

A LOOK BACK AT IMBA'S NATIONAL MOUNTAIN BIKE PATROL BY SPENCER POWLISON

"When we got to the Slickrock trail, this rider came walking out with a mangled arm, completely in shock. It was as if someone in central casting had sent him out on cue," explains Tim Blumenthal, IMBA's first executive director. Blumenthal is still amazed by the serendipity of the on-trail emergency that greeted some of the first National Mountain Bike Patrol (NMBP) volunteers when they headed out to ride during one of the program's inaugural training conferences in Moab, Utah, in 1994.

While no one knows what became of the injured rider, the NMBP's history is well recorded. During the intervening 15 years, the patrol has evolved dramatically, but the non-enforcement program's core mission has remained the same, and today, there are over 500 volunteer NMBP members who assist, educate and inform trail users.

Although the NMBP was officially "started" in 1994, volunteer mountain bike patrol's roots run deep, back to the early days of mountain biking, when trails were rife with user conflict, and blanket mountain

bike bans threatened great riding locations from coast to coast. The Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association (CORBA) was arguably the first organization to begin volunteer patrol activities with their Mountain Bike Unit (MBU), formed in 1988.

Based in the Santa Monica Mountains, near Los Angeles, CORBA was at risk of losing many great riding venues. "Due to frequent complaints about user conflict, land managers were throwing their hands up," explains Blumenthal. "The [mountain bike advocacy] toolkit had to be developed quickly." So, with support from the National Park Service and the California State Department of Parks and Recreation, the patrol was formed, and became an overnight success, being nominated for the "Take Pride in California Award" in 1991.

On the opposite side of the country, the New England Mountain Bike Association (NEMBA) was taking similar strides to preserve trail access. In the Middlesex Fells Reservation, just outside of Boston, mountain bikers were limited to only a few miles of singletrack and faced with an overheated situation. After a year of planning, the New England Mountain Bike Patrol was launched in 1996. "There wasn't a set standard [for mountain bike patrols] at the time," explains Krisztina "Z" Holly, the group's founder, "but the local land manager was under-resourced, so we developed the new program to act as their eyes and ears on the trail."

Within a few years, NEMBA's two-pronged strategy of trailbuilding advocacy and volunteer patrolling engaged the local bike community and created a positive relationship with the land manager to ensure continued access to the park. Today, NEMBA operates several patrol units throughout New England with similarly positive results.

As groups like the MBU and NEMBA Patrol made progress with local and regional access challenges, organizations like IMBA, the National Off-Road Bicycling Association (NORBA) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) began to take notice. At the 1990 Mountain Bike World Championships, in Durango, Colorado, advocates from around the country had an opportunity to connect and collaborate at a conference hosted by the BLM in conjunction with the race. The circumstances

were unique—for the first time, the International Cycling Union (UCI) acknowledged the sport's growth with an official world championship event.

It was also a coming-out party for some of America's legendary riders—

Ned Overend, John Tomac, Julie Furtado, Ruthie Matthes and Greg Herbold all won medals. But amidst the racing, television coverage and record spectator numbers, there was a

15 YEARS OF SERVICE

PATROLLERS ARE KNOWLEDGEABLE VOLUNTEERS WHO ARE ON HAND TO HELP ALL TRAIL USERS



latent urgency, a feeling that the good times may not last. "The future of mountain biking in urban areas was in question," explains Blumenthal. "Mountain biking had an image problem, and volunteer efforts were the best way to gain credibility, to show that we belonged on trails." While the access threats loomed, the conference helped the advocates and their organizations focus on solutions, and with that, the seed was planted to create a nationwide organization to help create and support mountain bike patrols.

