

BMX park opens in San Jose

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San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched:

To the gravity-defying BMX jumpers of Calabazas Park, the dirt here is sacred and the mid-air stunts sublime. Decades of two-wheeled daredevils carved up this former creek bed in West San Jose into chutes and berms, going airborne to cut crazy silhouettes against the suburban sky, and spawning heroes who went on to make history in this fledgling extreme sport.

On Saturday, Calabazas made some history of its own.

After 15 years of push-and-pull with the grass-roots community of stunt bicyclists forever redesigning their makeshift washboard of holy hills, the city of San Jose finally cut the ribbon on the grass-roots-inspired but now officially sanctioned Calabazas BMX Park.

"This place was always unique, built by the riders for the riders," said bike-shop owner Rob Carnahan, a local leader of the sometimes cantankerous drive to get the park built. "It's great that the city put all this money into it, but it was really the riders who made it happen."

Planners call the \$833,000 park cutting-edge, describing Calabazas as the largest city-funded course of its kind in the Bay Area and with few rivals in the rest of California. They say other cities, pumped up by the growing popularity of BMX racing and freestyle, have asked San Jose for advice on creating their own dirt bike parks.

It wasn't long ago that San Jose was feeling its way in the dark.

"There were unique challenges because we couldn't just go out and copy what others had done, because no one had done it," said City Councilman Pete Constant, Saturday's emcee, who helped bring to fruition a plan shepherded by his predecessor, Linda LeZotte.

"Finding experts to design something this specialized was tough. We wanted it to be a safe and well-designed course, but challenging enough so the kids wouldn't feel compelled to modify it as they'd done over the years."

From the beginning, that was the way Calabazas had evolved. Pioneers like Dennis Schneider, now 57, remembers riding the latest Schwinn models up and down the sides of the dry Calabazas Creek bed, then relaxing beneath the live oak trees or having apricot fights in the surrounding orchards.

"Long before this was a city park, this was our playground; this was our video game," said Schneider, who showed up Saturday with old bike buddies to see the new track.

When Rob Carnahan moved here from Berkeley and discovered the makeshift track in 1980, he was amazed by its size and its diversity of ramps and gullies, a moonscape in constant flux: "As freestyle riders, we all worked to build the park over the years," he said. "We'd ride and dirt-jump, then we'd work together to make it bigger, better, smoother and faster."

That pattern continued for years - riders would sculpt the course for maximum challenge and adrenaline rush, digging out dips and piling that dirt to craft even higher "tabletops." Whenever the berms grew too

lofty, the city would come in and top off the hills, partners in an unspoken agreement that kept the park exciting but not too dangerous.

Yet even as some parents helped bring in more dirt for their kids to build the mounds higher, people did get hurt, some seriously, and other park users sharing their walking paths with speed demons were fed up.

"We'd get calls from elderly people and pedestrians," said LeZotte, "who'd say, `these kids are out of control.'

"Three years ago, we had to fence off the course completely, but then they'd cut the fence and sneak back in."

After city crews completely bulldozed some of the hills "by mistake," LeZotte told the crowd of several hundred people gathered at the South Blaney Avenue park Saturday, "boy, did I hear about that. I realized how important this park was to the people who live around here."

With concerns growing over liability, the city officially shut down the park in mid-2004. But realizing how passionately the community wanted a place for kids to ride and jump, a task force including neighbors, parents and riders was set up. After years of planning, environmental studies, neighborhood meetings and input from the kids who would be using the course, construction finally got under way last winter.

Along with the old-timers on hand Saturday, and the teenagers and twenty-something riders showing off their skills on the new course, an even younger crowd also showed up, some of them barely out of diapers. Commercial photographer Scott Griggs brought his sidekick - 3-year-old son Lassen, deliberately fastening into place a helmet nearly three times the size of his head. Griggs said his son is "good on a bike. And even though it still has training wheels, he cruises around a lot. He represents the newest generation of BMX riders, and I hope he's into this for years to come."

And what did Lassen think of the bigger kids flying through the air on the other side of that fence?

"I wanna go out with those guys," he said. "And ride fast."

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