripped by speed and terrain and the otherworldly view above our handlebars.

IF YOU HAVE HEARD OF BRECKENRIDGE IN THE PAST 10 years, chances are you heard of it because of a race. The Firecracker 50 kicks off the annual Independence Day parade and has crowned USA Cycling’s national marathon champions; the Breck 100 ranks among the hardest hundos on earth; and the six-day Breck Epic has become king of American stage races. Even the roadies flock: This will be the fifth straight year that Breckenridge has hosted a stage of the USA Pro Challenge, which attracts racers from the Tour de France peloton and is broadcast live globally (last year’s highlight for me: watching a back-of-the-pack rider snatch a full beer from a fan’s hand, pound it while riding uphill at race pace, then hand the cup back to a different fan higher on the road).

Despite the races and relentless grassroots advocacy and the presence of local luminaries like four-time 24-hour National Champion Josh Tostado, all of the attention, at least on the fat-tire side, can be traced to the trail network. It’s the same network dozens of locals ride every day sans stopwatch or Strava, and, in some cases, have been exploring for 30 years. “We have 120-plus access points that leave from town,” says Scott Reid, an open space and trails planner for the town of Breckenridge. “Eighty percent of homes in town have trail access within a quarter mile. And all those trails lead to the backcountry.”

Not just woods, mind you. Spaghetti-strand singletrack at 12,000 feet. Berms up to 8 feet tall. Historic mining roads,

game trails, irrigation ditches, cutting-edge flow lines. As my buddy Sam Brede says, “The best part is no cars, dude. You never have to get in your car. This whole valley is a trailhead.” What’s more, because the Colorado Trail and the Continental Divide Trail pass through town, you could ride to Denver, Durango or Mexico if you wanted to.

All of which is bitchin’. But here’s the thing about Breckenridge’s trail network—and, for that matter, the entire mountain-biking scene. It did not just happen, as it seems when you ride here. In fact, you could argue the collision of people, land and money that created the network makes a better story than any of the awesomeness it has enabled since.

Many of the pieces to the puzzle were already in place in 1977, when the bigger picture began to take shape. Some of the mining roads date to the 1850s, when the town was founded, and hikers already trudged up and down a handful of Forest Service trails, both in town and high above. But the first example of what it would take to turn all the solitary routes into a cohesive web—one that now connects towns and counties and lets you ride the watershed from end to end and side to side—can be traced to a former Texas roughneck who owned a crucial parcel of land 2 miles south of town.

Win Lockwood had acquired what would become known as Spruce Valley Ranch with the same intention as any developer: Capitalize on the land. The assemblage of mining claims totaled roughly 500 acres and was zoned for 2,000 units, creating a potential windfall for Lockwood. Over time, Lockwood joined the fat-tire revolution that swept through Colorado and the West and has since passed on the sport to his sons, but in the late ’70s, he spent his free time roaming the forest and peaks on foot. Acting on a premonition of sorts, he made a decision that set a precedent for decades to come.

Instead of maximizing his density, he opted to divide Spruce Valley Ranch into much larger lots that would house just 50 of the possible 2,000 units. Part of the reason he did so was he wanted to connect Breckenridge to the rest of the Upper Blue Valley via a trail that ran through his property—not a private portal but one that would be open to all.

Thirty-seven years later, of the five main arteries that take you from downtown Breckenridge to the backcountry in minutes, the Blue River trail that Lockwood conceived and built (with help from countless people and organizations over the years) represents the *crème de le crème*—both for its fun factor and for the example it set.

“No one at that stage had really developed a network of any significance,” Lockwood says. “There were old mining roads and footpaths, but nothing had been done on a countywide basis. I think we set a tone as time went on to get other property owners, as they developed their property, to begin to connect these things.”

