

Rev up at mountain bike camp

Learn about cycling and nature in the Gatineau

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By Derek Puddicombe

The summer's slipping away and it seems the only thing your children have exercised is the television remote control or the computer mouse. Remember that mountain bike they whined for and you spent way too much on? Dig it out of the garage. Put it and the children in the car and head to Camp Fortune.

Dominique Larocque's mountain bike summer camp is a combination of an outdoor workout and a nature discovery for children between the ages of nine and 16. It's a mix, she says, that will bring about a healthy body, mind and soul. "My big focus is on the outdoors. We do all the physical activity outdoors because people spend a lot of time outdoors and nature can be very soothing for the mind. The kids love it," said Ms. Larocque, whose passion with the mountain bike began 14 years ago when she bought her first bike.

Ms. Larocque eventually became a dominant force in mountain bike competitions in eastern Canada. She represented Canada in the 1991 World Mountain Bike Championships in Italy. Three years ago, she decided to take her love of nature, her drive to be healthy and fit, and her passion for mountain biking and turn it into a business. Creative Wheel Consulting now offers a multitude of outdoor fitness programs that Ms. Larocque will adapt to her clients' ability.

Last summer, Ms. Larocque decided to offer a mountain bike day camp to her younger audience. It started small, but this year the camp has an average of about 35 campers each week. "Some of the parents who bring their children to the mountain bike camp are very concerned with the lack of physical activity their kids are getting," said Ms. Larocque, who also has three qualified instructors to help her throughout the summer.

Through a series of week-long activities and games, campers will learn mountain bike techniques such as climbing, descending, obstacles, what to do in mud and loose sand, braking and gearing. They will also learn how to properly maintain their bikes. And they'll be doing all this while getting fit at the same time. "Mountain biking is intense exercise. It's one of the best ways to get into shape," she said. A medical certificate is not required to register in the program, but relevant medical information is taken on registration.

Children are divided into beginner, intermediate and advanced groups, but can move from one group to another as they like. Children will find a level appropriate to their level of fitness. Other lessons she teaches her campers when biking on the trails include the importance of maintaining a manageable speed, respecting the trails, not travelling on private property, not leaving any garbage behind, never trying to scare animals that may be nearby and how to get to know the area they are biking in.

Each morning at 9 o'clock, when the campers arrive at Camp Fortune, they gather into their assigned groups. Safety is an important factor for Ms. Larocque, so before campers take off for a day of biking they do a walk-a-round, making sure that brakes, gears and other major parts of the bike are in good working order. After that, they're off for some intensive physical activity and along the way gain a better appreciation for nature, Ms. Larocque hopes. It's time she likes to call "playing with the trees." "Sometimes when we are mountain biking I will just stop and have them look at the trees," she said. If it's raining, campers head into the lodge for age-appropriate workshops on sports nutrition, mental training and nature appreciation. Coaching is available for campers who are interested in racing. At the end of the week, campers can participate in a race among themselves. Thirty minutes are set aside each day for journal writing.

Basia Ruta enrolled her two boys Matthew, 10, and Johnathan, 12, in the mountain bike camp last month. After only two days riding the trails, they wanted to return the following week. She agreed. "It allows them to get closer to nature and it gives them a great workout. You can tell because they are so tired at night," said Ms. Ruta. Jonathan had three words to describe his two-week adventure on his bike with Ms. Larocque. "It was amazing, unbelievable and challenging," he said, adding at the height of his experience he was riding 20 kilometres on some days.

When she started the camp last year, Ms. Larocque anticipated that the children would want to be involved in some other activities other than riding. She says she was surprised to discover that most of the kids wanted to spend all their time on their bikes. But most important to Ms. Larocque is that children are learning the importance of physical activity and spending time outdoors. "It's so important to be healthy. We never watch television here and if we are not mountain biking we are hiking or swimming. We even eat outdoors. It's not an easy camp," she said.

The cost for the one-week camps is \$195 and includes a daily lunch. The majority of children arrive with bikes, but if anyone needs a mountain bike for their stay at the camp they can arrange to get one through Ms. Larocque. There are still spots open for Creative Wheel's August camp sessions. For information on the mountain bike camp, Ms. Larocque can be reached at (613) 860-0887 or by emailing creativewheel@igs.net.