

Mega Avalanche - Mega Experience

By Sara Burdon



I don't really know quite how to sum up the experience of riding the Megavalanche. It's now Sunday evening and the race is over, I've showered, eaten, had a laze in the hot tub and am about to prepare dinner for our guests. I'm tired, bruised, headachy and kind of dazed, yet happy too. It's been my first big race, I definitely didn't do well in the rankings, but am fairly pleased with how I rode and certainly wasn't the slowest down!



How's that for a rock shute? Photo: Doug Shannon

On Saturday lunchtime we lined up for the qualifier. This is what I was most scared of having ridden it on Friday with Petra and struggled a lot despite her support. We'd got down the crazy sprint Avalanche course pretty well and I'd started elated by how much of that I'd ridden, but I soon struggled on the steep rocky qualifier course. However, on Saturday something changed. I don't know if it was excitement from being in a race or from riding with so many other girls but I found myself riding faster and better than ever and getting down most of the course.

The top half had lots of steep rocky sections, that somehow flew by and I was feeling pretty pleased with what I got down and starting to realize the difference a bike like my new Santa Cruz Bullit makes on a course like this. My confidence rocketed as I got more used to the bike and its capabilities. The second half slowed me down quite a bit as I hadn't pre-ridden it and went slower than necessary on loads of stuff, but was still great fun and I was happy enough at finishing in under an hour (54 minutes) and 33rd out of the women.

Emily Horridge totally blew away the course and won the women's race, so a fantastic result for her, Ophelie David came in second and Hannah Hannah in third. Masters World Champion Petra Wiltshire suffered from a mechanical with her saddle, necessitating a few minutes of allen key fiddling, and then found herself stuck behind a few slower girls but still managed to finish 11th overall.

For the main event on Sunday we faced a much earlier start - we had to be on the lift at 7am in order to be up the top in time. The first 405 men set off at 9am and we're next. We got to watch the fastest riders race down the glacier at an impressive speed and then we lined up. I stood next to Rachel Evans, a girl from Menorca who's new to downhill racing, but is making a pretty impressive entry to the sport, having come third in the Sprint Avalanche this week. Our start was delayed by a very bad fall from one of the guys, which needed some emergency treatment and then a helicopter rescue. Not inspiring for the rest of us! The music cranked up and then we were off.

Now riding on snow is totally different from anything else, but I found myself enjoying it yet again. I was much faster than on Thursday as the snow was grippier and I felt more confident, although I slid out a few times from going too fast. I was doing pretty well and making great time around the middle of the group until I slipped on an icy corner and spiraled off across the ice. No real injuries, just annoyance at watching lots of girls go by as I made my way back onto the track. The rest of the snow passed with lots of giggles and squeals as we all fell and slid around. Yet again, lots of fun and a real laugh. The men definitely have it harder here though - 405 as opposed to 40 people setting off together.



It's hard keeping your line with views like this! Photo: Doug Shannon

The rocky section was tricky and I had a couple of tumbles which knocked my confidence a little. The magic of Saturday unfortunately didn't continue, but I got down unharmed and enjoyed a lot of it. The great part about riding today was that as the other girls pass you after a fall they check you're ok before riding on. I never felt alone or worried despite my mates being way ahead of me in the race. My main problem were the uphill, I only had a single chainring on my bike, plus it's a much heavier bike than I'm used to and I found myself pushing up far more than I felt I should. I also had a very sore arse by this point as I'd neglected to change the saddle on the bike before leaving Morzine!

As we reached Alpe d'Huez the field was spread out and me and one other girl were playing cat and mouse with each other (swapping roles every so often) while the first of the men were starting to catch up. A few overtook on the traverse and the first forest sections. Practically all followed

etiquette and shouted their approach and waited for us to pull over, or passed on a wider section of track. However as we reached the steep switchbacks there were more and more larger groups and I felt like I spent more time stood letting people pass than riding. This for me was the hardest part of the race. I knew I needed to let faster riders pass, but I lost so much time. Pulling over, waiting and then starting up again, I felt like I never had enough time to get into my flow. Luckily this was right at the end of the course, but for me it was a tough way to end.

A quick pedal along the tarmac, through the gates and it was all over. I was exhausted, mentally and physically and disappointed with the last section of track, wondering, did I pull over too much, should I be more determined and try to keep going and just let people overtake on wider sections. There's no right or wrong answer it seems, everyone has a different opinion. I just know how it frustrating feels to be stuck behind someone slower, and now how tough and disheartening it feels to stand out of the way so much. Guy (my partner) and Petra were waiting at the bottom, both had had a good run with Petra getting a podium place by coming second in the masters women. Guy had done a better time than last year, but disappointed by being held up a lot on the singletrack and wanting to come back next year to do better. Sadly Emily's jockey wheel had fallen off halfway down and she'd decided to pull out. She was in fourth place at the time and right behind the leaders so was pretty gutted. Local girl Pauline Dieffenthaler won the women's race in an impressive 1 hour 10 minutes and was closely followed by Ophelie David and then Malika Malone in third place. Petra Wiltshire was the first British girl in, crossing the line in 1 hour 23 minutes, and I followed on in 29th place taking 1 hour 46 minutes. Emily's planning to come back next year to try again.

The question is do I want to come back? Yesterday the answer was definitely, and I felt the same early on today. Towards the end of the course I was demoralized, tired and fed up and said "never again". And now, well a large part of me wants to come back and do better. I know that with a bike I can pedal better (hey, just putting a small chainring on the Bullit would do) I wouldn't lose so much time and energy on the climbs. If I can go just a little faster then the men won't catch up till the end of the course so I won't face a final section with more standing than riding again. And if I can up my riding just a little then the rest of the course will be that much more fun. I've not yet decided, but I have a feeling I'll be back. If more of us girls enter, especially non-racers like me, then the event will be more fun for us all. I could have done with more company on a lot of the route, both to spur me on to do better and comfort me for not doing so well. In the men's category there are loads of non-racers just out for the experience.

The atmosphere is great, everyone's friendly, pros and mere mortals alike and I've met some great girls this weekend. The pros chatted with everyone else and encouraged us all on, showing the support there is in women's cycling. There were no egos on display, just smiley, chatty fellow riders. There's no reason to be put off by it being a race, it's more of an experience than a race and if you don't beast yourself then it's just an incredible thing to do. Despite the bruises and the emotional beating I'm so glad I did it. It'll definitely be in the top 10, if not top 5 of my experiences so far, and I now know why it's the race every mountain biker has to ride. Ride it and you'll understand.

You can read about the Editor's first attempt at the Megavalanche [here](#). Visit www.avalanchecup.com for more information.

And if you need some Alpine riding practice then why not join us and Sara next summer for the [DirtGirls training camps in Morzine?](#) We'll be announcing the new dates



Sara Burdon at home in the Alps