IT DIDN’T ALWAYS HAPPEN VOLUNTARILY, BUT OVER THE years other developers followed suit. In 1978, shortly after Lockwood started selling his lots (he also created a wildlife refuge and dedicated hundreds of acres to open space), Jon Brownson, a hotshot college ski racer, took a



Brandon Doza and Casey Swanson soak in the alpine splendor on the Wheeler trail.

job with the biggest development company in town, Breckenridge Lands. He worked there for 16 years before getting involved with a turning-point project in Breckenridge's mountain-biking history.

The development included 1,100 acres known as the Highlands, which also happened to house a vast network of 'social' trails. This was not the first time a large tract of private land held public recreation interest, nor would it be the last. In order to get an idea of what trails existed where, and which of those were worth fighting for, the Breckenridge and Summit County planning departments hired local mountain biker Laura Rossetter to inventory every social trail in the county. (Brownson also commissioned her to inventory the Highlands' trails.) Rossetter spent two years calling owners and walking the land with a pencil and notebook, mapping the sport's past, present and future.

It helped that Brownson, like Lockwood, was not a one-dimensional developer. He studied environmental land planning at the University of Pennsylvania and remains a five-day-a-week mountain biker who still frequents the alpine grandeur at age 61. As such, Brownson represented his business interests ably but bore an obligation to his town and way of life, too.

"You came into it feeling like it was an opportunity to be part of a solution and make this a better place—truly a recreational playground," Brownson recalls. "It was almost like: If we screw it up, we're going to hell for sure."

The Highlands developers wanted the town to annex their land, but the town required an equal community benefit in return (an early example of the reciprocal, points-based zoning formula that distinguishes Breckenridge among other mountain towns). The result of their compromise helped create the Flumes, a trio of fast, techy trails that transport riders north from town to a different web that extends northeast to the Keystone community and a host of residential areas on the other side of the county. Some of the easements the town received in exchange for annexing the Highlands take you right under the decks of multimillion-dollar homes. "When the choice is to have the trail right here next to this house or not have the trail at all, we were fortunate enough to see the trail win out in many of those instances," Brownson says.

The big picture was always in play. "If you allow public access through there to connect to something more meaningful, then you've really created an amenity and not just something to use as a marketing tool," he adds.

As Rossetter's inventory came up more often, Hollinshead and her husband, Jeffrey Bergeron, a 40-year Breckenridge resident and local newspaper and magazine columnist, realized the town would need money to build and legitimize its trails. They pitched the idea of a half-percentage-point sales-tax increase. Hollinshead and a friend she waited tables with stood outside the post office to get the signatures required to add the tax to the ballot. Not everyone agreed with the value of trails. The 'non-political' chamber of commerce sent out a letter urging members to vote against the tax increase. Bergeron, a Democrat, remembers working with a staunch Republican attorney named Jay Bauer, who happened to agree with the tax. "He did all the legalese work on the ballot question," Bergeron

says. “One day he was laughing about that: ‘How often can two hippies come into my office and get a Republican attorney to write a ballot initiative to raise taxes pro bono?’”

The measure passed easily in 1996, which is how Breckenridge now has an annual budget of nearly \$2 million for open space and trails, including land purchases (thanks to community-benefit requirements of developers, the town still has never paid for a trail easement). Within that, roughly \$200,000 is allotted to build and maintain trails—six times the budget of Park City, Utah, another famously well-equipped mountain biking town with similar advocacy and capital funds. Last summer, Breck’s town trail crew expanded from four full-time workers to six, each of whom has a nickname and contributes to the dry-wit hilarity in his own way.

Crew chief Tony Overlock, a technically gifted rider who used to lead rival gangs on wilderness trips, knows how good he and the rest of us have it. “Right now the Forest Service thinks we have too many trails,” he says. “They want old roads to be used as connectors instead of new singletrack,” which explains why Overlock’s crew builds on federal land.

