

SOWING SEEDS

FOR TWO DECADES, JOEY KLEIN'S WORK HAS INFLUENCED TRAILS ACROSS THE WORLD

BY CINDY HIRSCHFELD

The next time you're bombing down sweet singletrack or climbing a perfectly contoured bench cut, give a shout-out to Joey Klein. Even if he wasn't personally involved in designing or building or consulting on the trail you're riding, chances are he influenced it in some way.

As a trail specialist for the International Mountain Bicycling Association (as well as IMBA's longest-tenured employee), Klein, 57, is one of the sport's most influential trail designers and builders. During his 22 years with IMBA, he's worked and ridden in almost every state and 14 foreign countries, teaching countless people how to build trails, as well as bringing techniques and ideas learned abroad back to the U.S.

Along with two colleagues, Klein helped launch IMBA Trail Solutions, which hosts trailbuilding clinics and works with communities and land managers to plan, design and build new trails. Klein is renowned for his ability to communicate with both mountain bikers and non-riders, bringing together different user groups and creating community consensus. "Joey is a savant," says IMBA Executive Director Dave Wiens.

Klein's no slouch in the saddle, either. He started mountain biking while attending Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. Several years later, in 1992, he entered the 24-hour Montezuma's Revenge race near Breckenridge, and went on to compete in the grueling event 10 times, winning twice.

Born in Canada and raised in Golden, Colorado, Klein has long

loved the outdoors. After leaving Fort Lewis after a couple of semesters to resume a ski bumming career, he took a job at Arapahoe Basin ski area as one of the notorious "Atomic Janitors," cleaning the base lodge. Later he became a ski patroller, and then in 1994 joined the summer trail crew at nearby Keystone Resort just as biking at ski areas was taking off.

In 1994, as he started to become "infatuated with mountain bike trails," Klein says he stormed into the office of Keystone's president of operations with trail maps of Winter Park and Vail and said, "Hey, we could do

this, and we could do this better." Management turned him loose that summer, and Klein ended up mapping out 60 miles of trail, which eventually become the Keystone Bike Park.

After three years of trailbuilding, Klein joined Keystone's Dirt Camp as an instructor. "I learned more about mountain biking by teaching than I did riding," he says. "I got to take people down the trails I built and feed off their stoke. But I also learned there needed to be a wider range of easier and more difficult trails, and that not every trail should maim and kill."

Others recognized the joy he got from sharing his stoke, prompting race commentator Rod Elisha to dub Klein "The Johnny Appleseed of Mountain Biking."

Klein continued to hone his craft (and ski patrol and make snow in the winter). Then along with his girlfriend, Kathy Summers, he applied for a position with IMBA's Trail Care Crew. At the time, the couple was living in a converted school bus in the rural community of Montezuma, with no computer, so they submitted a handwritten application. "We missed a powder day and just stayed in the bus and wrote," Klein recalls. Part of their message: There's nothing so joyful as watching someone ride a trail you built. They got the job.



• [Left] Joey Klein gets to work on the Iron Giant Trail in the Iron Hills of Cedar City, Utah. **Tyson Swasey, Courtesy IMBA**

• [Facing Page] At an IMBA Trail Solutions trailbuilding and rockwork clinic in Silverton, Colorado, Klein shows off his handiwork. **Chris Orr, Courtesy IMBA**





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From 1999 through the early aughts, Klein, Summers and a few other colleagues worked as mountain bike evangelists, traveling across the U.S. and visiting Mexico, Canada and several European countries. “We were sharing knowledge and learning techniques from other places,” says Klein. “Things were still pretty cowboy. Mountain bikers were figuring out a lot of things on their own.”

Along with his colleagues Rich Edwards and Pete Webber, Klein wrote a book, *Trail Solutions: IMBA’s Guide to Building Sweet Singletrack*. The book gained traction, and IMBA also started receiving requests for more extensive trail planning and construction. That planted the seed for IMBA’s Trail Solutions program, and Klein eventually transitioned out of the Trail Care Crew. To

date, Trail Solutions has now worked on more than 400 projects worldwide.

“The beauty of my role now is that sometimes I’m an educator, teaching people how to design and build trails, and sometimes I’m doing the planning side of it,” explains Klein, adding that 12-hour days are the norm when he’s working on site. “I really love being on a [trailbuilding] machine for a few months, too.”