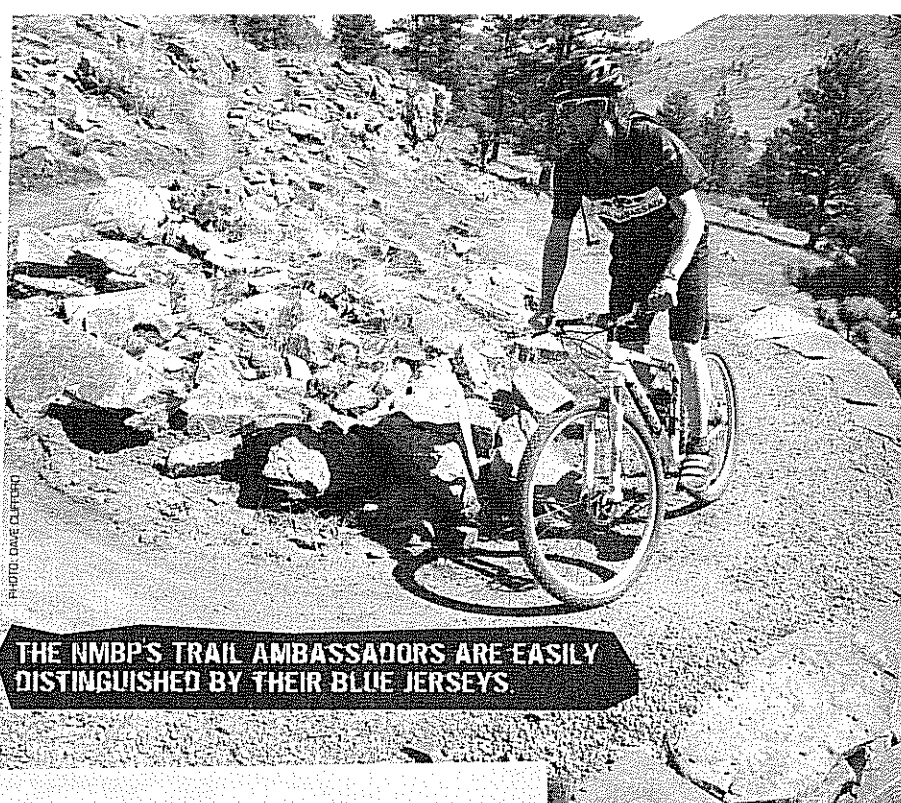
To many, NORBA is fondly remembered for the days of lavish race sponsorships, cantilever brakes and bad haircuts, but the organization was also significantly involved in advocacy efforts; in 1994, NORBA formed the NMBP. Although NORBA helped fund the start-up organization, it was formed in direct partnership with the BLM and IMBA. During the patrol's earlier years, NORBA worked to seed patrol development at key locations, like Moab.

Many of the first patrols were formed in conjunction with a major race venue and/or ski area, in an effort to provide more volunteer support for the existing race schedule. Throughout the early training sessions, IMBA and the BLM were active partners, providing training resources and organizational assistance.

An early-season blizzard greeted patrollers at the 1997 training conference, held in Colorado Springs. "The authorities were essentially saying 'don't leave your house,'" explains Jon Alegranti, the patrol's first program coordinator. But the event went on as planned, the knee-deep snow a stark contrast to the desert slickrock that greeted participants at the Moab training three years earlier. Regardless of the weather conditions, the participants flocked to Colorado because it would be the first training held by IMBA.

NORBA, recognizing the better fit between the NMBP and an advocacy organization, transferred the patrol to IMBA earlier that year; but to continue its commitment to advocacy, NORBA funded the patrol to the tune of one dollar per racing license through 2000. Fueled by copious amounts of coffee and other hot beverages, the participants weathered the storm and became some of the first patrol instructors. Their on-the-ground leadership helped start patrol groups throughout the country.