Such rationale contradicts the prevailing ideal, which is to sweeten the web whenever possible. Overlock and Troy Heflin, an ex-pro downhiller whom the town contracts for machine work, abide by a simple mantra. “It used to be, for mountain biking, let’s get from point A to point B,” Overlock says. “Now it’s more of: How much fun can we have between those two spots?”

Sometimes hardy locals gripe that the crew is building trails too tame and contrived, rerouting fall-line climbs into mind-numbing switchbacks. Overlock contends that switch-

backs are the cost of sustainability, but he understands. More surprising than a woman with hard thighs complaining about easy trails was the time when a whole group of women rode up to the crew raving about a freshly built flow trail.

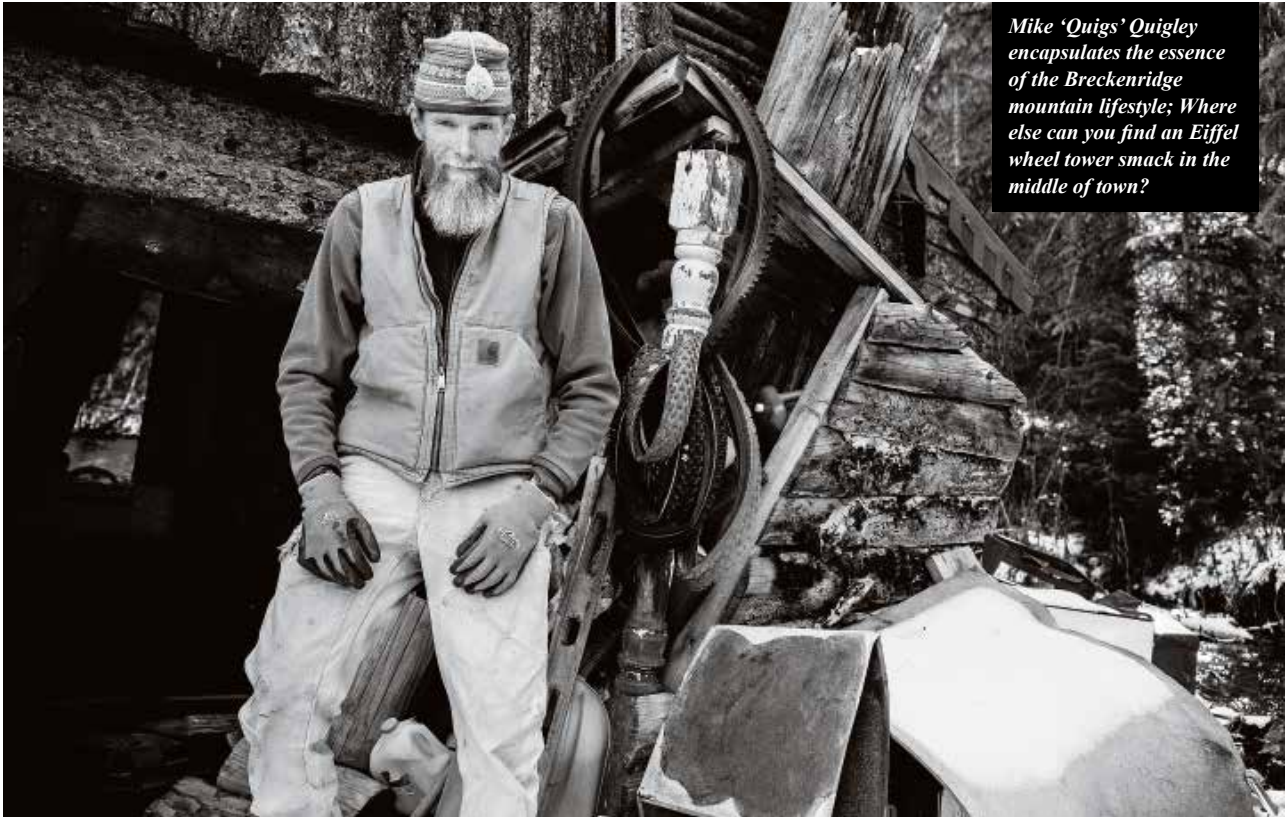
“You never think about putting in a berm that a soccer mom’s gonna love,” Overlock says.

