

Ross Schnell

Ross Schnell may not be the first name that springs into people's minds when they think of the stars of mountain biking in the 2000s. Names like Peat, Absalon, Sauser, Hill and Atherton are more likely to be bandied about. "Rad Ross"? Who the hell is that guy? Well, more and more observers, fans and people in the know are starting to sit up and take notice of the man known as "Rad Ross".

Words by Brett Kennedy

When I first met Ross, he was just another face in an internet café, in Nelson, NZ. The only thing that set him apart was that he was carrying a helmet. That's why my mate K-man started talking to him. K-man loves a chat, and Ross didn't seem too perturbed by the banter with the strange Aussie. It was

only after we'd invited him for a beer and started to load his bike into the car that I spotted the name on the top tube. "Is that you?" "Yeah."

I only recognised the name, not the face. Must've read it on a website, or a magazine, in Norba XC results or something, but didn't really know much else. We drank, chatted, and drank that night, and for an elite athlete, he sure knew how to let his hair down. It was his off-season after all, but there was no "I'm a pro and I'll live like one" mentality from him. Just an average guy who loved riding bikes. Better than most.

Schnell cut his teeth on 20-inch wheels, where his nickname was first coined, a throwback from the seminal 80's movie of the same name. "The nickname came from the BMX glory days. I had "Rad Ross" embroidered across the seat of my pants, that's just what we did back then. Seemed a pretty reasonable moniker for a BMX racer back then."

Growing up in Grand Junction, Colorado, Ross continued to race BMX and later mountain bikes right through his college days, before biting the bullet and doing what every graduate is decreed by society to do; get a real job. He put his degree in Radiology to good use, working for a couple of years in a hospital before getting back on the bike and giving racing another crack. When you've got riding mates like Adam Craig egging you on, what else are you gonna do? Schnell rode a season as a privateer, "working his ass off" which rewarded him with a call-up to the Trek-VW team as a fully supported XC Pro.

His burgeoning XC career didn't go exactly to plan, and an injury put him out for the best part of 07, when he had, as he describes it, the best shape of his life. "I was riding really well and had some really shit luck. I was at the front of a US National Short Track race and the guy beside me went down and brought me with him. Super random injury, I tore my Posterior Cruciate Ligament. Basically I dislocated my knee. It was weird, I got right back up and started to jump on the bike again but my lower leg felt all floppy. Being on injured reserve when you're riding well is really hard on the morale. You look at all of the hard work you put into getting to that point and its all for nought."

As it turned out, the time spent on the sideline was a blessing in disguise, and helped Ross spawn a new career direction; all-rounder. In 2008 Trek sent him "as an afterthought" to the

Californian mining town of Downieville for the All Mountain World Championships. A legendary race in its own right, a brutal XC and a long DH make up the All Mountain title, and Schnell lined up alongside the kings of Downieville, Mark Weir and Jason Moeschler, and proceeded to take them down on their own turf. "I think everybody wanted to see just how good Mark Weir really was. He'd won Downieville a bunch of times but nobody had ever really gone there to challenge him." He not only challenged, but dominated both races, bagging the overall title and setting new course records in the process. Suddenly, Schnell was big news.

Being "the guy who beat Weir" coupled with Trek's withdrawal of a fully-fledged pro XC team, Schnell's racing agenda soon took on a whole new look, and his sponsorship package did too. Trek continued to supply his bikes, Crank Brothers and Oakley were added to the list, and he started popping up in more ads and articles in magazines and on the net. Beside races like Downieville, Schnell was now riding events like Megavalanche and the Enduro Of Nations in France. "The format is very different than anything I've ever done, it's a shame that we're not seeing more of those races in the States. It's tough

3rd in the downhill, and 6th in the overall All Mountain title, not bad considering his lack of fitness saw him finish well down the XC field.

