



WILLING AND ABELL

Mountain biking's man behind the scenes



HILL ABELL'S LEAN PHYSIQUE AND GRACIOUS SMILE SUGGEST A MAN who is a couple days past 30, but he's actually 48. This is just the first of many contradictions one encounters upon meeting Abell. Here are a few more: He runs a successful business in Austin, Texas, yet he doesn't have a college degree. He is president of the IMBA board, yet he doesn't care for boardrooms. And although he recently was nominated for induction into the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, Abell would rather be on his bike than worry about such gratuities.

This man of contradictions prefers to let his actions speak for themselves, a tact that has led Abell to become an almost mythical, behind-the-scenes force in the mountain bike landscape. From running one of the first shops that specializes in mountain bikes to helping save trails

across the country, Abell has been quietly pushing the sport forward for 20 years.

Abell's revival of the Willits brand offers a telling case study. When Willits founder Wes Williams, who is widely credited with jumpstarting the 29er movement, fell out of the bike business and onto hard times, Abell offered his longtime friend a helping hand.

"I told Wes, when he was ready to start building frames again to let me know," Abell says. Williams accepted the offer, quit his job at a Ford dealership, and returned to his craft. Abell helped Williams set up shop in a hip South Austin neighborhood and began selling the bikes in his store.

Abell's garage currently holds 18 bikes, but his humble foray into the sport started in the early 1980s when he dropped out of college, moved to Austin and bought a Ross Mount Whitney from Bicycle Sport Shop, then a tiny multi-sport store. He was instantly hooked. At 24, Abell secured a loan from his mom, bought Bicycle Sport Shop and began specializing in mountain bike sales. Today he owns two shops, and the flagship downtown store occupies a 23,000-square-foot building with a smoothie bar, high-end rentals and an annual pro night that attracts such luminaries as Gary Fisher and Bob Roll.

Despite his hectic schedule, Abell still rides his favorite stomping grounds, Austin's Barton Creek Greenbelt, two to three times a week. He knows every side trail, including Dump Truck and Sweet 16, by heart. In fact, it was his desire to preserve those trails that motivated Abell to join IMBA 14 years ago.

Abell points to an access memorandum signed with the National Parks Service as one of the key breakthroughs during his four-year tenure as IMBA president, which concludes next year. "This is an important step for mountain biking to continue gaining national legitimacy," says Abell.

And it's just the latest in a long line of accomplishments for mountain biking's man behind the scenes. —*Ian Dille*

PHOTOS: DARREN POORE

