



**H**ave you ever wondered how and why the trails beneath your tyres came to be? Or how they withstand the natural elements and schralp after schralp? Trail building is not just a matter of shovels and imagination, but a skill to be learned and mastered over a lifetime.

10 years ago, a young(er) Evan Winton and Ryan De La Rue began their trail building careers atop the Victorian alpine destination of Mount Buller. Now, after years of learnings and accomplishments, they have returned to this same place to revitalise the network. I sat down with the duo from Contour Works to gain a deeper insight into the work and lifestyles of some of the best trail builders in the country.

## BACK IN THE DAY

When Evan and Ryan were kids, mountain biking did not possess nearly the same pull in Australia as it does now. There were few dedicated "bike parks," and the ones that did exist required some committed travel time. Evan grew up riding dirt-bikes in the suburbs of Melbourne; but his PE teacher raced Downhill and managed to impart this passion on Evan too. He went along to Thredbo Interschool championships, and soon found himself racing Downhill at a national level.

Ryan grew up in the regional Victorian town of Colac, near the now famous trails of Forrest in the Otway Ranges. However when Ryan was there, these trails had yet to be manifested. It was through sheer chance that Ryan met with Glen Jacobs of World Trail when they were visiting the area. Back then, Ryan adored his BMX and would scour the area for potential tracks. "I remember building jumps well before there was ever a skate park in the town that I

grew up in... if we found the slightest hill somewhere around town where we could scratch a trail in, we would do that." This innate passion and creativity continued through the years, until he approached Jacobs for some casual work during the holidays on their Mount Buller project in 2008.

## CONTOUR WORKS

The rest isn't history, however. Ryan eventually grew weary of the "gypsy" trail builder lifestyle, so joined Evan's freshly formed Contour Works as a business partner in early 2021. With the freedom to choose their destinations and hours, the pair were able to settle down with their respective families.

But Contour Works is more than just a lifestyle change. It's a company with its own specific model and mission. Maintaining a tight crew of around 8 people, the priority is quality over quantity. "We want to skill people up, but we also don't want to have inexperienced operators building trails under our name," says Evan. One of the advantages of such a team is that the bosses will always be on site building - and riding - the trails themselves. "It's our name that we're putting to it," says Ryan, "so we want to make sure it's high quality... that's our biggest focus at the moment."

## BULLER - THEN AND NOW

Rewinding a decade, Evan and Ryan arrived on World Trail's Buller project as DH riders. Naturally, they were keen to build "gnarly" tracks. Buller already had an ancient DH course (International) which had been raced on since the 90s. But ultimately, the project was to turn

this sleepy summer village into a versatile mountain bike park for all disciplines.

While remaining true to the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) standards, World Trail were presented fresh challenges unique to the high country. The battering weather patterns throughout the year, combined with the granular alpine soil meant the crew needed to adapt their building technique. This concern with longevity was carried into the Epic Trail, which stands today as an unmissable highlight of the Buller network. "Because of what we had learned over the 5 years between 2009 and 2014 when we built the Epic," Ryan notes, "we over exaggerated those reverse grades and really bulked up the drainage.



The trail then held up really well, which is cool to see."

But major developments in bike technology over the ensuing years saw the Buller network in desperate need of "modernising and future-proofing," as Evan surmises. Once a premier event destination, Buller had fallen behind its alpine siblings in terms of trail quality and character. While the original tracks were ideal for narrower handlebars and shorter wheelbases, they didn't complement the capabilities of modern bikes.

After an open tender process, Contour Works was selected to facelift the XC network over the summer of 2020-2021. "We were pretty excited when we saw there was going to be some

money spent up there," says Ryan, "and the opportunity to come back and build felt like coming full circle, going back to where you started."

Those who have ridden Evan and Ryan's refurbished trails at Buller will know these are hardly pure "XC" trails anymore. For example, Gang Gangs is unrecognisable; the width, speed, and features which have been added are comparable to some of the best all-mountain trails in the alpine bike parks of Australia. The new work at Buller is not only a reflection of the resort's fresh direction, but of Evan and Ryan's own journeys and learnings in trail building. "I don't think I've ever built a track and not gone back and said 'I wish I put that corner over

there', or 'I wish I did this feature here.' You've got to be self-critical all the time," Evan stresses. "There's certain stuff that we would have built up here 10 years ago and thought it was the best thing ever, and now we look at it and think we'd do it so differently now."

## MAKING TRAIL BUILDING YOUR CAREER

If you're inspired by Evan and Ryan's passion, you'll have many things to look forward to as a budding trail builder. For one, "sitting in an excavator and trying to get warm but you can't get warm," Evan jokes. But in the same breath, "the best thing is where we get to work. The locations are pretty amazing." Having travelled to New Zealand, Japan, and even Lizard Island, their shovels have taken them to some enviable destinations. "Every job you work at, you're never disappointed where your office is."

But it's here on mainland Australia that lies Ryan's proudest achievement: Buller's Epic Trail. "There were times when we were building it and I was hating it," he recalls. "I was just exhausted from trying to get an excavator through there. But then we rode it, and I thought 'this is so sick.'"

Thanks for dragging the excavator in there Ryan, because we think it's pretty sick too. "This is probably one of the proudest trails, for me anyway. Just seeing it 7 years later and it's still riding really well... I feel like it's stood up to the test of time."

Built to the high standards of Contour Works, the new Mt Buller trails will undoubtedly withstand the test of time as well. The ongoing work is set for completion in March 2022, and we expect a stampede of rubber to ensue.