

Battle on Mount Ascension

TARA BASILEWITSCH - Independent Record - 10/18/07

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It all started with a bet.

Two competitive Helenans met the challenge Tuesday night to finally settle the score of which is faster up a mountain, runner or biker.

The runner: Michele Bazzanella. The biker: Eric Grove.

There's only one trail to the top.

On the windy, wet evening, under a dramatic cloud of anticipation, a number of enthusiastic spectators gathered at the base of Mount Ascension at the head of the 2006 Prickly Pear Land Trust trail to see who would win.

The trail was in perfect condition from the start to the summit, where the timers, Patrick Judge and Brian Wieck, were stationed to begin the challenge that would settle a little bet made back in May.

On a sunny May morning just after winning the Don't Fence Me In 12K Trail Race, Bazzanella was having a casual conversation with Eric Grove outside his Great Divide Cyclery shop in downtown Helena.

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"A runner can beat a biker up a steep trail," she asserted.

Grove wasn't having any of that. He bet a biker would be faster up a trail like the new 2006 trail on Mount Ascension.

"You tell me when you're ready and we'll see who's faster," Bazzanella told Grove.

The bet was on.

And the summer days flew by.

By August, the bet still hadn't been settled, but the talk among runners and bikers in Helena was decidedly heated.

Certainly a biker, aided by wheels, has the advantage over a runner.

A runner, who's not weighed down by a bike, can sprint up a steep trail much faster than a biker grinding gears and negotiating switchbacks.

Opinions were split, interestingly not always along gender or age lines -- as gender was surprisingly not an issue for most -- but simply between human versus human and his machine.

Grove spurred the idea to make the bet into a fund raiser. Both Grove and Bazzanella are avid trail users and committed supporters of the Prickly Pear Land Trust.

This September at the Prickly Pear's annual Harvest Moon Banquet, Grove made their wager official by showing up with pledge sheets. Anyone who pledged for him would promise to donate their pledge to Prickly Pear if he lost. If he won, they were off the hook and wouldn't have to pay up.

"It grabbed a lot of people's imaginations," Grove said.

All that remained was to set a date. It was time to quit trash talking and find out who really was faster.

Nervous but excited that the moment was approaching, Bazzanella and Grove warmed up and continued to tease each other Tuesday.

Grove's wife, Angie, manned the walkie-talkie and cell phone at the start, while Judge waited at the top to time the race.

Grove offered to go first, then reasoned that Bazzanella should start up the trail, just in case anyone unaware of the race was on the course. It would be easier for her to warn them that he was on the way.

"So does anybody wish they were running this instead?" Bazzanella asked the group of supporters at the start line.

"I'm thinking maybe this really is nuts," she added, smiling broadly and clearly confident of the race ahead of her.

Counting down the last five seconds, Angie Grove gave the "go" command and Bazzanella shot up the trail.

Eric Grove now waited for his turn. He nervously adjusted his iPod, dialing in his music and focusing on the trail ahead of him.

"I had a little case of the nerves," he said. "You can certainly blow early if you don't approach it right.

"I was able to keep my momentum through the corners and then it was just a question of facing the pain," Grove said.

Three minutes after the runner disappeared up the trail, Grove took off on his titanium single-speed mountain bike. Yes, single speed. With a 32:17 cog ratio.

The race was on.

At the top, mountain bikers and runners alike anxiously awaited the arrival of the two competitors, toughing out the wind and the cold.

Peter Dan Sullivan, timing their splits at the saddle, where the trail pauses for a breath before the final summit push, cheered on Bazzanella as she scrambled up the rocky trail.

Spectator and fellow runner Greg Wirth yelled, "Go, Eric!" as Bazzanella ran by, hoping to give her that extra push by making her think Grove was hot on her heels.

"From the top, it was clear that both athletes displayed considerable grit on a challenging course and a challenging day," Judge said. "As they came into view from the top, I thought Michele looked much better, but that goes without saying."

Bazzanella came across the finish line in a time of 10 minutes, 11 seconds.

Before long, Grove pushed into sight, pumping up the ridge -- clearly on pace to make it to the finish faster than Bazzanella.

Sarah Slanger, mocking a protest, laid herself across the trail to block Grove's path.

But quick footwork wasn't quite enough.

Grove pedaled across in 9:24, the winner.

It's official. The biker beat the runner up Mount Ascension -- but only by 47 seconds.

"I felt as though I could get under 10 minutes. I had no idea how Michele's caliber of runner would match up with my caliber biker," Grove said.

"I was hoping to run under 10 minutes. I really ran as fast as I could. I don't think I could have had a better race. It was my fastest time ever," Bazzanella said.

And the fierce competition, infused with lots of teasing and trash talking throughout the summer, was over. The two competitors, just as confident in their abilities as 10 minutes prior, hugged and enjoyed the moment with their supporters at the top.

Although a good minute faster than Bazzanella on the lower section, Grove had a harder time with the last grind, and Bazzanella actually finished off faster.

"As I understand it, both competitors logged their fastest times ever," Judge said. "They were also both incredibly gracious about the whole affair. Personally, I've got to give credit to Eric. I thought for certain this would be another Billy Jean King-Bobby Riggs story.

"But the result does nothing to threaten the status of running as the clearly superior sport. And I, for one, remain firmly in the 'Bazzanella for President' camp," he added.

Whether biker or runner, the bet that became a little race will be a success for the Prickly Pear Land Trust.

"I was really excited to see so many people at the top," Grove said. "Michele and I would like to see (the race) as a tradition."

Very likely there are other Helenans of both biker and runner camps who are ready to match their speeds in a trail race. But will the biker always prevail?

"The concept calls to memory the historic challenge that started the Mount Helena Run, when a local youth, Ben Burgess, defeated a visiting professional runner from California. While the analogy is imperfect, from a spectator's vantage, the excitement was definitely there," Judge said.

Grove and Bazzanella will be contacting their sponsors soon to collect the pledges for the Land Trust.

"I'm sure we'll bring in over \$2,000," Bazzanella said.

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