"When a state forest manager asked 'So you would *only* patrol trails open to mountain bikes?' of course my answer was 'Exactly,'" explains Matt Ogle, Ohio's former IMBA state rep-



THE NMBP'S TRAIL AMBASSADORS ARE EASILY DISTINGUISHED BY THEIR BLUE JERSEYS

PHOTO: BILL HARRIS



KEITH VARLEY, BILL HARRIS AND RODGER FRAZIER (L-R) PATROLLING MOAB TRAILS IN THE FALL OF 1995

resentative. Just like that, trails began to open up for mountain biking. As patrols were developed throughout the country, access issues became more manageable, and mountain biking's public image began to improve. NMBP groups weren't a cure-all for mountain bike access issues, but their implementation was certainly a boon to many areas that were troubled by user conflict or recalcitrant land managers.

Throughout the late '90s, the NMBP held annual training instructor conferences nationwide, covering as many geographic regions as possible to sew the seeds of volunteerism. Even as program funding became scarce into the early 21st century, the NMBP could always rely on its strong foundation of volunteer organizers and instructors to recruit new patrollers.

Today's patrollers, hailing from over 70 patrol groups throughout North America, enjoy a host of benefits and programmatic assistance to aid local volunteers—gone are the days when IMBA Trail News had to provide step-by-step instructions for online forum access. Patrollers can equip themselves with distinctive red jerseys, patrol with gear that is often available at pro-deal pricing and, when they're done, log their volunteer hours with an online system. The only thing missing is a post-ride beer.

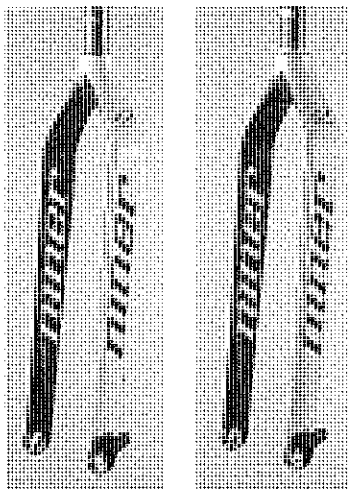
Last year, the NMBP also introduced the Trail Ambassador program, a unique level of membership that does not require CPR/first aid certification. Several groups, like the NEMBA patrol, have successfully operated ambassador programs

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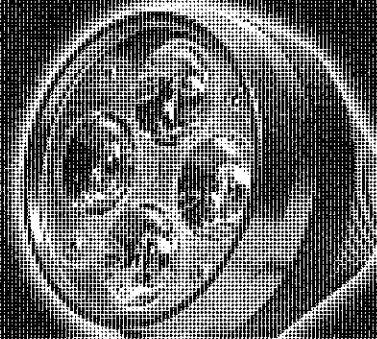


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Lupine (aka pine) Characteristic of, or like a wolf.
Requiring the ability to see or fight to be a competitive species.



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PATROL BASICS

The National Mountain Bike Patrol (NMBP) has a network of dedicated volunteers partnering with land managers, landowners and emergency personnel to assist, educate and inform all trail users in order to enhance their recreational experience.

Patrollers: Trained in CPR and first aid, they assist in medical and mechanical emergencies, educate trail users of proper etiquette, and inform land managers, owners and land users of trail conditions through monitoring efforts.

Trail Ambassadors: Perform most of the same duties as patrollers but can volunteer without formal first aid training. They coordinate directly with a local NMBP group.

For years, hopefully the national-level support will encourage more groups to expand their volunteer ranks with Trail Ambassadors.

Over the decade since the days of looming mountain bike bans, the program has grown in leaps and bounds, but it still remains an important part of the mountain bike advocacy toolkit. It's not often that patrollers have to provide extensive first aid care to an injured rider on one of Moab's most popular trails, but that's not the point either. Their presence as competent, knowledgeable and friendly volunteers has done the most to address the sport's early and ongoing advocacy challenges. But don't worry—just in case, they'll be sure to pack the first aid gear.

Interested in getting involved? The NMBP is always looking to foster new patrol groups and more volunteers. In fact, there may already be a group that rides at your local spot. For more information, please refer to www.nmbp.org, or get in touch directly: patrol@imba.com and 1-888-442-IMBA.