Klein is incredibly deft and delicate with a traildozer, says Edwards, who worked alongside Klein at IMBA for 21 years and

• [Above] Klein shares his wisdom at a clinic with the Iron Giants, Cedar City’s NICA team, and Iron Trail Craft, the local IMBA chapter.

• [Right] On the Boulder Dash Trail of Cedar City’s 36-mile network, Klein rocks and rolls. Tyson Swasey, Courtesy IMBA, both photos







• Trailbuilding's Johnny Appleseed shares stories from his travels at the Singletrack Society gathering in Park City, Utah. **Devin Simms, Courtesy IMBA**

is now the outdoor recreation infrastructure coordinator at West Virginia University. “The trails he’s built, people would swear they weren’t built with a machine,” adds Edwards.

Klein also has a knack for teaching rockwork, a building technique he and Edwards learned while working in Scotland and Wales. Later, when Edwards rode trails in Sedona a few years after Klein gave a trailbuilding workshop there, he discovered “little Easter eggs of rockwork” throughout the area, a telltale sign of Klein’s influence on local trail builders. “It was obvious [that work had been done] after Joey’s clinic,” says Edwards.

During his time as a trail specialist, Klein’s witnessed the progression of mountain biking and trail construction, which has evolved from a purely recreational pursuit to an economic driver and community builder. “Joey’s had a big influence on a lot of people and a lot of trails,” says Edwards. “It might not be direct, but his influence has been felt around the world.”

In 2003, Klein took his first of many trips to Australia, where mountain biking was just starting to take off. “The inspiration and knowledge sharing and credibility provided by those visits unlocked an entire country’s

ability to develop purpose-built mountain biking trails,” claims Edwards. “He has a gift for inspiring. He can translate the trail experience and how powerful it can be.”

Indeed, along with countless riders and riding groups, Klein has preached the mountain biking gospel to community leaders, church leaders and business leaders. “At the end, everyone is supportive, even though not a single one of them is a mountain biker,” adds Edwards.

It wasn’t always this way. Klein admits that during his early days at Keystone, when he was one of the few mountain bikers, he wasn’t much of a collaborator. But his time with the Trail Care Crew involved meeting and working with different mountain biking groups, local landowners and land managers on a near constant basis. “The thing I was afraid of was the thing I became good at,” he says. “I became very good at collaborating.”

Klein’s current charge is advocating for increased single-user, directional trails, a setup more common overseas than in the U.S. “Each user deserves a fair shake,” he says. “Sometimes there needs to be a hiking-only trail or an equestrian route or a downhill biking-only trail.”

The goal is to create pockets of dedi-

cated-use trails within a larger shared-user system. Klein cites two Utah trail systems—Corner Canyon, near Draper, and one by Cedar City—as models for this approach. “Joey’s been a leader in getting everybody really thinking carefully about how different users can interact with each other,” says IMBA’s Wiens. “It’s not as simple as creating a great trail for mountain biking. He designed a system years ago [Corner Canyon] that took a lot of those particular elements into consideration.”

As much fun as it is to design and ride flowy trails and fun features, it’s the smaller moments—those that encapsulate the pure joy of riding—that have the most impact on Klein. One in particular happened in 2019 at a bike exchange hosted by NavajoYes, a cycling outreach and advocacy group within the Navajo Nation.

“Four-year-old Briana was my first customer,” Klein says. “[It was Briana’s first time on a bike] and she picked out a sky-blue bike with the movie *Frozen* theme and a new saddle and pedals. She did much of the wrenching with my guidance. Within minutes, she was tearing around the place like a pro. Her brothers and sisters soon followed. They didn’t care if the brakes worked or about shifting or wheel size or full suspension. They were flying around like they were on wild horses—completely free. It was one of the most powerful moments in my career with IMBA.”

More recently, Klein’s career has come full circle. He’s currently working with Arapahoe Basin on a trail network that will include a bike-only downhill trail. Two sections of the route are done—the second opened in August 2021. When the entire 10-mile network is finished in a few years, it’ll be yet one more reason to give thanks to the Johnny Appleseed of mountain biking. 🍷