

Bittersweet is probably a word that is overused, but I just can't seem to think of another term to describe my emotions at present with the completion of the final trail at the Jackrabbit Mountain biking and hiking trails. Bittersweet is defined as pleasure and sweet accompanied by elements of suffering or regret. There is no regret, but there has been much labor, stress and anguish accompanied by laughter, friendship, gain and loss to fit into its definition.

Over two decades, yes, 20-plus years, have passed since the conception of creating the Jackrabbit Mountain biking and hiking trails began. The goal was to create an outstanding world-class trail system with all the amenities. We, the collaborating partners, have now checked off all but one remaining amenity from that initial list. That final remaining goal on the wish-list is constructing a pavilion adjacent to the parking area at the sites trailhead. This would help protect trail users from the elements, whether that be sun, sleet, hail or snow.

We are, however, proud to say we now have close to 21 miles of trails at Jackrabbit with the completion of the Rocky Cove Trail (.38 miles) which we describe as a specialty trail to advance one's technical skills, along with the two mile, hiking only, trail.

Jackrabbit now has trails that appeal to all skill levels, something for everyone, regardless if you are on wheels or on foot. If you want hard packed flow without technicality, we have it. If you want more climbing and a good workout, we have it. If you want table tops and banked berm turns, yep, we got it. And yes, we have rock gardens with an "old school" feel. But, back to the beginning, let's discuss what makes this bittersweet.

· History: Back in the day, a group of friends would take off on two wheels in search of trails, more like bushwhacking goat trails or overgrown logging roads. Very few purposebuilt trails existed during the '80s, '90s and even early 2000s. This clan would make an entire day of it to mountain bike at Tsali or Tanasi, or hang out locally and explore the woods on wheels. Yes, we would even poach the hiking only trail at Jackrabbit and do multiple laps on the 2-mile loop (in our defense, there was not signage saying no bikes allowed at that time). Beginning in 2001, the Pathways-Discovery afternoon and summer program for students of Clay County Schools began a biking program to introduce them to the sport of mountain biking. We tried desperately to find places to take them riding, sometimes traveling one or two hours just to see the students and staff laying down their bikes in exhaustion. Anything remotely looking like a mountain bike trail was either too steep, too technical or too many miles for beginners to enjoy.

The Southern Appalachian Bicycle Assn. was a fledgling bike club at that time but was behind the idea to promote trails locally. SABA began investigating potential sites that had enough acreage and was suitable for trails and was alerted to a peninsula off Lake Chatuge near the Jackrabbit Recreation Area. The collaboration formed between Southern Appalachian Bicycle Assn., Clay County Communities Revitalization Assn. and the Tusquitee Ranger District of the U.S. Forest Service to develop trails. Southern Appalachian Bicycle Assn. was successful in being creative in fundraising, by auctioning off two pontoon boats, two mountain bike raffles and years of being host to the "Circle the Bald" bike ride from 2004 until 2008 that coincided with the professional Tour de Georgia bike race. Clay County Communities Revitalization Assn. had the gifted Ron Guggisberg, who seemed to be able to pull money out of his hat with his grant writing abilities. Rob Tiger had a multitude of connections to potential grant sources, both of which were in this venture from its conception. Being the land manager for this section of the Nantahala National Forest, the Tusquitee Ranger District provided guidance and support in the process required to build trails on national forest lands.

Southern Appalachian Bicycle Assn. provided blood, sweat and tears in their trail clearance work in preparation for machine construction, regardless of weather conditions. We battled ticks, briars, mosquitoes, snakes and chiggers while working in the summer heat, to frosty eyebrows and numb fingers and toes in the dead of winter.

The community kicked in by helping, not only with donations, but to also construct the 50-car parking lot and much more. The initial 14.5 miles of trails were constructed by Mike Riter of Trail Design Specialists which was

completed in August, 2008, and the one-mile Church Cove Connector Trail in 2016. The U.S. Forest Service provided the restroom facility and picnic tables, while Southern Appalachian Bicycle Assn. and Clay County Communities Revitalization Assn. provided other amenities such as the kiosk, bike repair stand and bike wash station.

Jackrabbit was, and still is, receiving great reviews, with the only critique at that time being that there wasn't enough challenge for the advanced rider. We listened and negotiated, and eventually got the green light from the U.S. Forest Service to construct additional trails on the southeastern aspect of the Jackrabbit Mountain. Hence, this made for several more years of trekking in the woods by myself and my two dogs to develop a trail flag line for environmental impact studies and the future trail, plus more grant writing for Clay County Communities Revitalization Assn. and fundraising by all parties, to eventually get to the present.

The here and now: Ed Sutton and his team at Trail Dynamics constructed the Rabbit Ridge Trail (4.9 miles) which opened in April 2021, along with the most recent and final proposed trail addition of the Rocky Cove Trail (.38 miles) in August 2022. Trail Dynamics helped to create something different with rock gardens and other challenges to meet the demands of the advanced mountain biker.

Rocky Cove and Rabbit Ridge have features to help bike riders navigate rocky terrain to help improve their technical skills to advance to that next level. It also is considered a more advanced hiking trail, for those who want some elevation and new adventure. Rabbit Ridge is the only trail in this system that is directional for safety purposes. Read the signage to determine which entrance to take depending on the day of the week.

Every trail at Jackrabbit has its own personality and we respect the professional trail builders who have helped us create something for everyone. This brief narrative of its history cannot begin to describe all the thousands of volunteer hours put in by all parties to develop something for everyone's use, something that will be here long after we are all gone. A lot of trail clearance and mucho grande trail maintenance by a dedicated group of supporters of the trail continue to keep these trails open for everyone's enjoyment.

Besides the work to keep the trails clear, don't forget the efforts and support from the Tusquittee Ranger District. Kudos to Todd Sharkey and his crew who manage the trailhead facilities like restroom, trash receptacles, campground, swim area and etc. We hope that all who visit Jackrabbit will be good stewards of the trail by: · Packing out what you pack in, including those doggie poop bags · Ride and hike on open and existing trails only · Don't ride wet trails · Leave it the way you found it. The continued collaboration of the U.S. Forest Service, Southern Appalachian Bicycle Assn. and Clay County Communities Revitalization Assn. should be respected as a huge success story. Oh, and by the way, don't forget that we still want that pavilion. For more information go to: www.sabacyling.com, or www.cccra-nc.org.

Someone very close to my heart throughout this entire venture "Fred 'Two Wheels' Lewis" did not make it to see this final Rocky Cove Trail constructed. We would walk to this site and he always wondered how we were going to make use of all those rocks. He was with me for the duration of the planning and construction of all the other trails and volunteered for more than 18 years to help take students mountain biking. Here's to you, Fred. I'm sure you are riding a bike made of gold now. I miss you now and forever and this, my friends, is what bittersweet is.