NO MATTER WHERE YOU RIDE, YOU CAN USUALLY GET A fair feel for a local mountain biking population from the old guard. In Summit County, and particularly Breckenridge, many of the riders who mobilized the scene in the ‘80s have moved on, some to warmer climates, others to the city, at least a couple lost to avalanches. But for the most part the scene’s chassis remains, and a lot of them still ride multiple days a week.

Mike ‘Quigs’ Quigley personifies the first-generation Breckenridge soul rider—the archetype, whose ideals now drive men like Gelhaar and the Larue brothers. Quigs started mountain biking in 1985 and has lived in a small cabin on Illinois Creek for 21 years—sans electricity or running water—about as long as he’s been growing his bushy red beard. One afternoon last September, we met for a 90-minute loop, me on my \$4,000 Yeti, he on his 2004 Wayless with bar ends.

When Quigs was younger he and some friends formed a group called the French Creek Fitness Program. “We weren’t out there checkin’ our heart rates or anything,” he says with a grin. “We’d go on long, long rides, and then we’d go party and drink.

“I think the fact that I started biking here kinda spoiled my perspective,” he adds. “Because you go to other places, and the



Mike ‘Quigs’ Quigley encapsulates the essence of the Breckenridge mountain lifestyle; Where else can you find an Eiffel wheel tower smack in the middle of town?



trails tend to be a lot smaller, shorter, what I call 'race-tracky' trails where you're doing small loops and linkin' stuff up. But up here, you can ride all day, all week, and not cross your track once."

At the top of our climb in the Golden Horse-shoe, I asked Quigs if he always rides in the same faded red polo shirt, with the hole below the collar that his ponytail pokes through. "Yeah," he said. "Until it disintegrates."

I asked him what he gets out of mountain biking.

"It's kind of like waking up and looking at the mountains every day," he said. "It's part of your life."

A few days after my ride with Quigs, his words still fresh in my mind, I went for a solo jaunt along the crest of the Tenmile Range, linking the Wheeler and Miner's Creek trails. The loop takes about five hours from my house just south of Breckenridge, and you ride above treeline for half of it, all on 10-inch-wide single-track, gasping for oxygen at 12,400 feet.

I lingered on the crest. I always do, especially late in the season. Snow will be here soon. The biggest drawback to Breck's version of paradise is that it's fleeting—a long season of alpine singletrack lasts three months.

As I admired the view across the valley, I found my gaze drawn to Gibson Hill and a 220-acre tract known as Western Sky Ranch. Western Sky's owner, Danny Middleton, has become an unlikely fan of the trail network—and proof of its power—even though he doesn't mountain bike.

When he arrived from Houston, Middleton jokes that he was known as "the lying gunslinger from Texas." He saw no value in trails and hated that the county made him spend \$10,000 to build one. "Initially, your stance is: How can these government people dictate what you can do?" Middleton says.

But the more time he spent in Breckenridge the more he found himself thinking about trails and open space—not just what they could do for his property values but also for the town's identity. "I came around probably a year after I bought the property to where I totally got it, and I still understand it," Middleton says. "It's great what they've done. And it's going to be like that forever."

Sometimes I consider what the network might look like in 30 years. The pearls—up high, surrounded by elk and snow-capped peaks—are unlikely to ever be crowded; too few people are willing to suffer enough to reach them. But the town trails and easier-accessed backcountry loops are a tougher commodity to gauge. Are they more pressured now? Of course. But thanks to everyone and everything that created this network, if you spend enough time getting lost around here, you'll never want for empty trails. ▢



Kevin Dixon and Rich Banach rise and shine on the Discovery Ridge trail.