It's probably a good thing that Ross is so laid-back about his bad luck. Back in France for another crack at the Enduro of Nations, he managed to eat dirt once again, this time breaking his finger. I wondered if he was surreptitiously trying to cultivate a 'tough-guy' image or is just somewhat accident prone. "I think I go through rough periods where I'm more accident prone. Seems like I come off the bike pretty good once per season, but this year having two substantial injuries back to back was difficult. Neither crash was very substantial or impressive, but the outcomes were. In no way am I trying to cultivate a 'tough guy' image! I'd much rather be riding my bike than

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biking these days, with riders loathe to re-create the days of Tomac and co, riding two or three different events on the one weekend, on the one bike. Would it be remiss, foolish even, to suggest that Schnell could be the new Johnny T, the quintessential all-rounder? "Yeah that's ridiculous, Tomac was the man! There's a lot of good riders out there, it's just fun to try my hand at different things. I've always said I'm a 'jack of all trades, master of none.' Pretty much being mediocre at a lot of things is more fun to me than being really good at just one thing. I just try to specialise in being un-specialised."

Having seen both sides of the fence, Schnell is now content to take a more relaxed attitude to racing. "World Cups are cool but they're more for robot, machine-like bike racers. Events like SS Worlds and Downieville are roots-style bike races that the average Joe-Q public can embrace. They're just more fun."

Whether it's riding his mountain bikes or motos, driving race cars or go-karts, playing soccer or just kickin' back with his mates over a few beers, Rad Ross is all about having fun. Keeping it real. And who's to argue with that logic?

What's next on the Rad agenda? Major goals for 2010?

"I'm spending the fall riding for fun, playing in a soccer league again (haven't played for a long time and miss it), doing some track racing (cars and shifter karts), and riding my motos."

"Goals for next season are pretty non-specific, mostly just try to stay healthy and win a few more races of some type. Seems like when I have major goals everything goes to shit! I just take it one weekend at a time. I'll be doing everything from XC to Enduro to DH, with a singlespeed race or two mixed in. US National Champ's are in Colorado next summer, so that should be a good race for me at altitude although I don't want to jinx it..."

sitting on the couch."

It doesn't seem to matter what type of bike he's riding either. In his quiver of Treks are "a couple Remedys, a Session DH bike, Top Fuel for XC, Fuel EX, and an XO cyclocross bike. "But my favorite bike has to be the Remedy. It's suitable for pretty much every ride I do, I'd even race XC on it." But conversely and somewhat strangely for an ex-XC racer, his disdain for hardtails these days is clear. At the Singlespeed World Champs in Durango, Colorado recently, he chose to ride a dual suspension bike rather than suffer a beating at the hands of a hardtail. "Yeah, I chose the Top Fuel for SSWC because it's the most "XC" of all my bikes. There is no way I could ride a hardtail, or anything less than 4" of travel. Anything less is for fun-haters who like to ride slow." It certainly seemed to do the trick, as he not only had fun, he won the race (and got the tattoo to prove it).

And with his win, Schnell added another 'unofficial' World title to his collection. The All-mountain and Singlespeed titles have garnered Ross more attention than any Norba short-track or Super D win ever did.

Who says versatility doesn't have its rewards. It's a versatility that is rarely seen in mountain



going over there by yourself with no support and no idea what to expect. But the format is cool, 10 different stages over the course of the weekend, almost like a rally car race. Each stage was about 6-9 minutes long and its all on-sitting, no pre-riding allowed."

It seems whenever things are going just right for Ross, a spanner soon gets thrown into the works. Showing great form in the French race, Schnell was hitting his stride when, right on cue, disaster struck. "As I got more comfortable, each run got faster for me and I started finishing higher up each stage. On the fifth stage I slid out on some wet grass and I fractured my hip. I got up from the crash and still finished 4th on the stage, about 7 seconds back from Nico Vouilloz. Pretty irritating because I guarantee I would have won that stage. At the time I didn't know I had fractured my hip so I kept racing for another few stages. That hurt."

While most people would consider a broken hip to be somewhat more than "irritating", the fact that he would be off the bike in the lead-up to his Downieville title defence was what really hurt Schnell the most. Not being able to race at his best to defend the title was a major irritation. But even with a limited preparation, he still managed

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